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Research article

An overview of Indigenous peoples in Chile and their struggle to revitalise their native languages: the case of Mapudungun

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Abstract

Languages are not just sets of words. They are powerful tools essential to carry history, traditions, culture and wisdom. In Latin America, Mapudungun, the native language of Mapuche people – the largest ethnic group in Chile – can be threatened. A substantial linguistic shift has characterised the panorama of native languages of the current territory. However, language and education policies have been insufficient for their preservation. This article analyses Mapudungun from a general historical perspective to define Indigenous communities' experience in the country: insufficient state support for revitalising their languages and decolonising the Chilean national curriculum. An overview of Mapudungun in the last century is provided by explaining relevant linguistic and educational policies. The PEIB (Intercultural Bilingual Education Programme), a

linguistic and educational policy in Chile, is considered in depth. It aims to improve the quality and relevance of learning from curricular contextualisation. It also seeks to teach Indigenous children their culture, traditions and languages. However, the lack of support for traditional educators and the decontextualised curriculum have further impoverished their background and increased the gap between native peoples' languages and Chilean society. The article ends with a call to policymakers to recognise the importance of the construction of Chilean identities.

Keywords Programa Intercultural Bilingüe; Intercultural Bilingual Education Programme; Mapudungun; Chilean educational policies; Mapuche

Introduction

Fewla kalewetuy mongen; tüfachi weche mütewe wingkatuingün; allwe ngoymarpu- ingün taiñ küpal ñi ngülam ka ñi dungu; kalli rupape kiñe mufü tripantu, feymew epe kimwerpulatory ñi Mapudungun engün.

These days, our lives are changing; the new generations of Mapuche have Chileanised themselves too much; slowly, they are forgetting about the purpose and nature of our race, and in a few years' time they will surely have forgotten about their true language, their Indigenous language. (Coña, 1995: 25)

Languages are powerful tools that carry history, traditions, culture, cosmovision and wisdom (Gallegos et al., 2010). In Chile, the Spanish language was imposed by colonisers as the only language of Catholic conversion in an effort to control Indigenous communities (García, 2008). As a result, several native languages in Chilean territories are still threatened. Among them, it is the Mapuche people and their language that have the greatest demographic weight, and political and social impact, in Chile (Lagos, 2013). However, the Ministry of Education in Chile has focused mainly on improving and reinforcing the learning of the subjects assessed through standardised tests, such as language, mathematics and sciences, instead of fully overseeing the Bilingual Intercultural Education Programme (Programa de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe, PEIB). The PEIB was developed as an attempt to restore Indigenous linguistic policies and to pay native peoples a historical ethical debt (Lagos et al., 2013). It aims to improve the quality and relevance of learning through the curricular contextualisation and strengthening of ethnic identity in children and young people (MINEDUC and PEIB, 2011). It also seeks to give Indigenous children knowledge of their culture, traditions and languages. However, the lack of adequate support for traditional educators and contextualised materials have made the restoration of Indigenous communities' languages difficult to achieve. In this article, we suggest that current educational policies should be oriented to successfully restore and revitalise Indigenous languages by integrating and contextualising them in educational materials in private and state-run schools. This article focuses mainly on Mapudungun, since it is the largest Indigenous group in Chile (INE, 2017).

Chilean socio-historical context: from the sixteenth century to the Pacificación process

During the process of colonisation, in the sixteenth century, the Mapuche were an autonomous people in the south of Chile. The Spanish colonisers could not defeat them completely, despite their numerous attempts to colonise the whole Chilean territory. Hence, in 1641 the Spanish Crown acknowledged the war and the Mapuche's fighting prowess by giving them the lands they inhabited under the Treaty of Quilin (Tratado de Quilin). The Independence period, in the nineteenth century, was followed by the Pacification of the Araucanía Region (Pacificación de la Araucanía), when many European and Chilean families from the elite came to inhabit Mapuche lands to expand the urbanisation of the territory and consolidate the Chilean state (Gallegos et al., 2010). Therefore, Indigenous communities were expelled

from their domains by Chilean soldiers, displaced in small villages where they were put to work under inhuman conditions. This resulted in a 5 per cent reduction of the legally recognised native peoples' territory (Marimán et al., 2006). This abrupt change implied not only a radical territorial decrease, but also the social and cultural dissociation of these communities.

