

Teaching Chedungun in Chile's Alto Biobío Community A Perspective from Pewenche Youth

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This study describes the thoughts of Pewenche youth towards their ancestral language, Chedungun. Chedungun is a dialectal variety of the Mapuche language spoken by Pewenche people in Alto Biobío, which is a community located in a sector of the Andean Mountains in the 8th Bío Bío Region of Chile. Despite efforts by the Pewenche people to support their language, it remains threatened as most of Indigenous languages. In addition, recent studies (Henríquez, 2014), show that only adults are the most competent speakers of Chedungun while teenagers and schoolchildren are not learning it. This situation makes necessary to inquiry about what younger generations, specifically teenagers, think about learning Chedungun. This study provided high school students' perspectives towards the maintaining of their culture and language. Ninety Pewenche adolescents between 14 and 18 years old were asked if Chedungun was important for them, if they want to learn it at school, how it should be the taught and if they would like to become a teacher of Chedungun. Students in the study were overwhelmingly in favor of supporting their ancestral language.

This study was done in 2017 in Alto Biobío, a community located in southern Chile in the 8th Bío Bío Region by a linguist and a Pewenche teacher. This area is inhabited mainly by Pewenche people whose name is derived from their harvesting piñones (pewen), the seeds of the Araucaria, their sacred tree. They are part of Mapuche people, who are the most numerous Indigenous group in Chile and one of the largest Indigenous groups in South America. According to Lagos (1981), their language is one of the most studied in South America because of its many speakers, dialectal varieties and history. The study of the language started in the colonial period, and in 1606 Jesuit Priest Luis de Valdivia published the first grammar of Mapuche. In 1896 Rodolfo Lenz published *Introducción a los Estudios Araucanos*, and in 1903 Felix Augusta published a *Mapuche Language Dictionary*.

Pewenche people speak a dialect of the Mapuche language (also known as Mapudungun) called Chedungun. According to Henríquez (2014), Pewenche people still maintain their language, especially in the area called Butalelbun, which is the farthest and most isolated community in the valley. However, in other areas of Alto Biobío a process of interruption of transmission has begun, which has caused a change in the traditional pattern of transmission and the decline in the levels of linguistic competence of students (Henríquez, 2014). Norbert Francis (2012, p. 4) refers to linguistic competence as knowledge:

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For a user of a language to be able to understand a question or respond with a coherent answer, he or she must possess linguistic knowledge (among other kinds of knowledge)... Competence, then, is about underlying cognitive structure that store knowledge. The intuition that knowledge is not the same as ability comes from the frequently observed inability to put knowledge to use. The most dramatic examples are of people who have lost some aspect of language proficiency but who demonstrably have not lost at least some underlying component of the knowledge needed for the ability. Under this category, the most interesting cases are those in which impaired language ability is recovered within such a short time that we would not want to say that the relevant knowledge structures were acquired or learned a second time around. In other words, competence is based on mental representations that have a “content.”

Henriquez (2014) found that learning about students’ perspectives towards the teaching of Mapuche language is crucial to strengthen language revitalization process in younger generations. The study reported here was designed to examine how important the Mapuche language is for Pewenche adolescents and to learn about their perspectives on the teaching of their language in order to incorporate their voice in future revitalization efforts in schools. For this purpose, 90 students from the only high school of Alto Biobío community were questioned to learn about their perceptions concerning the teaching of the local language. This chapter also reviews the incorporation of language teaching in the schools of the community which started with the implementation of the Bilingual Intercultural Education Program (BIEP). In addition, the methodology of the study and the results are presented and conclusions and implications for future language revitalization efforts are discussed.

Background: Linguistic Situation, The BIEP, and Traditional Teachers

Gundermann, Canihuan, Clavería and Faúndez (2009) examined the situation of the Mapuche language based upon the results of three sociolinguistic studies using wide coverage surveys. They concluded that the vitality of this language is subject to a quick regress. Table 1 below shows the level of Mapudungun linguistic competence in the regions of Chile where this language is still spoken. Only 10.8% of people have high competence, 6.9% intermediate competence and 2.3% basic competence. Thus, 80.0% of the Mapuche inhabitants of the region have no competence in their language. Those of the Rios and Lagos regions present the most difficult regional situation of language permanence. Only 6.7% of the Mapuche population, mainly elderly, of this large area have demonstrable high competence in the language. The majority are in the mountain range of the province of Valdivia; 90.8% of the total do not have any competence in the language.

