

Bilingual Intercultural Education Program in Chile:

Efforts and Challenges of Revitalizing the Mapuche Language

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The Mapudungun or Mapuche language spoken by the Mapuche people in southern Chile is one of the thousands of severely endangered languages in the world today. Despite some efforts by the Mapuche and the Chilean government to support it, the language is threatened as fewer young people speak it. One of the efforts to revitalize Mapudungun is the implementation of a Bilingual Intercultural Education Program (BIEP). It began in 1996 as a product of the promulgation of the Indigenous Law 19.253 that established norms for the protection, promotion and development of Indigenous groups in Chile, and it created the National Corporation for Indigenous Development, which in conjunction with the Ministry of Education is responsible for the promotion of indigenous cultures and development of an intercultural bilingual program in areas of high Indigenous population, which in Chile are represented by the Aymara, Quechua, Mapudungun and Rapa Nui. The BIEP has been gradually implemented since its creation, starting in 2010 in schools with Indigenous enrollments equal to or greater than 50%. At present, its implementation is mandatory in schools with an Indigenous enrollment equal to or greater than 20%, which has involved a transformation of the school curriculum in Chile and a paradigm shift in relation to linguistic and planning policies, particularly with the teaching of Indigenous languages.

Among the main features of the BIEP is to establish Chile as a multicultural and multilingual country where diverse cultures and languages converge, which is a reality that schools should welcome in order to

ensure access to learning opportunities of Indigenous languages. The BIEP is articulated from an intercultural education approach, and the Ministry of Education 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” (Ministry of Education, 2011).

An analysis of the educational efforts contemplated in the BIEP shows three important aspects:

- 1) The teaching-learning process is student-centered, which means the BIEP considers personal experiences, identities, interests, tastes and realities of all students who share the classroom, favoring intercultural dialogue;
- 2) The community as a resource and source of knowledge. This aspect legitimizes the community as a source of knowledge and experience, valuing the knowledge of the communities that speak the original language, especially the participation of the elder members in consultation and interaction with students. It emphasizes that schools alone cannot assume the tasks of recovering a language and strengthening the identity, self-esteem and values of the original cultures. Consequently, it is recommended to incorporate the family and other traditional authorities of the community because they contribute with their experiences, values, advice and knowledge from their cultural world. As a result, they transfer their experiences



Map by Isabel Diego Ramirez

to the new generations through speeches, stories, songs, dances and artistic expressions, among others. Lastly, this second aspect highlights the contribution of traditional educators in the training process, especially in the rescue and revitalization of indigenous languages, an aspect that constitutes a significant advance in the vision of educational policies from the Ministry of Education;

3) The BIEP proposes the use of new technologies in teaching, considering their advantages in granting a greater social status to the language, and the possibility of using it in modern technological means. Likewise, this didactic orientation is of interest in the teaching of indigenous languages, since, from the discursive point of view, it considers the different areas or communication channels, both the traditional ones of orality and also the conversation and other forms of interaction, as well as the communication through digital media. In this way, the teaching of indigenous languages is situated in the era of digitalization and globalization, considering the proliferation of digital technologies, which make possible the existence of massive communication, entertainment and information devices (De Moraes, 2011). This orientation constitutes a step forward in the teaching of indigenous languages, since it fosters a vision equally situated in the new contexts of production and reception of discourse (Cassany, 1999), aligning with contributions from textual linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics, among others.

Even though, the BIEP considers the three relevant aspects explained above, 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 & Valenzuela, 2013). Despite the fact that the BIEP is articulated from

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an intercultural education approach with emphasis on additive bilingualism combined with a communicative-semantic approach to language teaching, one cannot ignore its lack of specific teaching methodologies and proposals that are not related to the needs of each cultural context and geographical area (Catrileo, 2010). In addition, there are few reports on the development of communicative competence in indigenous languages in Chilean schoolchildren since the implementation of the BIEP in Chile, which makes difficult to know the real impact of this program in the school context.

A more detailed analysis of the pedagogical orientations of the BIEP reveals that even though the communicative approach to language teaching is the main orientation in the proposal of cultural content (indigenous languages), the actual communication skills do not constitute an explicit or central didactic orientation, since they do not explicitly appear in the

program. The absence of the development of communicative skills is disturbing, especially, considering their importance in a process of linguistic revitalization (Quintrileo, 2017).

In order to strengthen the weaknesses identified in the BIEP, a more didactic approach, based on McDowell (1983) and Cassany (1999), is proposed. They state that two main elements in communicative language teaching must be considered: First, the adaptation to the needs of the apprentice, and second, didactic activities located in a context of 'communicative classroom.' The first one follows a didactic design oriented towards the interests, goals and requirements of each student. In a word, a cooperative-based methodology could be proposed, which in terms of Richterich (1985), would result in the participation of the three entities involved in the training process: the student, the educator and the school. In Chile, each school designs

Group of Mapuche totems at a park in Temuco, Chile



its own educational model, however there are very few reports and evidences about the incorporation of students in an educational model. In a communicative approach of this nature, the teacher assumes a role of mediator, negotiating the interests of the students and the establishment. From this perspective, a cooperative model focused on the development of communicative competence, should ask: what does the student want to learn?, taking into account the specificities of cultural content; Then ask yourself: How does the student want to learn? attending to their communicative needs (from the pragmatic point of view of language), sociocultural (topics of interest, discursive genres) and didactic (learning styles, methodological approaches and preferred activities). Finally, the cooperative model should ask what are the eventual goals of the children, which would make it possible to advance in the awareness of the motivation processes of the students themselves. This last point has special importance owing to its implications at the level of the attitudes expressed by speakers and non-speakers of an indigenous language, taking into account the low value of indigenous languages because of historical circumstances, assimilationist public policies and ethnocentric and racist ideologies. The goals or motivations of the students could even contribute to remove attitudes of rejection towards methodologies, styles and cultural contents.

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A focus on the needs of the student should address their sociolinguistic profile, according to each level and geographical context. In Chile, the challenge is enormous, because today we do not have clear and key instruments measure the communicative competence of children, and obviously, a model with a communicative approach should address dialectical diversity, particularly in the case of Mapudungun.

The second element related to didactic activities located in a context of 'communicative classroom' is based on participants and goals. The main question here is: does the activity have a communicative purpose, in pragmatic terms? (say hello, ask, etc.). In this way, student knows and is aware of the reason for the activity. This point is also associated with the needs and motivations of the student, contributing to the metacognition of the training process.

The incorporation of the needs of the apprentice and didactic activities located in a context of communicative classroom are essential elements that can boost Chile's BIEP. However, the incorporation of these elements is not free from challenges, which is something all Indigenous activists have always faced when dealing with revitalization efforts. The needs of the learners and contextualized didactic activities will be part of a long-term project.

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