



Indigenous Language Students from Spanish-Speaking Countries: Educational Approaches

*Hannah Pick, Walt Wolfram, North Carolina State University;
Jacqueline López, Center for Applied Linguistics*

Introduction

In the United States the terms "Hispanic," "Latino," and "Chicano" are often used to describe individuals who come, or whose ancestors come, from Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Spain. Hispanics/Latinos represent a significant portion of the U.S. population (15% in 2007). They account for 50 percent of the country's growth from 2000 to 2007, and 70 percent of growth in children younger than five. The Spanish-speaking population is the fastest-growing language group in the United States. Estimates are that 75 percent of the Hispanic/Latino population speaks Spanish to some degree (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009, based on tabulations of the Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey).

Terms used above (e.g. Hispanic, Latino) do not recognize the complex language profiles of individuals who come from a Latin American country and speak a language other than Spanish as their first language; for example, Otomí, a Native American language, spoken in Oaxaca, Mexico; or Tzeltal, spoken in Chiapas, Mexico. The number of Spanish-speaking students in our schools and universities is significant, and Spanish language programs for them, such as Spanish for Native or Heritage Spanish Speakers, are critical to their Spanish language development. At the same time, in the development of heritage language programs, it is important to recognize the language and cultural backgrounds of students from indigenous backgrounds within Latin America, in addition to those of Spanish-speaking origin. As used here, "indigenous" refers to native ethnic people who inhabit a geographic region where they have the earliest known historical connection.

The Case of Indigenous Students from Mexico

The largest group of Latin Americans in the United States is of Mexican descent. In 2005, 64 percent of the 42.7 million Hispanics or Latinos in the United States were of Mexican background (Christie, 2006). At the same time, Mexico is the home of over one quarter of the total indigenous population in Latin America (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004), with at least 10 percent belonging to a family in which an indigenous language is spoken (Fox, 2006). Thus, Spanish is not spoken as a first language by a significant portion of Mexicans, and sometimes it is not spoken fluently, or even at all, by people who were born and raised in Mexico (Hidalgo, 2006).

Similarly, there are immigrants in the United States from Mexico who do not speak Spanish as their first language. The Mixtec, Nahuas, Otomí, Purhépechas, and Triques are among the largest indigenous groups migrating to the United States. Many people from these groups began coming as early as the 1940s with the Bracero Program (Anderson, 1997; Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Zabin et. al, 1993). In 2004, it was estimated that about half a million indigenous immigrants in the United States came from the Mexican state of Oaxaca alone and were Otomí speakers (Santos, 2006). In addition to speaking a local variant of an indigenous language, most members of these indigenous communities have distinctive cultural traditions and values, which they bring with them to the United States (Kearney, 2000, p. 176). They also often represent minorities who are stereotyped and suffer discrimination by non-indigenous, mainstream Mexican society.

Indigenous Students in Schools

Indigenous students in U.S. schools can experience both social and educational consequences from their diverse language and cultural background. Buttaro (2004) concludes that teachers should work to help students appreciate and accept each other, as perceptions of social acceptance can help lower cultural adjustment problems for students (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Constantine, Okazki, & Utsey, 2004; Morie, 2000; Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

Students of indigenous Latin American descent are often alienated in the classroom by native English speakers and native Spanish speakers (including those from their own native countries). This pattern is exemplified by a study in Oregon, which found that students with indigenous Purhépecha language backgrounds were learning at a slower pace than native Spanish-speaking students from Mexico (Swanson, Ballash, & Cost, 2006). In an attempt to alleviate this problem, a group of teachers went to Mexico and spent time in a local village in Michoacán, where they gathered information about the Purhépecha language and culture. They then incorporated their findings at their school in Oregon to facilitate learning for their Purhépecha students. They based lessons on the students' prior knowledge and cultural and language references and involved family members in various activities (including crafts and music) at the school.

These connections were rewarded, as the Purhépecha students became more alert, responsive, and interested in school. More programs like this one, in addition to after-school programs and weekend heritage schools, could make a difference both socially and academically for students of indigenous Latin American backgrounds.

Heritage programs and organizations for students of indigenous Latin American descent can also help to keep indigenous languages and cultures alive (Santos, 2006). In some cases, children who move to the United States may go from speaking an indigenous language to speaking English without ever learning Spanish. If they don't use their native language enough, language loss often results. As language loss takes place, it may be readily followed by loss of identity. Heritage programs and organizations can help to promote a sense of appreciation for the heritage languages and cultures of these students. These programs can also contribute to the preservation of indigenous languages, as a speaker's attitude toward their cultures and languages plays a role in keeping languages and dialects alive both for the speaker and for society in general (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram, 1999). An individual's linguistic and cultural attitudes, as well as those of the community as a whole, are key components in maintaining indigenous languages and cultures in the United States. Consequently, heritage language programs for those from indigenous backgrounds will help preserve indigenous languages and ground heritage speakers in their cultural backgrounds.

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