

Volume 32 Issue 2

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rcééa

BENDING THE LINE: BEHIND THE SCENES OF
LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Mariana Domínguez

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*

Editor-in-Chief: Robert Mizzi

Special Edition Editors: Carole Roy and Kathy Mantas

www.cjsae-rceea.ca

32,2 October/octobre 2020, 155-163

ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

www.casae-aceea.ca

BENDING THE LINE: BEHIND THE SCENES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Mariana Domínguez
University of Ottawa

Abstract

This article is a personal reflection about the acknowledgement of my “taken-for-granted frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59), which were replicating the hegemonic narrative I grew up surrounded by as a white, Mexican, Spanish-speaker; while hindering a more thorough understanding of the educational and linguistic topics that interested me. Drawing from the work of North American and Latin American, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, scholars working in the fields of language revitalization and Indigenous knowledge, I provide a personal introduction and link my language learning and teaching experiences to my professional interest in Spanish-Yucatec Maya bilingualism of undergraduate Maya students of my region while beginning to outline my presence as a non-Indigenous emerging researcher working with Indigenous students.

Résumé

Cet article est une réflexion personnelle sur la reconnaissance de mes « cadres de référence tenus pour acquis » (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59, traduction libre), lesquels reproduisaient le discours hégémonique qui m'entourait pendant mon enfance d'hispanophone blanche mexicaine, tout en empêchant une meilleure compréhension des thèmes pédagogiques et linguistiques qui m'intéressaient. M'inspirant de travaux de personnes autochtones et non autochtones d'Amérique du Nord et d'Amérique latine œuvrant dans les domaines de la revitalisation linguistique et des savoirs autochtones, j'offre une introduction personnelle et établis des liens entre mes expériences d'apprentissage et d'enseignement des langues et mon intérêt professionnel au bilinguisme espagnol-maya yucatèque des étudiantes et étudiants de premier cycle dans ma région. Je brosse aussi un premier portrait de ma présence comme chercheuse non autochtone émergente qui travaille avec les étudiant-e-s autochtones.

Part 1 - Personal Introduction

When I was a baby, my mother hired a woman “from a village,” as it is commonly referred to in my Mexican hometown, to take care of me while she went to work. My mother asked

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
32,2 October/octobre 2020, 155–163
ISSN1925-993X (online)*

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

the woman to speak (Yucatec) Maya to me. The woman refused. Furthermore, she denied being a speaker of the language, despite the fact that my mother knew the woman spoke Maya, like most people in her village. I am a white, Spanish-speaker, Mexican, female, from the province of Yucatan, Mexico. I was raised in Yucatan speaking Spanish and when I was eight years old, I began to learn English. I loved my English classes and since I have "a good ear," listening and speaking were never that hard. I remember fondly the characters of some English textbooks, the vocabulary notebook I created, and the fieldtrip to the hardware store to record new words. I complemented in-class content with watching American television and reading books, which immersed me in different types of realities where English made sense.

This article is a personal reflection about the acknowledgement of my "taken-for-granted frames of reference" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59), which were replicating the hegemonic narrative I grew up with and which hindered an understanding of the educational and linguistic topic that interested me, namely, Spanish-Yucatec Maya bilingualism of undergraduate Maya students of my region. It is a journey that began when I was a child and which has deepened during my doctoral program as I take into account the different perspectives regarding Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems in relation to my academic research. Language is a gateway to knowledge systems, consequently, language usage and language teaching and learning are processes that invite us to be aware and acknowledge the cultural contexts where languages are meaningful daily tools of social interaction.

I began teaching English as a foreign language in Mexico at the turn of the 21st century. I was twenty years old and I did not have any training for my first job. Instead, I was given the textbook and sent to the classroom where six kids between the ages of 6 and 9 were going to have an intensive 3-hour beginner English course every Saturday. I knew the language but I did not know how to teach it; and much less, how to teach it to children. I do not remember how I dealt with the situation but I remember feeling unprepared. My second teaching job was in a language school that provided training in their methodology and I learned to have warm-up and wrap-up activities; to establish a session's goals; and to have everything timed so as to respect the length of the session. As I continued teaching English as a foreign language, I became more familiar with the teaching terminology and curriculum development. I even enrolled in a language teacher training course so that I would feel more confident about my practice. That preparation, although based on a methodology for English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language, was apparently good for teaching ANY language. Up to that point, I was focusing on course content and structure. Later during my Master's degree in Applied Linguistics, I learned about the deep impact that a student's background can have on her/his learning process and my attention turned to the issue of the language learner. Who was learning the language and for what purposes? Learner profile and course content delivery seemed to be intrinsically related. But the learner was somehow presented as an isolated element in what seemed to be a one-size-fits-all model rather than an analysis of individuals' different backgrounds and life experiences.

