

# **Bilingual Education in Chenalhó, Chiapas in Southeast Mexico**

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*Bilingual Education in Chenalhó, Chiapas in Southeast Mexico*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research investigated the situation of the Tsotsil language spoken in Chenalhó, Chiapas, Mexico, by focusing on the implementation of a Spanish-Tsotsil bilingual elementary school. It was possible to discover that the Tsotsil language is still alive and that most parents who participated in this research transmit it to their children. However, there are students who prefer Spanish instead of their native language Tsotsil, due to the negative attitudes they have towards it such as “it is the language of old fashioned people while Spanish is the language of fashionable and modern people.” Nonetheless, most students portrayed positive attitudes towards both languages. The barriers that have affected the promotion of Tsotsil are: a monolingual approach and curriculum that favour Spanish, lack of resources in both languages, lack of training for instructors to teach with a bilingual approach and negative attitudes toward the native language.

Key words: Spanish, indigenous, language, Tsotsil, elementary bilingual education, barriers, Chenalhó

## **Preface**

One of the limitations of the study was the language barrier. Children's and their parents' native language is Tsotsil, and mine is Spanish. Although I took intensive Tsotsil lessons in order to communicate with them in Tsotsil, it was still difficult for me to converse with them fluently in Tsotsil. However, this problem was solved, thanks to my interpreters; the girls of grade six who helped me translate. Fortunately, the participants and I always managed to communicate; nonetheless, I wish I would have been more proficient in Tsotsil, so that I could have spoken more with the participants of the study in their native language.

Another limitation is the time I spent at the research site. I was living in Chenalhó for an academic term, a significant time to collect data in the bilingual school; however, I wish I could have spent more time in the town in order to learn more about the Tsotsil language and culture. Spending more time with the community would have been a good opportunity to give more back to them, to show my gratitude for their contribution to this research. I feel it would have been useful to have more participants to take part in the study, such as students from all grades. The groups that participated were three elementary bilingual classes (two first grades and one sixth grade), because I wanted to focus on how students began and ended their elementary studies in terms of their linguistic skills and language attitudes. However, it would have been interesting to work with learners from all grades to enrich the findings of the work. I would suggest that researchers interested in replicating this work consider and address the limitations I state here.

This dissertation is divided into five different chapters. The first one contains the introduction to the study in which the background, personal reflections, research problem area, research questions and rational and significance of the study are stated. Also, the importance of indigenous languages is mentioned in this chapter.

Chapter two contains the review of the literature, which is composed by the predicament of endangered languages and examples of them. Moreover, there is a section focused on Mexico, its indigenous groups, its languages and the reduction of these. There is also a section on bilingualism and bilingual education in Chenalhó, Chiapas.

Chapter three contains the research approach that was used in this work. This chapter focuses on postcolonial theory as it is the theoretical framework in which this study was grounded. The debate about the prefix “postcolonialism” is discussed as well as the topic of language viewed from a postcolonial perspective. Moreover, the reasons for conducting a qualitative study and using critical ethnography as a strategy of inquiry are justified. The data collection, analysis and interpretive methods are explained as well. This chapter is finished by the ethical considerations that were addressed to conduct this study.

Chapter four presents the collected data and the description of the journey in the research site and the characteristics of the participants of the study. Also, the purposes of the bilingual school where this research was conducted as well as the participants’ attitudes towards the Spanish and Tsotsil languages are stated.

Chapter five, which is the last chapter of this dissertation, presents the analysis of the data, that is, the value of languages, language loss and standardisation of indigenous languages, the topic of intercultural bilingual education and the barriers for the implementation of it. The chapter also provides a general discussion of the analyzed findings and it concludes that there is hope for change in the educational system in Chenalhó, Chiapas.

## **DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

KOLAVAL! ¡MUCHAS GRACIAS! THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

I would like to thank many people from the bottom of my heart for being part of this process and for having contributed to my educational career. There are many people who have shared their knowledge and experience with me. I have no words to express my gratitude to my wonderful supervisor Dr. Ingrid Johnston who was fundamental in this process. She was an exceptional guide and supporter who encouraged me and helped me during my program; I feel grateful to her for each of her contributions. I am honoured to have had a supervisor like her. Also, I feel grateful to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. José da Costa, Dr. Bill Dunn and Dr. Yvonne Lam who generously gave their time and expertise to better my work. I thank them for their contribution and their good-natured support. I would like to give special thanks to the incredible Dr. Susan Rippberger for her guidance, constructive feedback, and her trust in this research. Also, I would like to thank her for having made the time to fly to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada to be personally present for the defence of my doctoral dissertation. Her research and insights supported me and expanded my own work. Thank you very much, Dr. Rippberger!

