Bilingual Education and National Identity for the Cabécares in the Costa Rican Chirripó Indigenous Reserve

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In the 1970s, the Costa Rican government, through the National Commission on Indigenous Affairs (Comisión Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas—CONAI), established a reserve system for its indigenous people to provide them with their own territory. Eight indigenous groups in 22 reserves were protected under this proclamation: the Borucas, Bribris, Chorotegas, Heutares, Guaymís, Gautusos, Terrabas, and Cabécares. Reports indicate that there may be as many as 200,000 indigenous peoples in Costa Rica (Torres and Molina, 1996, p. 1). A 1996 census reports that the Bribris and Cabécares are the two largest indigenous groups in Costa Rica (Rojas and Fernández, 1996). Much of the research on indigenous peoples has been focused on these two groups in the Talamanca area in southern Costa Rica. Researchers in Costa Rica have researched and described the Cabécar culture and issues of importance to them in Talamanca, but the Cabécar reserve of Chirripó, located in central Costa Rica, has been ignored. Even basic services such as health care and education have only recently become available in the Chirripó reserve. While the Cabécares in Talamanca have had state-supported education since the 1950s, the Chirripó Cabécares did not have any state supported education programs until 1980 (Borge, 1998, pp. 433-444; Comisión Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas, 1980).

The Department of Indigenous Education (under Costa Rica’s Ministry of Public Education) has recently made a substantial effort to incorporate bilingual education into the 14 schools in the Chirripó reserve in order to preserve the Cabécar culture and language. Such an approach is important because loss of culture and language through the education process may cause loss of identity, academic failure, and marginalization. Implications may also include high dropout rates, low attendance records, high illiteracy rates, exclusion from mainstream society, disempowerment, and feelings of inadequacy (Rippberger, 1993, pp. 50-61). Ultimately, research suggests that dominant language and culture instruction for minority language students often fail to meet the objectives and cause alienation and subordination of minority cultures (McKay and Wong, 1996, pp. 577-608; Pease-Alvarez and Hakuta, 1991, pp. 4-6; Rippberger, 1993, pp. 50-61). In 1998, I studied bilingual education in Costa Rica through an ethnographic, two-month study that sought to understand the educational needs of the Cabécares and how these needs are fulfilled. In the following essay, I provide some background and general theory on bilingual education and intercultural communication and then I discuss the current state of bilingual education in the Chirripó reserve. Finally, I describe how bilingual education programs in Costa Rica potentially influence and affect cultural identity for the Cabécares and for Costa Ricans in general.

Cabécares of Chirripó

The Chirripó reserve, located in central Costa Rica, is sparsely populated secondary and primary rain forest (Hurtado de Mendoza, 1986, pp. 99-100). There is virtually no infrastructure within the reserve, so travel occurs by foot or by horse. The fourteen villages within the reserve also lack infrastructure; these villages are centralized areas for congregation, and each village consists of a few hundred people, living in ranchos, or circular shaped homes constructed of local materials and sometimes sheets of tin (Hurtado de Mendoza, 1986, pp. 101, 105). Within the reserve, the Cabécares subsist on their crops and livestock; the economy is mostly a barter system, and the people have few belongings besides the natural items found within the reserve, although some Cabécares are increasingly in contact with the capitalist system outside of the reserve (Budowski and Oliva, 1986, p. 33). For example, many Cabécares are increasingly seeking employment outside of the reserve on coffee or banana plantations. With the construction of a bridge to cross one of the major rivers within the reserve in 1982, migration within and outside of the reserve was greatly facilitated (Hurtado de Mendoza, 1986, pp. 97-102). In essence, the Chirripó reserve is very isolated and infrequently visited by outsiders, who are generally regarded with suspicion.

Education and health care are two of the most serious issues facing the Cabécares, even though the Costa Rican government has attempted to provide both in the Chirripó reserve (Budowski and Oliva, 1986, pp. 33-39; Fernández, 1998). The government has built several health care clinics in the Chirripó reserve and has arranged for a traveling doctor who visits each clinic approximately once a month, but no regular health care is available, especially for inhabitants who live in more remote locations, far from these clinics. Similarly, the Cabécares have faced significant barriers in education. Rojas and Fernández (1996) report that 95% of Cabécares speak the Cabécar language, whereas only 70% speak some Spanish (p. 3). According to a 1997 Ministry of Health report, the illiteracy rate in Chirripó localities where schools exist range from 80-85%; the rate is much higher in the interior part of the reserve where schools are non-existent, whereas the illiteracy rate in Costa Rica as a whole is only 4.5%. Although indigenous people may be suspicious of education programs that emphasize high literacy rates and institutionalized health care,
ial bilingual education (TBE) program seeks to instruct language minority students in both their native tongue as well as the second language. The maintenance program is similar, but does not seek eventual assimilation as does the TBE. All bilingual education is driven by the dominant group, bilingual education is often controversial in the face of politics and economics, especially when mandated by national governments, and funded by taxpayers (Rippberger, 1993, pp. 50-61).