Part 2 – Yucatec Maya

Spanish is a minority language in Canada, yet nobody questions its vitality as it has approximately 480 million speakers around the world (Instituto Cervantes, 2018). In

Mexico, Spanish is used in government, education, and the media, but Spanish is not the only language spoken in Mexico: for over five hundred years, it has co-existed with several Indigenous languages. According to official statistics, there are almost one hundred and twenty million (119,530,753) people in Mexico: twenty-five and a half million (25,694,928) identify themselves as belonging to one of the approximately 67 Indigenous groups, which represents 21.5% of the total population (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2015). In addition, seven million (7,382,785) are speakers of an Indigenous language (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2015). In Mexico, there are 11 linguistic families, with 68 languages and 364 linguistic variants which represent (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, n.d.)). I am particularly interested in Yucatec Maya because it is the Indigenous language from my region and it has had an impact on Yucatec Spanish. I am only beginning to learn Yucatec Maya but I grew up listening to and using some of its words and phrases that are embedded in my regional Spanish. I have also witnessed an increase in the Yucatec Maya courses offered as well as promotion of its oral and/or written form aimed at different population segments, both Maya and non-Maya. Furthermore, language teaching and learning can be a gateway towards the acknowledgement of different worldviews, particularly at a time of academic mobility.

Yucatec Maya is an oral-based Mexican Indigenous language spoken by 859,607 people (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, n.d.) in the southern states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatan. Mainly spoken by the Maya people, it is one of the three most widely spoken Indigenous languages in the country. Yucatec Maya is traditionally transmitted through Maya institutions: family members pass on the language to younger generations, and the community validates such linguistic knowledge through its political, religious, and community dynamics. Language shift is when “members of the community stop speaking the pre-contact language habitually and mostly speak the post-contact language, which comes to be the language of the next generation” (O’Shannessy, 2011, p. 83). Güemes (1994) points out that during the 20th century the “modernizing” processes of rural areas in the Yucatan resulted in changes in the social and cultural organization of Maya communities, impacting their social cohesion mechanisms and the transmission of Yucatec Maya. This author identifies formal schooling, religious institutions, mass media, a market economy, and internal migration as the main factors that caused the shift from Yucatec Maya to Spanish. It is important to remember that language shift, as opposed to natural language evolution and change, does not result from a situation where people get to choose (Hill, 2002) but is the outcome of domination and imposition of another language that is presented as ‘better’ and more fit for social life, while the original language is signalled, overtly or covertly, as less valuable and less functional. Moreover, language shift happens within a broader context in which full knowledge systems are being denigrated and replaced with ones presented as more functional for social life.

The following list of questions reflects beliefs of Indigenous parents and grandparents in different endangered language communities, and explains the reasons behind their family linguistic choices:

Why speak the Indigenous language if doing so places you at the lowest level of the social ladder? Why bother to learn the Indigenous language when there are other immediate necessities in the community, such as

food, housing, schooling, and healthcare that learning the language will not provide? Why learn the Indigenous language when it is not legally recognized and, therefore, no commercial or legal transactions can be carried out in it? Why learn the Indigenous language if it is not used at school? Why learn the Indigenous language if nobody else uses it outside of the community? What does the community gain by maintaining its native language? (Lemus, 2018, p. 396)

Currently, all Mexican Indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing regardless of their apparent "vitality" (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, n.d.). Even though the General Law on Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Spanish and 66 Mexican Indigenous languages are all national languages (Althoff, 2006), the latter are mostly used in informal domains of life, like in the privacy of people's homes. This applies to the demographically stronger ones like Nahuatl and Yucatec Maya (Flores Farfán & Ramallo, 2010) and is the result of a European cultural and linguistic imposition that began in the 16th century, positioning Spanish as the dominant language (Hidalgo, 2006).