I also feel grateful to the people in Chenalhó, first and foremost to the students who participated in the study, who I call my little children: they were the ones who inspired me to do this research and to work hard to achieve my goal. Thanks, also to the teachers who trusted me and somehow saw hope for improvement in the educational system through the research I conducted. I feel

like an advocate and spokesperson for them and their educational needs, and in the pain they have suffered through the discrimination they have been victims of, which has had an impact on the way they perceive themselves, their languages and cultures. Now, I have a better understanding of the reasons they have for calling themselves “Los olvidados”, which means “The forgotten;” they feel excluded from their own society and country. Phrases such as “talk about us,” “don’t forget about us, Karla” and “come back” increase my commitment to the Tsotsil community I worked with.

Thus, I am as a spokesperson, sharing with academia what the Tsotsil community taught me while I was living in Chenalhó. I feel I have to share part of the experience I had with them to remind society that they are there, that they exist, that they want and need to be heard, and that they need support from people, from us, from people in the educational field. This research is dedicated to them. I would like to thank them for sharing their sad and painful stories, for being there for me and sharing their time, knowledge and *little or big* resources such as food, affection and attention with me, along with so many other beautiful things. I have been able to confirm Barrientos’ ideas that those “the ones who have the least are the ones who share the most” (Barrientos, 2006). The participants of the study have greatly contributed to me as a student, as a researcher, as a teacher, and as a human being in general. They have contributed to my vision of linguistic and cultural rights, of the importance of respect not just with regard to diversity, but respect for mother earth and nature.



Conducting this study has helped me to gain a better understanding of my research topic, so I am grateful to the participants from whom I have gained more knowledge on bilingual education. This knowledge makes me feel empowered and responsible for taking action to contribute to creating and to helping to implement quality bilingual programs that preserve and promote indigenous languages and cultures in Mexico. Again, I dedicate this work to my indigenous children, teachers, the school principal and students' parents. I promised them that I would talk about them and their situation and the type of education that is delivered in the focus school. This is the least I can do (to raise awareness), and the first step in making change through education. This is the least I can do for the participants of the study for having given me so much while I was living with them. As Madison (2005) points out, research is not just about receiving, but also about giving. It is a reciprocal process and I feel that a way to give back to them is by raising awareness and consciousness about bilingual education and cultural and linguistic issues. I would also like to thank the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) for having me provided me with a scholarship during my doctoral program at the University of Alberta. In addition, I would like to acknowledge my familia and amigos who assisted, advised, and supported this research and writing efforts over the years. Special thanks to Rob Bioletti who was always there to help me and motivate me during the process of this study. Rob Bioletti was an exceptional supporter who believed in my work. This dissertation would not be the same without his contributions. I highly appreciate all the time he spent with me, researching and writing the drafts of this

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Kolaval, Muchas Gracias, Thank you very much to all the amazing people who were part of the process of my doctoral program and the writings of this dissertation! ¡Muchas gracias desde el fondo de mi corazón! Many thanks from the bottom of my heart!

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Background and Personal Reflections

In order to be fully committed to advance research in a certain area, I believe it is very beneficial to bridge the research with one's own personal history and identity. These reflections can motivate the researcher by making the investigation more meaningful on a personal level, and consequently result in more profound results. Thus, I agree with Madison (2005) that:

It is important to honour your own personal history and the knowledge you have accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition or instincts that draw you toward a particular direction, question, problem, or topic-understanding that you may not always know exactly why or how you are being drawn in that direction. Ask yourself questions that only you can answer: "What truly interests me?" "What do I really want to know more about?" "What is most disturbing to me about society?" You might probe even more deeply and ask yourself, as in the words of the writer Alice Walker (2003), "What is the work my soul must have?" (p. 238), and go from there. (p. 19)

I feel committed to contributing toward making a better and more just society where indigenous people's cultural and linguistic diversity are honoured, respected and preserved. In part, such respect and preservation can be achieved through quality bilingual education. Since I grew up in Chiapas, southeast Mexico, where indigenous people have a very significant presence (LRAN, 2009) and they, as well as non-indigenous people interact daily, I frequently witnessed

the differences between these two groups. Even when I was younger and not totally aware of political and economic issues taking place in my state and was not even able to name them as such, I could notice the inferior role indigenous people had in comparison to non-indigenous. Now that I am older I can better “understand” the economic, political and cultural struggles embedded in that situation of difference.