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Table 1: Test of Linguistic Competence, May–July 2007, UTEM –CONADI

Regions	Level of Competence in Mapudungun								TOTAL	
	No competence		Basic competence		Intermediate competence		High competence			
Región del Biobío	15,657	80.0%	445	2.3%	1,342	6.9%	2,121	10.8%	19,565	100%
Región de la Araucanía	80,212	48.4%	8,715	5.3%	21,689	13.1%	54,974	33.2%	165,590	100%
Regiones de los Ríos y los Lagos	57,537	90.8%	738	1.2%	824	1.3%	4,245	6.7%	63,344	100%
TOTAL	153,406	61.7%	9,898	4.0%	23,855	9.6%	61,340	24.7%	248,499	100%

In addition, Vergara, Gundermann and Foerster (2013) present levels of competence distributed by age as shown in Table 2 below. They reported the levels of Mapuche language competence measured in the 58 districts with the highest number of Mapuche, which represents 82% of the population living in southern Chile. Eighteen hundred families participated in the study, however the test of competence was given only to one member of each family. Data in Table 2 shows the absence of monolingual Mapuche people and the correlation between the rise and decline of linguistic competence among younger people. This data reveals the need to incorporate the voice of younger generations into the revitalization efforts and projects.

Table 2: Levels of Competence in Mapuche Language (Vergara et al., 2013)

Age	Level of Competence in Mapudungun								TOTAL	
	No competence		Basic competence		Intermediate competence		High competence			
10-19 years old	27,559	85.7%	1,993	6.2%	1,378	4.3%	1,209	3.8%	32,139	100%
20-29 years old	27,559	85.7%	2,748	7.2%	3,177	8.3%	1,488	3.9%	38,277	100%
30-39 years old	31,349	69.1%	1,617	3.6%	5,258	11.6%	7,121	15.7%	45,345	100%
40-49 years old	26,341	61.2%	1,345	3.1%	5,383	12.5%	9,968	23.2%	43,037	100%
50-59 years old	16,586	47.5%	1,578	4.5%	4,354	12.5%	1,2428	35.6%	34,946	100%
60-69 years old	12,530	44.5%	183	0.7%	3,003	10.7%	12,422	4.1%	28,138	100%
70-79 years old	5,205	26.7%	170	0.9%	1,016	5.2%	13,082	67.2%	19,473	100%
80 and more	1,417	25.4%	264	4.7%	270	4.8%	3,624	65.0%	5,575	100%
TOTAL	151,851	61.5%	9,898	4.0%	23,839	9.7%	61,342	24.8%	246,930	100%

The process of language teaching in this community started gradually with the implementation of the BIEP. It began in 1996 with the promulgation of the Indigenous Law 19.253 that established norms for the protection, promotion and development of Indigenous groups and their cultures in Chile. This program highlights the purpose of intercultural education, in terms of “rescuing and assessing the differences between culturally diverse groups, and where specific languages and cultures acquire great relevance, since it seeks mutual recognition among them.”

The BIEP began when the Chilean State recognized intercultural education as important for Indigenous peoples, with Chile being one of the last countries in Latin America to implement it. In 1995, groups of Indigenous representatives demanded from the government a kind of education that respected their culture, language and world vision. As a result, the BIEP was created starting with three pilot experiences in three areas of the country with the purpose of improving the quality and relevance of learning from curricular contextualization and

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strengthening of the ethnic identity of children, youth and adults. Three axis of action were developed: curricular contextualization, community participation, and teaching of Indigenous languages (Donoso, 2006).

Although the BEIP contributed to a greater appreciation of the country's Indigenous cultures and has become the main foundation the development of intercultural education, its implementation has been subject to criticism, mainly because it tends to promote a static and stereotyped Indigenous identity, which ignores the dynamism of social, cultural and ethnic identities, as well as the evolution of contexts, where language is an instrument of communication, interaction and univocal transmission of culture (Quintrileo, Yañez & Valenzuela, 2013). Likewise, Loncón (2010), CIAE (2011) and Williamson (2012) also mention the criticism of the BIEP by various organizations and academic sectors that identified the following:

- a) It is more a program for Indigenous residents in rural communities than a bilingual intercultural education program, given that it does not promote the original cultures in the dominant society,
- b) It presents bureaucratic flaws in its implementation,
- c) The resources available are insufficient for the needs of the participating schools,
- d) lack of communication channels between directors, supporters and Education Ministry, and
- e) Resistance and “discriminatory” attitudes from different governmental spheres towards the BIEP.