The latter point is related to the idea of the self. Shin and Kubota (2008: 210) mention that the construction of the 'Self' by dominant groups 'is accompanied by denigrations of other languages, cultures, and people in language education'. Ironically, for Indigenous peoples in Chile, this Pacification was nothing but an era of 'abuse, deprivation of their lands, neglect and even forced invisibility' (López, 2006: 238). The process of Pacification continued through the church and schools. Indigenous communities were forced to convert to Catholicism and abandon their beliefs, traditions and rituals to embrace the Holy Truth. Missionaries taught Indigenous people the Bible, and Spanish teachers taught children the new language of the nation. Besides, the Spanish considered native peoples as inferior, directly denying their existence (Donoso, 2008; Historic Truth and New Deal of Indigenous People Commission, 2008). Thus, Mapudungun and other native languages were diminished, and Spanish was imposed as the only language of Catholic conversion to subjugate the Indigenous population (García, 2008).

Indigenous communities in Chile in modern times

During the early twentieth century, the number of native people who spoke Spanish increased due to migration from the rural regions to the cities. As their native language held low prestige, native people had to put their mother tongue aside or use it only in their private life, learn Spanish and teach it to their children to protect them from being discriminated against and to offer them a real possibility to finally settle down (Antileo and Alvarado, 2017). Their migration to urban areas also interrupted their traditional socialisation circuits. The long working hours and commutes, fully immersed with Spanish speakers, hindered the possibilities of interaction with their native language (Rojas et al., 2016). Nonetheless, in the case of the Mapuche people, independent Mapuche organisations have helped them to adjust their lives to these new dynamics, which have sought to facilitate their transition to Chilean life while preserving their native identity (Ancan and Calfío, 1999; Curivil, 2006). In the same vein, migration to the capital city implied a series of 'conflicts, unequal encounters, settlements, resistance and pressure' (Antileo and Alvarado, 2017: 110). However, in 1935, the *Lonko* (Mapuche leaders) meeting in Butahuillimapu, a historical Mapuche area, pressured the government to listen to their historical demands regarding recognising their identities and languages and inhabiting their ancestral territories. This was the first attempt to claim spaces to develop proficiency in their native tongue and to build schools, which Indigenous children could attend without being discriminated against because of their race, culture and languages.

It was under the government of Salvador Allende in the 1970s that the native communities, primarily Mapuche, enjoyed some benefits regarding their participation in public and political spaces (Tricot, 2020). It is interesting to note that this did not occur due to the creation of policies relevant to these peoples, but as a collateral effect of policies aimed at small farmers who sought to improve the quality of rural communities' lives. Nevertheless, after the *coup d'état* on 11 September 1973, dictator Augusto Pinochet imposed neoliberal reforms that destroyed, among other things, all the advances in social policies and covenants between the socialist government of Salvador Allende and Chilean people, including native groups (Rector, 2003). In 1978, Pinochet denied the existence of Indigenous peoples with the implementation of Decree 2.568, which sought to divide what was left of Indigenous property. This allowed land reductions (*reducciones*) with the aim of collecting lands needed for Chile's economic progress (Gallegos et al., 2010). This both ended Indigenous legal identity to favour the selling and use of land to private parties and fragmented the linguistic communities who inhabited those lands (Figueroa Huencho, 2018). Along the same lines, the Chilean Constitution developed during Pinochet's dictatorship in 1989 made no mention of Indigenous peoples at all (Lagos, 2013), thus silencing 'the multicultural and multilingual status of the nation' (Lagos et al., 2013: 410), all of which would ultimately have a strong impact on the definition of future Chilean identity and the recognition of Indigenous languages. However, Chilean language policies based on globalised premises developed during Pinochet's dictatorship have benefited profitable languages such as English to prepare the population to fit into a neoliberal system (Block, 2010).

The return of democracy and its effect on Indigenous language policies

In 1980, UNESCO acknowledged for the first time the importance of language diversity and the implications that the loss of Indigenous languages would have on global history (Gallegos et al., 2010). However, after the referendum that allowed the return of democracy in 1989 the presidential candidate Patricio Aylwin met with a group of Indigenous leaders in Nueva Imperial in the south of Chile to discuss a new law that would protect them after many years of deprivation. This was the first legal attempt to restore Indigenous peoples' rights after Pinochet's dictatorship, and it was known as Nueva Imperial Minutes (Acta de Nueva Imperial; Becerra et al., 2013). Patricio Aylwin's party alliance, the Concertación, was committed to recognising Indigenous peoples' rights and joining international treaties for their protection. However, this coalition did not abandon neoliberal practices for the sake of the economy, and it authorised deforestation and the creation of hydroelectric power stations that negatively impacted Indigenous peoples' lives, cosmovisions and rural communities (Pairican, 2014).