The term bilingual education is also controversial because there are multiple types of programs. In theory, bilingual education is a system in which students from different cultural backgrounds learn two languages simultaneously. In the United States, such a program might focus on the Spanish and English language development for both native speakers of English and native speakers of Spanish. However, this kind of bilingual education program is uncommon; bilingual education has come to signify any training in a second language that may attempt to assimilate second language students sometimes with development in the first language and sometimes not. Roberts (1995) describes basic program models that have been used in both the United States and elsewhere (pp. 369-378). First, she explains the immersion program, where the goal is to mainstream or assimilate language minority students into majority language classrooms. A second type of program in the United States is the English as a Second Language (ESL) pullout program where language minority students are pulled out of mainstream classes for some instruction in the dominant language, such as ESL type classes. This program generally includes the sheltered model, where ESL and content areas are combined. The transitional bilingual education (TBE) program seeks to instruct language minority students in both their native tongue as well as the second language. The maintenance program is similar, but does not seek eventual assimilation as does the TBE. All of these programs, with the possible exception of the last program, focus on subtractive bilingualism, that is, the focus on cognitive development in the second language, but not the first language (Roberts, 1995, pp. 369-378). Roberts argues that subtractive bilingualism usually has a negative outcome on the language minority student. On the other hand, she contends that additive bilingualism, where the first language is developed through both first and second

Bilingual Education Literature and Theory

In general, bilingual education results from interaction between two or more cultures that have different languages, beliefs, values, customs, behavior. Rippberger (1993) contends that the relationship between two cultures is usually a superordinate/subordinate relationship (pp. 50-61). The dominant group often acts as the driving force for assimilationist programs, arguing for quick assimilation. Because bilingual education is driven by the dominant group, bilingual education is often controversial in the face of politics and economics, especially when mandated by national governments, and funded by taxpayers (Rippberger, 1993, pp. 50-61).

The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be listened to, likely to be recognized as acceptable in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak. Here again, social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality. Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence. What is rare then, is not the capacity to speak... but rather the competence necessary in order to speak the legitimate language which, depending on social inheritance, re-translates social distinctions into the specifically symbolic logic of differential deviations, or, in short, distinction *italics original*. (p. 55)

Bourdieu (1991) also argues that educational systems play decisive roles in cementing official or national languages by establishing a normalizing framework of language. Thus, communication competence in a language is important for social acceptance, yet is difficult in a second language, requiring not only communication competency, but intercultural communication and bilingual competency as well.

The implications of subtractive bilingualism have potentially lasting and damaging effects for students. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) recounts "being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for 'talking back' to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong" (p. 53). Anzaldúa experienced the American system of assimilationist bilingual education in the 1950s and 1960s, which has often been criticized for damaging students' self-esteem and cultural identity by forbidding the use of the students' native language. Such programs demonstrated outright racism in many cases. McKay
and Wong (1996) argue that such practices still occur in bilingual programs in the United States (pp. 577-608). Pease-Alvarez and Hakuta (1991) conclude that this leads to disempowerment of the language minority student (pp. 4-6). For example, in one “bilingual” education program, students studied English for at least half of the school day and then were integrated into mainstream classes such as math, even though they were not proficient in English. These students had difficulty following the class discussions and lectures, felt uncomfortable participating in class, and sometimes failed to understand assignments and directions. As Bourdieu claims, such students are excluded and silenced by their peers and the system within which they were forced to operate. In many bilingual education programs, such normalized conceptions of language competence may lead to labeling second language students as disadvantaged, culturally different, or minority (Rippberger, 1993, p. 51), which may imply that students are “disabled,” slow, or dumb (McKay & Wong, 1996, pp. 577-608).

Although students may be able to overcome exclusion and marginalization in academic settings, studies reveal that this ability to succeed in poor learning environments originates in the individual’s resiliency and invulnerability (Arellano and Padilla, 1996, pp. 487-488; Gordon, 1996, pp. 63-64). Resilience, “the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles,” means that students are able to overcome language barriers, low social status, poverty, or other learning barriers, when such circumstances may severely limit other students’ ability to succeed (Gordon, 1996, p. 63). This ability is often related to an individual’s self-concept, motivation, and intelligence (Gordon, 1996, p. 64). Students in second language learning environments that focus on subtractive bilingualism or assimilation are less likely to have positive self-images, and are less likely to be resilient or invulnerable to constant messages of cultural inferiority.