Reflecting on my early experiences, I have realized how such a reality has shaped my way of thinking, my desire for social justice, which is closely related to the motivations I have for pursuing my doctoral studies. My worldview has been shaped by the experiences I have lived and witnessed. As Turner (2006) states, it is possible for indigenous people to be “word warriors” (p. 95) or people who fight for human rights via intellectual pursuits; I would add, so it is for non-indigenous people. I believe that one of the most valuable weapons people can have is knowledge, so those interested in helping indigenous people “ought to be intimately familiar with the legal and political discourses of the state, and therefore able to use them to assert, defend, and protect the rights, sovereignty, and nationhood of indigenous communities” (Turner, 2006, p. 95). For that reason, I felt encouraged to continue learning about indigenous peoples’ situation with regards to their language, culture and worldviews by conducting research on Spanish-Indigenous elementary bilingual education in Chenalhó, Chiapas, in southeast Mexico.

The damage caused to indigenous people in Mexico has been significant. Their feelings of inferiority and embarrassment due to the discrimination they

have suffered have made them want to abandon their language and culture (Lam, 2009). That is, they want to walk away from who they are, the Totonacs in Central Mexico (Lam, 2009). I believe change is possible and meaningful change can start in the educational field, for example, through quality bilingual education where teaching can involve the creation of a milieu, which is conducive to learning – “one that cares for and respects students’ individuality with respect to their culture and linguistic identity (native language), and makes provision for self-reflection, knowing and meeting, in particular, the language and literacy needs of individual learners (Fevrier, 2008, p. 6). I think indigenous people’s situation can improve and this can in part be achieved through education; that is why I felt compelled to explore my research topic.

I decided to investigate the situation of the Tsotsil language, which is a Mayan language spoken by approximately 429, 168 indigenous people in Mexico (INEGI, 2010), as it is the language I was exposed to the most in Chiapas other than Spanish. After learning more about different endangered languages in distinct parts of the world, my idea about the importance and need to take action to prevent language loss was reinforced. In addition, my curiosity to investigate the current situation of the Tsotsil language increased as well as my sense of responsibility to help one of the communities from the state I come from. In short, I am aware that my worldviews (Creswell, 2007) have influenced my interest for researching Spanish-Tsotsil bilingual education in southeast Mexico. My paradigms guided me as an investigator, “not only in choice of method but in

ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105) to guide my research investigations.

### **Research Problem Area**

Mexico is one of the countries with the largest indigenous populations in Latin America with approximately 10 million, which represents between 12% and 15% of the Mexican population (Chacón, 2005). Unfortunately, these indigenous communities’ languages and cultures have been disappearing. According to McCaa and Mills (1998), “native languages are under assault in Mexico. Education appears to be the "villain” and bilingualism its weapon. Paradoxically, if native languages are to thrive in the next millennium, their salvation likewise will be education and bilingualism their hope” (para. 2).

Francis and Reyhner (2002) argue that even among the most ethnolinguistically conscious bilingual teachers, language attitudes are marked by conflicting ideas and ambiguity, driven by the mechanisms of cultural and linguistic denigration that operate at the institutional, community-wide and regional levels. Bilingual teachers in Mexico prefer to use Spanish in the classroom, for example, for written language functions (Francis & Reyhner, 2002). This practice contributes to the idea that indigenous language’s oral “dialectically fragmented” condition is evidence of its inherent deficiency as a language for academic purposes, especially for reading and writing (Francis & Reyhner, 2002). Thus, I felt encouraged to investigate if this was the case for one of the indigenous languages spoken in Chenalhó, Chiapas in southeast Mexico: the Tsotsil language.

## **Research Questions**

I explored:

In what ways does the current Spanish-Tsotsil bilingual program in an elementary bilingual school in Chenalhó, Chiapas, aid or hinder preservation of the indigenous language?

Given this general research question, my sub-questions were:

1. To what extent does this bilingual program respect and promote the native language and culture?
2. Which historical and current contexts have influenced the teachers' and students' attitudes and experiences of teaching and learning the Spanish and Tsotsil languages?
3. What are the students' and their parents' attitudes toward indigenous language retention in one elementary bilingual school in Chiapas, Mexico?

## **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

### **Importance of Indigenous Languages**

Reasons that motivated me to conduct this research are my ideas about the importance and value of languages and my interest in human rights. Nettle and Romaine (2000) state that “every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been a vehicle to. It is a loss to every one of us if a fraction of that diversity disappears when there is something that can have been done to prevent it” (p. 14). Any language as well as the speakers of that language are valuable and deserve respect because they contribute to the cultural richness of its nation (Rippberger, 1992). Thus, I feel nobody has the right to take away

someone else's mother language because through our mother tongue, "we come to know, represent, name, and act upon the world" (McCarty, 2003, p. 148).