Despite this, several steps have been taken to revitalise Indigenous languages and their human rights. In 1993, parliament created a corporation to restore native peoples' rights, composed of Indigenous representatives called the National Corporation for Indigenous Development (Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena, CONADI; Becerra et al., 2013; CONADI, 2021). Subsequently, in 1998, both CONADI and the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) developed the Bilingual Intercultural Education Programme (Programa de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe, PEIB), which was implemented in 2000. Its main aim was to help Indigenous peoples finally integrate into Chilean society by developing appropriate educational materials to work with Indigenous students across Chile, especially in rural areas where they were mainly concentrated, and preparing teachers to teach in their native languages (Becerra et al., 2013; MINEDUC, 2017).

PEIB: an answer to Indigenous communities' demands?

According to the last Chilean census records (INE, 2017), 12.8 per cent of people belonged to an Indigenous ethnic group (that is, 2,185,792 people). In fact, there are only a few native languages in Chile that are still used by Indigenous communities, such as Mapudungun (Mapuche), Aymara, Quechua, Rapa Nui, Kawésqar, Lickantai and Yagan (Red por los Derechos Educativos y Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas de Chile, 2014; Subdirección Pueblos Originarios, 2020). In the same vein, the cultural and linguistic diversity of Indigenous peoples in Chile has been the subject of public policies since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In education, one of the most relevant has been the PEIB, which aims to develop an Indigenous language and culture subject in schools with a high rate of Indigenous students to prepare them to perform adequately both in their society of origin and in global society (MINEDUC and PEIB, 2011). It should be noted that the PEIB takes place only at the primary and preschool levels in 90-minute weekly lessons. However, language education has been historically developed by political and economic interests that are essential 'in the construction as well as the transformation of inequality between the privileged and the underprivileged' (Shin and Kubota, 2008: 206). As a result of years of deprivation and social stigmatisation, many Indigenous peoples stopped speaking and learning their native tongues because they did not find the heritage language useful to their communicative needs (Lagos, 2013). Thus, the PEIB that was adopted, institutionalised and implemented by CONADI and MINEDUC in 2000 was seen as a 'new approach to restore and revitalise indigenous cultures to make them coexist inside a pluralist society' (Lagos, 2012: 152) by recognising their strengths and validating their identities. López (2006) discusses how the importance of PEIB in Latin America is related to the development of self-esteem and the reestablishment of Indigenous identities that were oppressed over centuries by dominant colonies.

In Chile, the CONADI and MINEDUC supervise the programme (mainly the curriculum, financial resources and materials) that is supposed to be compulsory in schools that have 20 per cent or more of Indigenous children, and optional in others with fewer heritage students. Nevertheless, although this initiative takes functional intercultural education as its principle (Walsh, 2009), and it is seen as an approach that seeks dialogue and equitable relationships between cultures (UNESCO, 2006), its formulation seems to be rather multicultural in nature and, at some point, assimilationist. The PEIB recognises the coexistence of different cultures, but it lacks an approach to equate power relations

(Lagos, 2015; Espinoza, 2016). Additionally, linguistic planning towards Indigenous languages has been weak. The PEIB itself has not been designed to ultimately revitalise native languages, but as a palliative measure to diminish the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' learning and schooling (Lagos and Espinoza, 2013). This dramatically differs from the case of the learning of English as a foreign language in the country, whose language teaching has a fixed and organised national curriculum and is compulsory in all schools, which is consistent with its international prestige and utility (Instituto de Chile, 2016; Banfi, 2017).