Similar programs were modeled in many Latin American bilingual education programs. Ripberger (1993) contends that organizations such as the World Bank supported Spanish language assimilationist programs, and therefore provided financial assistance to “educate” indigenous people in Latin America (pp. 53-54). Many of these programs had adverse effects, causing loss of language and cultural identity, as was the experience for the Cabecar and Bribris in Costa Rica’s Talamanca reserve (Borge, 1998, pp. 433-444). The Chirripó reserve is of particular interest because of its isolation and lack of formal education until 1980; in theory, the assimilationist or submersion approach for learning Spanish was never used in Chirripó.

**Bilingual Education in Costa Rica**

In Costa Rica, the assimilationist approach was initially used in indigenous reserves that had education programs until the 1980s, when the Ministry of Indigenous Education focused on newer critical and interpretivist approaches to incorporate what has been called bilingual and bicultural education, steering away from the United States model of assimilationist bilingual education. In 1995, the Costa Rican government established the Department of Indigenous Education in order to create a better system of education for its indigenous people (Torres and Molina, 1998, p. 8). These new approaches make Costa Rica unique in the sense that the nation has shifted away from assimilationist education for its indigenous people, despite the general public support of such programs throughout the United States and Latin America. However, even though the Department of Indigenous Education has made extensive efforts to educate all children on indigenous reserves, they still face many problems (Borge, 1998, pp. 433-444; Fernández, 1998).

Until the 1960s, the Cabecar language was entirely an oral language. A few Cabecaras requested missionary support in the reserve, so American missionaries established a presence in the reserve in the 1960s and still live there today in the Xipiri village. The written form of the Cabecar language was developed by these local missionaries (Jones, 1998). However, because the Cabecar are primarily an oral culture, there is little emphasis in their culture to learn to read and write, but is increasingly common with teachers and health care workers the Costa Rican government assigns to work in the reserve and the presence of missionaries. The very fact that outsiders created the written language for a primarily oral culture demonstrates the difficulties in formalized education. The Cabecar have their own system of education that emphasizes living skills within the reserve system. Hernández (1995) suggests that formal institutionalized education imposes a rationalized system of thinking and ideology that has the potential to reshape cultural identity, which may not be appropriate for or desired by the Cabecar (pp. 7-19). However, as the Cabecar increasingly leave the reserve in search of monetary income and for other reasons, they also increasingly encounter the need to know how to interact with outsiders and a primarily literate culture. While the formalized system of education may change the Cabecar culture from an oral to literate culture, this shift may be inevitable as interaction with people outside the reserve increases.

The Department of Indigenous Education has attempted to contextualize primary school education for Costa Rica’s indigenous people, use teachers that can instruct in indigenous languages, and incorporate community participation into their approach (Department of Indigenous Education, 1998). However, these goals have not been met yet in the Chirripó reserve. For instance, of the 14 primary schools and 14 teachers in the Chirripó reserve, none of the teachers are from the Chirripó area and only one of the teachers speaks Cabecar (Jones, 1998). The teachers teach mainstream curricula that are taught in Costa Rican schools, and most of the curricula occur in Spanish rather than Cabecar because the teachers are not fluent in Cabecar. Some text books for the primary schools
but there are so few text books in both languages that only minimal instruction bilingual in both Cabecar and Spanish may have a full time job outside of the resources and teachers for the reserve's schools. The school buildings are in poor condition. Very few Cabecares have finished primary school, let alone high worker. Cabecares who are bilingual are needed in every aspect of law, policy, health care, and education. Furthermore, even bilingual Cabecares may not have the training to function as teachers, health care workers, and leaders of their communities. Very few Cabecares have finished primary school, let alone high school or university training (Ministry of Health, 1997).

