

Language Nests: a strategy to revitalize the native languages of Oaxaca, Mexico

From the Pedagogical Movement to the Language Nests

Julián Jiménez Ramírez¹

Oaxaca is one of the Mexican states with the greatest cultural and linguistic diversities in the country. Due to the contrastingly different geographical features of the land, there is a wide variety of elements that people use to understand, interpret and explain nature, the world and life itself; since each culture has created a whole set of expressions. The cultural wealth of the First Peoples is expressed in their daily activities and it is contained in their systems of organization, production and education; based on their real needs from the past and present.

After reflecting upon the role schools play in First People's towns, an education project called the "Pedagogical Movement" was promoted by the Chief Office of Supervision Zone 21; better known as the Pilot Plan, or the CMPIO (Coalition of Teachers and Indigenous Promoters of Oaxaca for its acronym in Spanish). Its goal was to create an educational system that embraced the direct beneficiaries and the knowledge they bring from their background and perspectives. Several activities were planned to create spaces and opportunities for analysis and reflection with the teachers, parents and communities.

The movement has developed in different stages. The process starts with self-reflection and self-evaluation by the teachers where they acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses. Then tasks are planned to rethink the role of teaching with the input of students, parents, authorities and people from the community.

The work of the Pedagogical Movement has caused changes in the way teachers, children and towns understand and value the original cultures, since for centuries they have lived their culture in a clandestine way. That is to say, they are aware that their people have their own culture, but they

do not practice it. Many understand the native language but they do not speak it because they have been forbidden to do so or have been discriminated against for using it, even in their own schools.

Among the techniques used for rescuing, strengthening and spreading the cultures and native languages, there is one called **the language nests**, inspired by the experience of the Maori people from New Zealand/Aotearoa:

"The language nest is a program that has children aged 1-6 totally immersed in their original language; especially in communities where the spoken language is not their native one. The intention is to create a space and an environment where small kids get used to listening only to their original language from the few people who still speak it (adults and elders), so they are raised as native speakers of their heritage language".²

In Oaxaca, language nests were created after learning from the strategy of analyzing the linguistic and cultural situation that First Peoples face; through the participation in the CMPIO-Pilot Plan in the Intercultural Education National Congress (CNEII):

"In the second general meeting of the National Indigenous and Intercultural Congress -carried out in the city of Oaxaca in October 25-27, 2007- an agreement was made to create the first language nests in Mexico to revitalize the original languages and cultures in those towns and communities where they are at risk."³

This agreement turned out to be a great aid in strengthening activities to promote education, from and with the communities. It stirred a strong sense of commitment; but also brought challenges for the communities where the language nests were to be established. "...As of February 2008,

COMMUNITY	FIRST LANGUAGE
Guadalupe Llano de Avispa, Tilantongo, Nochixtlán	Mixteca
El Oro, Nuxaa, Nochixtlán	Mixteca
Yolotepec de la Paz, Yosondúa, Tlaxiaco	Mixteca
Coápam de Guerrero, Concepción Pápalo, Cuicatlán	Cuicateca
Tlalixtac Viejo, Santa María Tlalixtac, Cuicatlán	Cuicateca y Mixteca
Plan del Carril, Huautla, Teotitlán de Flores Magón	Mazateca
Santa Catarina Lachatao, Ixtlán	Zapoteca
San Juan Evangelista Analco, Ixtlán	Zapoteca
San Andrés Yatuni, Santiago Xiacuí, Ixtlán	Zapoteca
Santiago Camotlán, Villa Alta	Zapoteca

1. Pilot Plan-CMPIO.

2. Meyer, Lois M. and Fernando Soberanes Bojórquez. *The Next Language*

CMPIO-CNEII-CSEIHO Guidelines, OAXACA, México. 2009, pág. 9.

3. *Op. Cit.*, pág. 15.

Original territory of the Nuu Sau (Mixtec Region)



the first language nest was created through an agreement with the assembly of the Mixtec community of Guadalupe Llano de Avispa in Tilantongo, Nochixtlan.”

It is important to highlight that only five language nests were originally planned, but due to the impact that this recovery and revaluing strategy has had regarding in halting the processes that are displacing the native peoples’ language and culutre, the communities and teachers of five other communities also requested language nests. In the end, 10 language nests were established in different regions in Oaxaca, as shown in the following table:

The first language nests focused only on four of the 16 languages that exist in Oaxaca. Still, it is deemed as progress because the communities became aware of why it is important to keep their languages alive. Thus, there is a deep commitment from many community members, but unfortunately not from all of the population. The most interested members are the elders.

In order to develop the strategy, it is necessary to acknowledge that even though there are successful cases, it is not easy to create the conditions everywhere, since people live the experience differently. It was necessary to do training to orient the activities and to involve all interested parties: the children, parents, teachers, guides (elders), local authorities, as well as researchers. The most important aspect was to analyze the experience of each language nest to design workshops based on the results, difficulties, needs, challenges, materials, questions and attitudes of the children.

“To strengthen the effort, six workshops have taken place in Oaxaca (from March 2008 to March 2009) with the

support of the CNEII, the New Mexico University and the CIESAS program from Unicef. They have involved the guides, mothers, fathers, teachers and town authorities where the nests are ...”