In the same vein, the current state of affairs shows that the PEIB is still far from being a national policy. That is to say that, even though some students could have access to this programme, Chilean students face a centralised curriculum that strengthens and favours Western monocultural visions (Quintriqueo Millan and McGinty Travers, 2009; Van Hooft et al., 2021); their public school texts usually reproduce racism in different ways (Canales-Tapia et al., 2018); and there is a lack of teacher training on diversity and intercultural education (Íbañez-Salgado and Druker-Íbañez, 2018). In the case of teachers, Castillo et al. (2016) consider Indigenous educators essential to contribute to students' cultural competence. However, according to Lagos (2015), one of the challenges that the PEIB faces is its implementation, since it mainly depends on whether and how these teachers will apply the intended contents. In this sense, language policies have attempted to teach native languages following grammatical patterns, losing the essence and richness of the language that has transmitted knowledge and a particular world view through generations (Becerra et al., 2013).

The second challenge of the PEIB is that it is not designed to be implemented in the main cities, private schools and wealthy municipalities. Native communities are commonly segregated and divided into different sectors, which are usually the poorest in Santiago and in the south of Chile (INE, 2017). While the PEIB was mainly meant to be implemented in rural areas, the current sociodemographic distribution of this community shows the need for its implementation in cities as well. Considering the PEIB's aim of developing an intercultural Chilean identity, it makes sense to integrate the Indigenous communities' culture and life in the schools in the most populated cities, since these groups are a minority in those places and treated as such (Lagos, 2013). Furthermore, an intercultural education programme should not be extended only to Indigenous students, assuming that non-Indigenous students do not require it, which is against the purpose of critical intercultural education itself. Critical interculturality aspires to become a sociopolitical and economic project, as well as a pedagogical one, to deal with and acknowledge cultural differences and historical issues, such as racism and problems derived from Indigenous communities' land dispossession (Walsh, 2009).

Another obstacle for the programme is that there are not enough funds to adapt and create appropriate materials that in turn are not sufficient or relevant enough for students' interests (Riedemann, 2008; Loncón, 2010; MINEDUC and PEIB, 2011). Therefore, the lack of contextualised materials and teaching the topic for 90 minutes a week have transformed the intercultural subject into an optional module within schools, belittling the need to learn it and focusing schools' language curriculum on English and on subject matters that are assessed with nationwide standardised tests (Saavedra, 2021). Besides, the PEIB has ultimately been developed to teach isolated elements of Indigenous communities' culture instead of their language, which, as Castillo et al. (2016) point out, has negatively affected students' motivation to learn it. Additionally, according to Lagos (2013), intercultural teachers are often sent to cover for absent teachers, or even to watch the entrance door at schools, making their students relate the native language subject to the way in which their teachers are treated by the school community.

Recent results in the Quality Measuring System of Education (Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación, SIMCE) have shown that Mapuche students tend to score lower than non-Indigenous students on the Mathematics and Language SIMCE tests (Fernández and Hauri, 2016; Saavedra, 2021). For example, in the Mathematics SIMCE test, Mapuche female students scored 25 points lower than their non-Indigenous peers, while Mapuche male students scored 27 points lower than non-Indigenous students (Fernández and Hauri, 2016). Saavedra's (2021) findings also show that non-Indigenous students outperform Indigenous students in both Language and Mathematics SIMCE tests by 10 and 18 points respectively.

These test results are consistent with the fact that schools adopting the PEIB or having high enrolment rates of Indigenous students also show poorer performance than schools with fewer Indigenous students (Arias-Ortega et al., 2020). In this regard, Arias-Ortega et al.'s (2020) study suggests that rural schools with predominantly Indigenous backgrounds score poorly compared to urban schools with a lower presence of Indigenous children. However, according to Webb et al. (2016), the PEIB should

not be considered detrimental to school performance, since it has proved beneficial to students in other Latin American countries.

It is also important to mention that most Indigenous children in Chile belong to the working class and attend deprived public schools (Webb et al., 2016). Hence, for students with Indigenous heritage, learning their mother tongue is established as an annexe to the rest of the national curriculum, with a unitary and decontextualised profile regarding the local and Indigenous reality (Lagos, 2015) that might be considered an overload of work compared to the rest of the children. In this sense, the Mapuche linguist Loncón (2010: 80) acknowledges that the recognition of the linguistic and educational rights of Indigenous children in Chile are still 'pending issue[s]'. Despite the facts that these are recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be integral to the development of Indigenous communities' dignity and are in connection with various international and national regulations (International Labour Organization, 1989; Chilean Indigenous Law, 1993), these have not been properly implemented. Loncón (2010) argues that the Chilean state has not maintained a clear and active role in the restoration of Indigenous languages and has not been able to guarantee the rights associated with those either.