In addition to these issues, there is a general lack of money for additional resources and teachers for the reserve's schools. The school buildings are in poor condition. In one area, the school consists of a corrugated tin roof, one plywood wall, a dirt floor, a few dilapidated school desks, and a garden of local fruits and vegetables. The garden is an attempt to teach students about local crops, but parents and students may not understand the importance of school attendance if the students can learn about these same crops at home. Students must study and share the same texts, creating little opportunity for school work at home or becoming literate in either Spanish or Cabecar. The Cabecar population is extremely dispersed, making school attendance difficult (Fernández, 1998). Parents of Cabecar children may not want their children to attend school, or may need them at home to care for younger siblings, attend to crops and food gathering, or to work outside of the reserve. In some cases, children may have to walk one to four hours to and from school. Younger children may require an adult to accompany them, further complicating school attendance if parents are unable to walk their children to school. All of these factors demonstrate the difficulties in implementing a formalized system of education in the Chirripó reserve and explain Cabecar reluctance to participate in formalized education and low graduation and literacy rates.

The Cabecares of Costa Rica are confronted with many of these problems in their educational system, yet they may not experience the same peer marginalization in education as other second language learners in other countries. The reason behind this may lie in Costa Rica's indigenous reserve system. The reserves are isolated and hard to reach. Additionally, the terrain is difficult and roads are non-existent so travel occurs by foot or by horse. Such isolation means that students rarely attend school with language majority students, unless they live outside of the Chirripó reserve. However, some of the problems mentioned above indicate that the government's role in bilingual education still affects the Cabecares, especially since the teachers are not Cabecares. Their interaction outside of the reserve is especially indicative of how they are marginalized and excluded by mainstream society. Often, adult Cabecares work outside of the reserves on banana or coffee plantations for a portion of each year to generate income, since they have few other mechanisms for earning money, and up until recently, they were a culture that relied more on a barter system economy. Both inside and outside of the reserve, the Cabecares may face the language difficulties Bourdieu describes. Many of the Cabecares face such exclusion, and are at times hostile to outsiders who think the might exploit them for land or take advantage of their inability to speak Spanish. For example, one Cabecar woman related a story of how outsiders had taken advantage of her grandparents. They had signed over the majority of their land in exchange for a cow and a dog because they could not read the legal contract in Spanish they had signed. There are certainly serious implications involving native and second languages in intercultural communication.

Implications of Bilingual Education for the Cabecares and Costa Rican Identities

Language is an integral element of cultural identity because it is the manner of expression and reflection of ways of life and thinking. For language minority people, such as the Cabecares, the inability to provide education in native languages is likely to have lasting and pernicious effects. As Pierre Bourdieu (1991) observes, educational systems play a normative role in establishing the usage national languages, such as Spanish, and create an impetus for the loss of indigenous and native languages (p. 55). As long as educational systems continue to emphasize education in dominant languages for language minority students without enacting a system of additive bilingualism, where language majority AND minority students learn both languages, language minority students and cultures will continue at a disadvantage in all avenues of their societies.

For the Cabecares, the implementation of the educational system in the Chirripó reserve and an attempt to instruct in the Cabecar language is a good faith effort to provide everyone in Costa Rica with an education. However, as this study of the Cabecar educational system reveals, students are not able to achieve the expectations of the Costa Rican government. Rippberger's study of bilingual education in Mexico (1993) indicates that language minority indigenous peoples experience high drop out rates, low attendance, high illiteracy rates, exclusion from mainstream society, disempowerment, feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem. While the Cabecares experience bilingual education in a different way because of their isolation and education in non-mixed classes, their increased contact with outsiders and work outside of the reserve indicates a growing concern for the educational experiences of the Cabecares. Additionally, the government's interpretation of what the Cabecares should know via mainstream curricula and the focus on literacy also demonstrate...
a potential conflict of interest. The Cabécares will be in a better social position of power if they can read and speak Spanish because of the hegemony of dominant languages such as Spanish, but these educational systems will create lasting cultural changes for the Cabécares.

Finally, Costa Rican or tican identity as a whole is affected by these educational policies because they have the effect of confirming systemic discrimination and dominant languages. Unlike other Latin American countries, the mestizaje is less common in Costa Rica. Race or ethnicity in Costa Rica is often described using a black/white dualism. Many ticans are of “whiter” descent, but there is recognition of black populations, especially along the east coast. However, indigenous peoples are mostly ignored by the general population. Costa Rica as a nation projects a homogenous identity, and the continued isolation and educational system for the population. Costa Rica as a nation projects a homogenous identity, and the segregated nation of indigenous people in the reserve system designed to protect them, perpetuates this identity. The continued isolation and educational system for the Cabécares contributes to this identity of homogeneity, even though Costa Rica is a diverse nation with a substantial number of indigenous peoples. The Ministry of Education’s Department of Indigenous Education, established in 1995, has much work to do, not only to provide meaningful education to the Cabécares, but also to include indigenous peoples as part of Costa Rica’s national identity.

References


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