However, one of the most critical aspect of the BIEP has to do with the transmission of the culture and the teaching of the Indigenous language itself. On one hand, it does not favor the introduction of traditional teaching within the school and does not contribute to improving the quality of teaching where it is implemented. Also, it does not include the training of Indigenous teachers who fluently speak the language and are active practitioners of the culture (Loncón, 2010; CIAE, 2011; Williamson, 2012). This last aspect is especially unfavorable for the transmission and teaching of the language and culture, since teachers of Chedungun language express that the BIEP makes their work difficult because it does not consider the cultural particularities of Alto Biobío and Pewenche people.

According to the Ministry of Education, Mapuche or Pewenche teachers are called “Traditional Educators” and are validated by their communities. They are intercultural facilitators who teach their Indigenous language and culture and do workshops on interculturality, revitalization and/or bilingualism. Nevertheless, teaching the Indigenous language and culture is immersed in a western/colonial educational system based on a monolingual and monocultural educational model. This model's main learning outcomes are to prepare students for Spanish language standards tests, not the revitalization, learning or recovering of the Indigenous language. In this context, the Pewenche teachers are isolated and do not feel as

supported as other teachers in Chile. Their testimonies express that their cultural knowledge and philosophies are not recognized by the educational system, the school curriculum and by Chilean graduate teachers. In spite of these difficulties, Pewenche teachers find when teaching their language in a western/colonial Chilean education system and disadvantageous learning environment, they persist. They work to strengthening the Chedungun language in their students and persevere in retaining Indigenous knowledge and transmitting it to younger generations.

Challenges and weakness of the BIEP are not limited to Chile, but also in the United States. The Department of the Diné [Navajo] Education claims that Federal Government has failed to deliver effective Indian policies. A Special Senate Subcommittee report on Indian Education was issued in 1969 entitled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy - A National Challenge*. In 1980, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found, "Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has failed over the years to provide Indians a quality education." These challenges show a need for an inquiry into what younger generations, specifically teenagers, think about the learning of Chedungun at the primary or secondary school. This study will allow policy makers and others to know whether young people agree with the implemented educational system, the importance they give to Chedungun language teaching and how committed they are towards maintaining their heritage culture. Students' perspectives towards the teaching of Chedungun language will also help improve the implementation of the BIEP in Chile.

The Study

In order to explore Pewenche students' perceptions towards Chedungun language teaching, 90 Pewenche students between 14 and 18 years old attending Ralco High School were interviewed in 2017. Their average age was 16 years old. Ralco is the only secondary school in the Alto Biobío community where the students lived. This ethnographic study was part of a community project to determine the vitality of Chedungun language among high school students. According to Starfield (2015), ethnographic research privileges the direct observation of human behavior within particular cultures and settings and seeks to understand a social reality from the perspectives of those involved in the observed interaction. The ethnographic research was complemented with a survey to get information about learners' characteristics and beliefs (Wagner, 2015).

Data collection was based on Starfield (2015), who states that ethnographic data collection methods include observation through fieldwork and formal and informal interviews. In addition, students responded to an open-ended questionnaire to get information about their belief and attitudes towards Chedungun language teaching. Students were interviewed about: a) If Chedungun is important for them and if they want to learn it at school, b) How should Chedungun be taught and learned, and c) If they would like to be a teacher of Chedungun.

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Results

Students were given an open-ended questionnaire with three questions to which they provided written answers in Chedungun:

Question 1: Is Chedungun important for you, do you want to learn it at school? Why?

This question was asked to determine the value students gave to their community language and if they consider it should be taught at school. Students responses revealed that 91% of Pewenche students consider Chedungun important for them. Most agreed that Chedungun represents their culture and community, and it is the language they identify with. Pewenche teenagers' responses highlight the importance of not losing their language. Some of their responses translated from Chedungun are given here:

“Yes, it is important, my family has not lost our language, and I would never lose it, no matter what.”

“Yes, it is important, with our language, we don't lose our traditions.”

“Yes, it is very important, it is something that comes from the past, and it must survive forever.”

“Yes, because Chedungun is a beautiful language, and it is important to learn it in order not to lose it.”

“Yes, because it is time to recover our traditions.”

“Yes, it is very important for me. I speak Chedungun, and I can't forget my culture.”

The students' responses reveal that the Chedungun language has a strong meaning for Pewenche youth and that they hope their language will not be lost, since the maintenance of their language will keep their traditions alive. Issues identified by Pewenche students related to the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity. Students considered that speaking the language prevents linguistic homogenization, which means that Chedungun language makes them unique in a very monocultural society impacted by the neo-colonizing effects of globalization:

“Yes, it is very important for me because it makes me different from the rest of the people.”