The struggle to revitalise ethnic groups' languages in current times

The Indigenous policies developed since the return to democracy in Chile have focused mainly on acknowledging diversity, rather than on the autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous peoples themselves (Hale, 2005; Richards, 2016). These perspectives have led to limited public policies on native languages developed by small departments in ministries, or through the application of specific state funds. In this way, central policies towards Indigenous languages (or those related to them) have a low impact on them. However, these have aroused great interest from these populations (Ancan, 2017). Among them, we find the Programme for the Promotion and Diffusion of Indigenous Cultures and Arts of the National Council of Cultures and the Arts (CNCA), CONADI workshops and contests to learn Indigenous languages, and the PEIB in state-run elementary schools and preschools.

Contrary to what was expected, the interest of young people and adults in generating more links with Indigenous communities' culture has grown in recent years, especially in the case of the Mapuche. This re-ethnification is characterised by the re-socialisation of traditional Mapuche life in the city. In this sense, organisations are formed where ceremonies are held, customs and habits are recovered, and the native language is learned in context (Vergara et al., 2016; García-Mingo, 2016). In addition, a series of autonomous works has been conducted to teach the language and to revitalise Mapudungun (Loncón, 2010; Teillier, 2013; Vergara, 2016; Palma, 2017). These initiatives are mainly in the forms of physical workshops and internships where the language is taught, but there are also virtual initiatives, such as the creation of digital contextualised learning resources and other documents accessible to all (Palma, 2017). In addition to these, there have been other relevant activities, such as the creation of institutions to look after the revitalisation of Indigenous languages through the discussion and standardisation of the written and oral languages (Loncón, 2010; Palma, 2017), social movements that seek the officialisation of Mapudungun in the Araucanía region as is the case in Galvarino and Padre Las Casas (Palma, 2017) and the Bill on Linguistic Rights developed and articulated by the Network of Educational and Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples in Chile (Loncón, 2010).

Conclusions

In this article, we have presented a historical overview of Mapuche people and the attempts to restore their native languages and culture. Indeed, the history of Indigenous communities in Chile has been marked with bloodshed and assimilation, and having both their human and linguistic rights violated. However, in an attempt to commit to ancient culture and ethnic groups, the Ministry of Education alongside the CONADI established the PEIB. However, this programme has faced multiple challenges since its implementation in 2000, such as the lack of appropriate materials, support for teachers, time to teach the native language, and economic resources to implement it effectively in schools. Additionally, the emphasis on promoting the learning and evaluation of other school subjects has negatively impacted the funds and interest for teaching native languages in Chile (Becerra et al., 2013).

Although we value the interest and efforts that the MINEDUC and CONADI have made to help Indigenous communities' languages, we propose that the PEIB, as a multilingual education programme, should be extended to all children across schools in Chile, whether they attend a private or public school in rural or urban areas, so that all Chilean citizens treasure the value of their heritage. Thus, the Chilean state has an enormous responsibility to look after Indigenous languages and cultures. To date, most students receive almost no training on Indigenous peoples' culture, much less on their languages. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the gap between the results of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in standardised tests is not primarily found in Chile. In fact, it has been registered in Latin America (Saavedra, 2021), Canada (Richards, 2020), Australia (Dreise and Thompson, 2014) and New Zealand (Song et al., 2014). We claim that some of these countries are known for their language policies to revitalise Indigenous languages. Hence, we might have to question the utility, nature and structure of these tests if their educational aim is to promote linguistic and cultural diversity. It would certainly be a challenge to implement intercultural education, but in a world where language is power, policymakers should try to empower native languages above others.

However, there is still hope for Indigenous communities in Chile. In 2021, Elisa Loncón, Mapuche, a linguist and renowned Indigenous peoples' advocate, was appointed as president of the Constituent Convention, which oversees the new constitutional process in Chile. The democratically elected constituents have promoted the recognition of Indigenous communities' rights and the country's plurilingualism in the new Chilean Constitution. As a matter of fact, a few constituents are Mapuche, and these have brought to the table the importance of implementing their cosmovision and revitalising Indigenous languages in all educational establishments, and thus ultimately considering Chile a multilingual country.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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