The goal of language revitalization is to promote the use of a receding language to ensure its transmission to the new generations and increase its usage to more areas of social life (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). One of the current best practices in language revitalization states that the design of a project should be done by endangered language community members (Grinevald & Bert, 2014; Hinton et al., 2018). However, the involvement of non-speakers who are sensitive to the topic without being part of the community itself might prove beneficial to expand awareness about the issue. By working with the endangered language community while also being aware of dominant ideologies, there is a window of opportunity for the development of projects that aim at educating people in other segments of society who are not ethnically and/or linguistically part of the language revitalization movement. I suggest that Mexican Indigenous languages could profit from some revitalizing while the Mexican Spanish speaking population could benefit from some awareness about the social and linguistic inequalities that surround us every day.

In 2001, Mexico was declared a multicultural nation and consequently the indigenous linguistic rights movement acquired official recognition. For Yucatec Maya, this shift in perspective had a positive impact on the status of the language, among both the Maya and the non-Maya. As a result, Yucatec Maya is currently being learned by people of Maya ancestry, Mexican Spanish speakers, and foreigners. Yucatec Maya is mostly taught by Maya teachers from the three states of the Yucatan peninsula and such a wide array of teaching and learning situations poses many challenges for a language that is not part of the dominant culture: how are we being told to teach a language? Is there only one way to teach a language? Can we teach all languages the same way? What extra-linguistic factors should be considered when teaching a language? More specifically, where in the language teaching and learning process do we locate the diverse culture-based ways in which we transmit (teach) and acquire (learn) knowledge about a language, which inevitably includes information about language structures, functions, and situations?

Part 3 – Mexican Indigenous Education

Mainstream social practices today are based on knowledge that has been selected, validated, and transmitted through society's institutions (Sefa Dei et al., 2000). Brent Davis (2009)

explains that Western ways of knowing and the so-called “scientific knowledge” originated in 19th century European philosophy and, through different colonization enterprises, imposed what Marie Battiste (2013) calls “cognitive imperialism.” Through its different disciplines, methods, and institutions, it set the parameters against which any other knowledge system was measured. One such institution is the educational system. Despite the fact that they represent hegemonic culture(s) and language(s), schools and universities play a central role in Indigenous communities as they are considered a place that provides opportunities for social improvement to students and to the community. In a Maya cultural environment, school is part of a secondary socialization process that goes hand-in-hand with the use of Spanish and hegemonic ways of knowing that may contrast with traditional Maya teaching and learning practices (Lizama, 2008). In addition, the Eurocentric curriculum perpetuates the prestige of Spanish, maintaining Maya lifestyle and Yucatec Maya in its historically oppressed and discriminated position (Güemes, 1994).

Currently, there is a movement that advocates for the inclusion of Indigenous content in the curricula. In addition, there are initiatives that have provided instruction in Indigenous languages as the medium of instruction or as a second language. Nonetheless, these initiatives rarely deal with social and linguistic preconceptions that are left intact at the core of the educational system. Consequently, the first step towards the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in schools and universities has to do with raising awareness of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations: Although valuable, current efforts focus on what Flores Farfán (2015) calls a unidirectional intercultural education; in other words, the consequences of colonialism’s cultural repression are addressed only by Indigenous students, leaving the non-Indigenous sector untouched by this concern.

In the field of Indigenous post-secondary education in Mexico, the intercultural approach adopted officially at the beginning of the 21st century aimed at maintaining Indigenous cultures while attaining an effective bilingualism Indigenous language-Spanish. However, it has been criticized for simply translating curriculum content; for lacking reflection about the value of cultural diversity; and for having an integrationist approach towards new technologies (Ramírez, 2006). Furthermore, it is considered to be a top-down, expert-based evolution of the assimilationist policies that prevailed throughout the 20th century known as *indigenismo*, a cultural and educational movement that continued to emphasize the greatness of a pre-Hispanic past while seeing the contemporary Indigenous peoples in some sort of civilization decline (Despaigne, 2013; Llanes Ortiz, 2008). Under the light of interculturality, linguistic and cultural diversity is celebrated, promoting respect for cultural differences without questioning the power structure that has maintained Indigenous peoples dominated by the *mestizo* dominant segment (Despaigne, 2013).