“Chedungun is a really good language because nobody else speaks it.”

“Yes, it is very important because is a language spoken just in this place on earth, and it allows me to understand many things in many ways.”

“Yes, Chedungun language is very important because it represents our people. This makes our people unique and special because those who speak it, speak it from the heart.”

Student responses suggest that Pewenche teenagers do not want to be assimilated and want to conserve their language and culture to remain different from the dominant society. This, once more, reveals a strong sense of identity. The last theme to emerge from the students' responses related to the importance of

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Chedungun is linked to its connection with their ancestors:

“Yes, it is very important. Speaking the language will prevent culture loss and it is a way to maintain the teaching of the elders.”

“Yes, it is important, it is part of our culture and the culture of our ancestors. This language makes us special people.”

“For me it is important because is the language of our ancestors, and this has a very special meaning for me.”

“For me it is very important to speak Chedungun because this language is my culture. Moreover, my whole family communicates with our language. Our ancestors inherited this language and we must keep on going with this legacy.”

“Of course, Chedungun language is important because is the language that our parents and grandparents spoke. Unfortunately, as time goes by, young people are losing it.”

“It is important because is the language of our ancestors”

“Yes, it is important because by learning Chedungun we don't forget where we come from and we prevent language loss.”

As the students' responses indicate, the younger generations feel connected with their ancestor and elders by means of the Chedungun language. They consider that speaking the Indigenous language will allow them to keep their cultural heritage alive.

Question 2: How should Chedungun be taught at school?

This question was asked to identify the best pedagogical practices to teach the Chedungun language with the goal to integrate the students' voice and needs into Chedungun language teaching methodologies. Students expressed that they have only a few Chedungun language classes at the high school, which is not enough to learn the language. They voiced a need for much more time to be allotted to learning and studying the language in order to revitalize and activate the language of passive bilinguals. In addition, students said that the teaching of Chedungun must regularly include visits to communities and build deeper connections with the environment and nature. Moreover, classes should include lectures by traditional authorities and elders. Finally, most of the students emphasized that interaction among students and teachers is the key element for effective learning, and Spanish should not be spoken during the class.

Question 3: Would you like to be a Chedungun teacher? Why?

This question was asked in order to explore the students' interests related to language transmission and their feelings about becoming a teacher and sharing their knowledge. Students responses reveal that 65% of the students would like to be Chedungun teachers, meanwhile 35% of the students would not be able to assume this role. Students who would not like to be Chedungun teachers expressed that their interest is in other areas while most of them indicated that they are not

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interested about it mainly because they did not speak the language at a level to be a teacher. Students who would like to be Chedungun teachers gave strong reasons to express their interest in becoming a teacher. Among their comments are those related with language maintenance and cultural knowledge transmission and sharing. They highlighted the value of the language by expressing that they do not want their language to be lost:

- “Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher to teach small children the language so that they don’t forget our language and where they come from.”
- “Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher because is a way of not losing my Pewenche Language.”
- “Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher to help our language not to be lost.”
- “Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher to maintain our Indigenous languages alive.”
- “Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher because I could help children and adults to know more about my culture, language and traditions. I could also help to recover my language and motive others to learn it.”
- “Yes, I’d love to be a teacher because I don’t want my language to be lost.”
- “Yes, of course. I could teach many things about my culture and I could teach the language, so the language would not be lost.”
- “Yes, I would like to help my students to learn more and more and in this way the language would not be lost.”
- “Yes, because I don’t want future generations to forget our language”
- “Yes, because I would help our language not to be lost, and I would help other people to value our culture.”

Besides the students’ concern about Chedungun language loss, they expressed their interest in becoming a teacher to share and transmit their cultural knowledge:

- “Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher because I feel proud of being Pewenche and if I were a teacher I could teach what I know.”
- “Yes, because I would teach all what my grandparents and teachers taught me.”
- “Yes, because I would teach my community language.”
- “Yes, I would like to be Chedungun teacher, because I would teach to rest of the people what I know about my culture.”
- “Yes, because I would like to introduce my knowledge to all the people.”
- “Yes, I would like to let other people know my culture, I think it is a good way to work and guide those who don’t know about the language and culture.”
- “Yes, because I would like to transmit my knowledge to small children.”

Language transmission occurring during exchanges of cultural knowledge is a key element for language survival and revitalization efforts. The students’ interest

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in Chedungun language transmission demonstrates Pewenche teenagers are very committed to their culture and are willing to share their cultural knowledge with future generations. Students also stated that if the language is taught more, then it will be used more for communication purposes:

“Yes, I would like to be a Chedungun teacher because I could have more communication with children and young people, especially in those communities where Chedungun is still spoken as the only language, and also I want to show my culture to the rest of the world.”