Vygotsky (1978) postulated that language is one of the elements that define a person's cultural identity, as language is the basis for thinking and communication. According to the National Geographic Enduring Voices Project (n.d):

Language defines a culture, through the people who speak it and what it allows speakers to say. Words that describe a particular cultural practice or idea may not translate precisely into another language. Many endangered languages have rich oral cultures with stories, songs, and histories passed on to younger generations, but no written forms. With the extinction of a language, an entire culture is lost. (para. 3)

Thus, I believe it is important to give attention to the preservation of languages, and in particular indigenous languages. There is knowledge that is encoded only in oral languages. This is particularly evident in oral languages in regard to Aboriginal people and their relationship to nature, since they "have interacted closely with the natural world for thousands of years, [so] often have profound insights into local lands, plants, animals, and ecosystems" (National Geographic Enduring Voices Project, n.d., para.4). One reason, then, that it is valuable to study indigenous languages is because it benefits environmental understanding and conservation efforts (National Geographic Enduring Voices Project, n.d). Creating and implementing bilingual programs takes into account

indigenous students' sociocultural realities (CET, 1992) as well as what is meaningful to them (their land, plants, animals, etc.). The indigenous student should be a "knower of his [sic] sociocultural reality which enables him to incorporate into the productive life of the community and as a socially participative individual" (CET, 1992, as cited in Paciotto, 2004, p. 536). Such attention addresses the interrelations of in-and out-of-school curricula. According to Brisk (1999) "a successful bilingual program develops students' language and literacy proficiency, leads them in successful academic achievement, and nurtures sociocultural integration" (p. 2). She defines sociocultural integration as "the ability to function in the larger society as well as in the heritage community (Brisk, 1998)" (p. 2). Teaching with a bilingual-bicultural perspective respects and promotes children's sense of the uniqueness of their own culture, language and realities are promoted (Naqvi, 2009).

On the importance of maintaining indigenous languages, Scollon and Scollon (1981) argue that "each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. Although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are, nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of each person's self-awareness, identity, and interpersonal relationships" (p. 89). Reyhner (1995) adds that:

These values are psychological imperatives that help generate and maintain an individual's level of comfort and self-assurance, and, consequently, success in life. In the normal course of events these

values are absorbed along with one's mother tongue in the first years of life. (para. 3)

Woodbury (1997) supports the protection of endangered languages because:

Much of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory, and technical vocabulary, to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humor, ways of speaking to children, and unique terms for habits, behavior, and emotions. When a language is lost, all this must be refashioned in the new language – with different word categories, sounds, and grammatical structures – if it is to be kept at all. Linguists' work in communities when language shift is occurring shows that for the most part such refashioning, even when social identity is maintained, involves abrupt loss of tradition. (para. 6)

Woodbury's (1997) words show the importance of revitalizing endangered languages because they are a valuable marker in one's identity. As Woodbury (1997) points out, when a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity. It is true that language disappearance may be voluntary or involuntary; however, it always involves pressure of some kind, and it is often felt as a loss of social identity or as a symbol of defeat (Woodbury, 1997).

Another reason why indigenous languages are important is the history they carry. People's history is passed down through their language. Thus, when the



language is lost, it might imply that valuable information about the early history of the community is also lost. Woodbury (1997) states that:

The loss of human languages also severely limits what linguists can learn about human cognition. By studying what all of the world's languages have in common, we can find out what is and isn't possible in a human language. This in turn tells us important things about the human mind and how it is that children are able to learn a complex system like language so quickly and easily. The fewer languages there are to study, the less we will be able to learn about the human mind. (para. 11)

In this respect the National Science Foundation (NSF) (2008) argues that the study of threatened languages has implications for cognitive science because “languages help illuminate how the brain functions and how we learn” (para. 6). Peg Barrat (n.d., as cited in NSF, 2008) suggests that “we want to know what the diversity of languages tells us about the ways the brain stores and communicates experience” (para. 6). This perspective is supported by National Geographic Enduring Voices Project (n.d.), which states that “studying various languages also increases our understanding of how humans communicate and store knowledge. Every time a language dies, we lose part of the picture of what our brains can do” (para. 5).

I agree with McCarty (2003) that “language loss and revitalisation are human rights issues” (p. 148) since the desire and efforts to revitalise native languages cannot be divorced from larger struggles for democracy, social justice,