Mexican intercultural universities were created at the turn of the 21st century with the goal of promoting local development and preserving local knowledge and languages. Their student profile is that of underprivileged Indigenous or rural youth. A few generations have graduated from their bachelor’s programs and are entering the job market. However, there are high rates of unemployment for students who finish their bachelor’s degree, whether they come from mainstream universities or from intercultural ones (Mateos Cortés, 2017). Nonetheless, for Indigenous students, the following factors worsen the situation:

Their low-quality pre-university schooling, their stigmatised use of an indigenous language, their lack of ‘urban’ work experience and related

job skills, but also an often-found lack of awareness and knowledge among the wider public of the degree courses taught at this new kind of intercultural university. (Mateos Cortés, 2017, p. 160)

In her study about the post-university employment opportunities of Indigenous students, Mateos Cortés (2017) found that an intercultural university curriculum has the potential of developing an awareness about a Western assimilationist education that discredits Indigenous ways of knowing, while promoting ethnic re-empowerment in the process of training new generations of Indigenous professionals. These findings align with the objectives of self-determination found in the current Indigenous knowledge movement (Grande, 2008). However, schools remain representative of Western ways of knowing and they might not be appropriate for all initiatives that aim at re-empowering Indigenous epistemologies or at revitalizing Indigenous languages.

There is an officially acknowledged need for an educational system that is culturally and linguistically relevant, and a more just and equitable society. This leads us to question the place that Mexican Indigenous cultures and languages have, not only in everyday life but in the educational experiences of their speakers; and to explore why the cultural and linguistic background which is considered the norm is Spanish ancestry with Spanish as the language spoken.

Conclusion

What are the elements that come into play when teaching a language? At this time, language teaching and learning are full of labels that reflect specific contents and forms aimed at promoting the effectiveness of such processes but not all languages have such a prolific set of teaching and learning resources. This is the case of most Mexican Indigenous languages. The language ideologies that pose dominant languages as superior and as having an instrumental value that Indigenous languages allegedly lack, have been interiorized by historically dominant and dominated segments of contemporary societies which is reinforced by the fact that Indigenous languages are mostly limited to informal domains of life.

Presently there is an international academic and social movement that advocates for the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity as characteristic of, and beneficial to, humanity (Thieberger, 1990). This creates a favourable atmosphere to work with endangered languages. Language shift is, like Hill (2002) states, a process that generally results from cultural and economic domination, and is not the result of natural evolution. In (post) colonial contexts, like that of Mexico, language endangerment results from unequal socio-cultural relationships established between dominant and dominated groups, the hegemonic views imposed by the former, and the disempowerment experienced by the latter. What do my experiences as a Spanish speaker learning and teaching English have to do with Yucatec Maya and/or with undergraduate Maya students? This reflection has been an attempt to point at different interrelated paths that have shaped my personal and professional interest in the coexistence of Spanish and Yucatec Maya. In the process, I have come to acknowledge that my sociocultural background promotes English learning while Spanish is seen and used as a national language. But I have also come to learn how Yucatec Maya is currently being promoted as having an instrumental value, both by its users and language revitalization advocates, whether they are Indigenous or not. Being a non-Indigenous person trying to

work with Indigenous populations has triggered many questions and reflection that go beyond the scope of my doctoral research project

I initially followed Battiste's (2013) example of choosing a familiar topic for the doctoral project and thought I had it all figured out when I applied to the program with the intention of working with Maya youth from my region. After coming in contact with the literature about Indigenous language revitalization and knowledge(s), I realized that these past years have been more about observing myself and acknowledging that although I come from the same territory as the young Maya people I want to work with, I needed a deeper understanding of the issues or situations that surround their lives. Most importantly, I was faced with the significance, the "so what?" aspect of my research. Linda T. Smith's (1999) words resonated with me: "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?" (p. 10). In this personal and professional search, the work of North American and Latin American scholars, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, has contributed to the exploration and evolution of my ideas and deepened my understanding of the cultural, educational, and linguistic environment of Maya undergraduate students.

Author Note

I gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Mexican Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) Scholarship.