Similarly, other students expressed that they like speaking in Chedungun language:

“I like my language, and I'd like everybody to speak it and learn it, and what it means to be Pewenche.”

“I love my Chedungun language.”

“I like Chedungun, it identifies myself.”

Another reason students gave to be a Chedungun teacher is related with the number of speakers and culture values:

“Yes, I'd like to be a chedungun teacher because in this way, there would be more speakers of Chedungun.”

“Yes, I'd like to be a Chedungun teacher because Pewenche culture is very interesting, with values and respect.”

The last reason given by the students to be a Chedungun teacher has to do with the language strengthening:

“I would like to be a Chedungun teacher to strengthen the culture, beliefs and of course the language.”

Language strengthening is essential for Chedungun language revitalization and all endangered languages. The arguments presented by some of the students show they are attached to Pewenche culture so that they want to find ways to restore and reinforce their language, cultures and beliefs.

Conclusions

Most studies indicate that Indigenous language in Chile will eventually be completely replaced by Spanish language (Gundermann et al., 2009-2011). Many Indigenous grandparents are still fluent in the Mapuche language, while younger generations tend to be Spanish monolinguals. (Vergara et al., 2013). This ongoing linguistic displacement, prompted this study of Pewenche teenagers' perspectives towards their language and the value that their culture has for them.

Fortunately, all responses given by the Pewenche teenagers in the questionnaire and subsequent interviews reveal a strong sense of cultural identity. They

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are concerned about their language loss and the effect that would have on their culture. For most Pewenche students who participated in the study, Chedungun has deeply embedded cultural meanings. First, Chedungun is important to them because of what it represents in terms of cultural identity. This denotes a favorable context for language conservation and language strengthening since cultural identity is the key element for revitalization efforts. Second, Chedungun is important for them because by speaking it, it makes them different in a country characterized by cultural assimilation. This reveals that Pewenche teenagers are trying to resist cultural homogenization. Third, Chedungun allows them to be connected with their ancestors. Their language is a legacy containing the wisdom and teachings of the elders, especially those who passed away. By means of the language, they feel their ancestors' spirits still live.

In relation to the teaching of Chedungun language in the school, they complained about the whole curriculum and that the Minister of Education is not giving the teaching of their language the status it deserves. They complained they do not have enough classes to recover their language, it has no value in the dominant world and it is not a requirement for higher education or job opportunities, which is why they proposed that their language must be more officially included in the curriculum. They also stated that the teaching of Chedungun needs take place not only inside the school but also outside of school and classrooms. This means that the teaching process should be carried out respecting the world vision of Pewenche culture which sees the land as their mother and the whole of nature as part of their spirits. In addition, students express that communities, families and authorities should take part in the teaching process, since all of them can contribute and teach younger generations about the culture and their life experiences.

Concerning the last dimension of this study related to cultural knowledge sharing, most of the students expressed that they wish to teach their language, mainly because they do not want it to be lost. They think that by assuming the role of a teacher they would contribute to Chedungun language development and maintenance. They also added that the teaching of the language could increase number of speakers, and, as a result, they could use their language for communication purposes in contexts other than family.

All arguments given by Pewenche students revealed that revitalization efforts are possible. Even though studies show that younger generations are not speaking the language, their strong sense of identity and their concern about language maintenance open up good possibilities for language recovery. Based on the students' views, it is necessary to highlight that the design and implementation of any revitalization program must consider the participation of the communities, families and authorities and must take place inside of school as well as outside school.

Students were very critical with respect to the importance given to the teaching of their language. They think the Minister of Education has not correctly implemented the teaching of the language in the schools. Chedungun teaching has been implemented following the Chilean model and has been inserted in

isolation within the school system, which makes the job of Pewenche educators difficult. Students asked for more classes to learn their language, but at the same time they feel that learning the language will not help them to get higher education or job opportunities.

The students perspectives towards the teaching of the language in the school reveals the need for a real bilingual education in Alto Biobío community. An education that will prepare them to live in the dominant society as well as an education designed to strengthen teenagers' linguistic and cultural identity. Most Indigenous people have been demanding a real intercultural and bilingual education for years. The type of education demanded by the Indigenous communities is subject to huge challenges, which not only depend on the communities' demands, but it mainly depends on the transformation of national educational policies.

Changes in educational policies usually do not happen within a short period of time; it is hoped that the strong sense of cultural identity of younger generations can be enough to preserve Chedungun language.

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