

## **Chiapas, Mexico and the indigenous language Tsotsil**

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Chiapas is a state located in the southeast of Mexico. It is bordered by the states of Tabasco to the north, Veracruz to the northwest and Oaxaca to the west. It is bordered by Guatemala to the south and east.



Figure 1. Map of Chiapas, Mexico (Google, s.f.)

Chiapas is well-known for having one of the largest and most diverse indigenous populations in Mexico with approximately 959,066 indigenous language speakers over the age of five, or 27% of the state's population. This state is home to nine major ethnicities and was a center of the Mayan Empire with ceremonial city centers in Palenque and Yaxchilán. The history of Chiapas indigenous groups is different from other parts of Mexico in that much of the state was a frontier that has only recently been settled and freed from a long period of relatively lawless exploitation by diverse interests. It is only in the highlands that indigenous territories were left alone. Elsewhere, many indigenous communities had their territories expropriated to establish commercial estates and were either converted to indentured labor or fled to frontier areas to create new settlements. With colonization, a number of indigenous populations from neighboring states with different traditions arrived to Chiapas.

## Indigenous peoples in Chiapas



Figure 2. Indigenous embroidering (Google, s.f.)

The main indigenous groups in Chiapas in descending population order are Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Choles, Zoques, Tojolabales, Mames and Mochós. The most populated regions of Chiapas are the Altos and the Centro, which include the capital of San Cristobal de las Casas and Tuxtla Gutierrez and the region of Soconusco. These indigenous communities have been expanded in numbers and spatially to new areas, especially in the western central zone and the area along the Oaxaca border. Indigenous elites are moving to cities that are dominated by mestizo elites.

The reasons for these groups to move to urban centers are political or religious conflicts combined with pressures on agricultural land.

### **Tsotsiles and Tzeltales**

The Tsotsiles call themselves “true men”. This group is related to Tzeltales, a group that refers to themselves as “working men”. These two groups speak an indigenous language that belongs to the Tzeltalan subdivision of the Mayan language family. Tzotzil and Tzeltal were differentiated from one another around 1200 A.D.



Figures 3 & 4. Mayan ruins in Palenque, Chiapas (Google, s.f.)

## Indigenous education in Chiapas

The unequal conditions in which ethnic groups live, in contrast to the rest of the society, are reflected in the educational system. There are at least 13,179 settlements with a density of over 70% indigenous language speakers. This is a population of 4 million people with an illiteracy rate of those over 15 years of age of 46.6%. This rate is almost four times higher than the national average (12.4%).

There are at least 4,000 settlements with a population density of between 30% and 60% of monolingual indigenous language speakers with a population of over 2 million whose level of illiteracy in the age group of over 15 years is over 30% - double the national average. The same 1990 Census shows that 21% of the indigenous children between ages 6 to 14 did not attend school. One of the striking results of language policies was the expanded use of Spanish among the indigenous population. In 1930 one million people were classified as bilinguals and in 1990 there were over 4 million bilinguals out of a total of 5.1 million people over 5 years of age, classified as indigenous. This represents a major increase from 47% bilingual indigenous speakers in 1930 to 84% bilingual indigenous speakers in 1990.

## Ideas to use Spanish and Indigenous languages at school



Figure 5. Design of a school in Chiapas (Google, s.f.)

Various authors view exclusive Spanish literacy within the indigenous speech community as reinforcing a “diglossic ideology” that contributes to devaluing the indigenous language (Francis and Reyhner, 2002). In other words, indigenous languages are considered as “dialects”, so they are not given importance at school.

According to Spolsky (1989) a possible solution to the conflict between the national language and indigenous languages is to create an academic space where indigenous language writing is somehow logically or naturally required. This could allow novice bilingual writers to consciously direct their attention to specific writing skills and other language skills in their “weaker” language. The instructional situation would require learners to use the indigenous language.

The distribution of languages by function in the classroom is the most advocated solution for several authors. For example, Francis and Reyhner (2002) suggest using the national language or the indigenous language for certain activities in class. Also, they point out that the indigenous language should be used for “administrative functions, parent-community/school communication, non-academic routines, teacher/student, and teacher/teacher interaction outside of the classroom”. Since these are standard features of any successful additive-developmental bilingual program, they should be used in bilingual programs in Mexico.

Attention should be given to the design and planning of the curriculum of schools whose learners come from a bilingual community. Teachers should concern themselves with the language development of children that speak or are in contact with two languages. Also, instructors ought to promote the use of both the national language and the indigenous language in those young learners. By doing so, indigenous languages can be transmitted from one generation to another, and the possibilities of maintenance can increase. The government should create sanctions to those bilingual instructors that do not use both languages at school and do not promote their use, and award those who do. Otherwise, Spanish will continue to take over indigenous languages in Chiapas and might make them disappear in the near future.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous languages in Chiapas are disappearing and school has played an important role in that loss. Thus, it is essential that the design of bilingual programs in Mexico assign functions to both the national language and indigenous languages in certain domains. By doing so, both languages would have the same possibilities of being spoken and indigenous languages would be preserved.

### **References**

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