References

- Althoff, D. F. (2006). Centralization vs. local initiatives: Mexican and U.S. legislation of Amerindian languages. In M. Hidalgo (Ed.), *Mexican Indigenous languages at the dawn of the twenty-first century* (pp. 167-190). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Austin, P. K., & Sallabank, J. (2011). Introduction. In P. K. Austin & J. Sallabank (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of endangered languages* (pp. 1-24). Cambridge University Press.
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonising education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich Publishing.
- Davis, B. (2009). *Inventions of teaching: A genealogy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Despaigne, C. (2013). Indigenous education in Mexico: Indigenous students' voices. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 7(2), 114-129. doi: 10.1080/15595692.2013.763789
- Flores Farfán, J. A. (2015). Na'at le ba'ala' paalen Na'at le ba'ala' paalen. Adivina esta cosa ninio: La experiencia de revitalización, mantenimiento y desarrollo lingüístico y cultural en México con énfasis en el maya yucateco [Na'at le ba'ala' paalen Na'at le ba'ala' paalen. Guess this thing kid: The experience of revitalization, maintenance and linguistic and cultural development in Mexico with an emphasis on Yucatec Maya]. *Trace (México, DF)*, 67, 92-120. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-62862015000100005&lng=es&tlng=es
- Flores Farfán, J. A., & Ramallo, F. (2010). Introduction. In J. A. Flores Farfán, & F. Ramallo (Eds.), *New perspectives on endangered languages: Bridging gaps between sociolinguistics, documentation and language revitalization* (pp. 1-12). John Benjamins. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Grande, S. (2008). Red pedagogy: The un-methodology. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies* (pp. 233-254). Sage.

- Grinevald, C., & Bert, M. (2014). Whose ideology, where, and when? Rama (Nicaragua) and Francoprovençal (France) experiences. In P. K. Austin & J. Sallabank (Eds.), *Endangered languages: Beliefs and ideologies in language documentation and revitalization* (pp. 355-384). Oxford University Press.
- Güemes, M. (1994). Situación actual de la lengua maya en Yucatan: Un enfoque demográfico [Current state of the Mayan language in Yucatan: A demographic approach]. *L'inaj. Revista de Divulgación del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, 8, 2-11.
- Hidalgo, M. (2006). Socio-historical determinants in the survival of Mexican indigenous languages. In M. Hidalgo (Ed.), *Mexican Indigenous languages at the dawn of the twenty-first century* (pp. 87-124). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Hill, J. (2002). "Expert rhetorics" in advocacy for endangered languages: Who is listening, and what do they hear? *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 12(2), 119-133.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2002.12.2.119>
- Hinton, L., Huss, L., & Roche, G. (2018). Introduction: Language revitalization as a growing field of study and practice. In L. Hinton, L. Huss, & G. Roche (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language revitalization* (pp. xxi-xxx). Routledge.
- Instituto Cervantes [Cervantes Institute] (2018). *El español, una lengua viva* [Spanish, a living language]. https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol_lengua_viva/
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [National Institute of Statistics and Geography] (2015). *Encuesta intercensal 2015: Principales resultados* [Intercensal Survey 2015: Main results]. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/intercensal/2015/>
- Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas [National Indigenous Languages Institute] (n.d.). https://site.inali.gob.mx/Micrositios/DILM2019/diversidad_linguistica_mexico.html#tema1
- Lemus, J. E. (2018). Revitalizing Pipil: The Cuna Nahuat experience. In L. Hinton, L. Huss, & G. Roche (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language revitalization* (pp. 395-405). Routledge.
- Lizama, J. (2008). Un panorama del sistema de educación intercultural bilingüe en Yucatán [An overview of the intercultural bilingual education system in Yucatán]. In J. Lizama (Ed.), *Escuela y proceso cultural. Ensayos sobre el sistema de educación formal dirigido a los mayas* (pp. 89-124). Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.
- Llanes Ortiz, G. D. J. (2008). Interculturalización fallida: Desarrollismo, neoindigenismo y universidad intercultural en Yucatán, México [Failed interculturalization: Developmentalism, neoindigenism, and intercultural university in Yucatán, Mexico]. *Trace: Travaux et Recherches dans les Amériques du Centre*, 6(53), 49-63. <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/4238/423839509004.pdf>
- Mateos Cortés, L. (2017). Indigenous youth graduating from Intercultural Universities: Capability building through intercultural higher education in Veracruz, Mexico. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 38(2), 155-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2017.1291496>
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172>
- O'Shannessy, C. (2011). Language contact and change in endangered languages. In P. K. Austin, & J. Sallabank (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of endangered languages* (pp. 78-99). Cambridge University Press.

- Ramírez, E. (2006). *La educación indígena en México* [Indigenous education in Mexico]. UNAM.
- Sefa Dei, G. J., Hall, B. L., & Rosenberg, D. G. (Eds.). (2000). Introduction. In *Indigenous knowledges in global contexts: Multiple readings of our world* (pp. 3-20). University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Thieberger, N. (1990). Language maintenance: Why bother? *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 9(4), pp. 333-358. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.1990.9.4.333>