Below we share some examples of language nests that were implemented in terms of their creation, functioning and activities.

Who has given life to the language nest of Yolotepec de la Paz?

Background

The community of Yolotepec de la Paz is located in the high Mixtec region of Oaxaca and it belongs to the Municipality of Santiago Yosundua. It is a small community since most of the young people migrate to other places in Mexico, looking for jobs or other lifestyles. Many return when the town has its annual fiesta celebration; but very few come back to stay after having lived elsewhere.

Schools are very important in this community. They have a preschool center that belongs to the indigenous education subsystem and an elementary school that belongs to the general sub-system. In both places, there are teachers from different communities but within the same Mixtec region. Some speak Mixtec, others do not.

The children and youngsters did not learn Mixtec as their native language. Even people who are older than 40 years old say they do not speak it; even though it has been noticed that they do understand it, they do not want to accept it.

1. Ibidem-Meyer, Lois M. Pág. 15.



Preschool children observe the process of elaboration of Chileatole.

Nowadays only the population over 60 speaks Mixtec fluently, but they are forgetting it since the school forbade them to speak it more than 40 years ago.

Because of the CMPIO Pilot Plan and thanks to the nature of indigenous kindergartens, the community was offered the chance of a language nest. The first ones to be approached with the idea to recover, strengthen and spread Mixtec were the local indigenous authorities. Then, the plan was taken to the general assembly of the communities. The participants agreed to create a language nest after hearing what it is and how it works. In Oaxaca, the preschool and elementary children are coordinated by the teachers who arrange their nest activities where the Mixtec-speaking elders act as guides. Only Mixtec is spoken during those periods and there is no translation into Spanish.

Sometimes, it happens during school hours or outside of them, according to the conditions in the communities. It is important to say that the guides were selected not only because they speak the language, but also because they know the cycles and wisdom of the **community**.

The nest started with three guides: Mrs. Agripina, Mr. Francisco, Mr. Asuncion and Professor Adela Isabel Lopez Pacheco, who took turns to coordinate activities with all the children in the preschool education center and those from the elementary and junior high schools. But the older ones eventually withdrew from the nest.

Mrs. Agripina, Mr. Asunción y Mr Francisco, the guides of the Yolotepec de la Paz Language Nest.

Picture: Julián Jiménez Ramírez

The plan was to work one day a week with the each one of the groups. The preschoolers would have nest activities during their school hours and in their own facilities. In their case, it was not an extra-curricular activity.

The learning experience in the nests

Preschoolers watch how to prepare "chileatole"

In the language teaching program, the teacher and guides

base their plan on the activities of the communities. The actions selected are those that are closer to the experience of the children, like food preparation, greetings, agricultural activities, etc. The guides give all the instructions in the original language. The converse in Mixtec while demonstrating an activity, showing the body language, and proving direct participation and handling; so the students relate and interpret the verbal instruction with the mimics and gestures. Thus, there is a greater chance of appropriating the message and paying closer attention to Mixtec. There are no translations into Spanish in the nest.

Some activities that are being rescued and revalued

With the language nest active in the community, the inhabitants are beginning to realize how important Mixtec is in their relationship with nature and with each other during family or community activities. They also realize that they have abandoned some meaningful acts that are important, since they help them know and value the sacred places of production. That is when the original language words simply sprout.

Another example of change in community activities is Tavinxí, the summoning of the souls on the day of the death; or Calend in which the godmothers now dress in denim to dance. With the children learning in the language nest, new strength has been given to the festivities and customs, which has led people to reflect on why they matter. Recovering these and other activities is of great relevance, since they are a way for the language to be reborn or adopted.

Some ways to promote learning

A language is only learned by listening to it and by using it in contexts and environments where there is direct participation. Thus, guides speak only Mixtec when naming objects, explaining an activity, giving instructions or asking explanations from the students. Guides never use loose words but rather full sentences to provide full context while in an activity with the children.

Games are often played by the guides and children either in the nest, the classrooms or the school yard. Stories are always present in the language nest since they are important to provide anecdotes and to reflect upon the philosophies of the community. They are even more attractive when accompanied by body movements or when they are told in the place where the event took place or if they go back to the times of the guides.

Touring the community with the guides. This is a very useful activity, since it allows the children to know and value their community by visiting natural environments or institutions (hills, wells, building, etc.) that are relevant for some historical reason, for the benefits they bring to the community, for the activities that take place in them, for their names, for the families who live in those places, for the plants that are produced or for any other relevant fact of the community landmarks.

Children's participation in the activities. The children participate directly with their parents in some community activities such the festivities, "tequios" (collective community work), and the meetings of the communities or institutions. They prepare meals and tortillas, they help in the sowing of corn, etc.

Participation in school activities. With the objective of inviting parents to stop hiding or denying their knowledge of Mixtec, guides are invited to speak at ceremonies with the children such as paying respects to the flag, the closing of a school year, etc. In this particular example, the guides and the children conducted the end of school ceremony in Mixtec

Some progress

Acquiring a new language requires developing different skills: listening, speaking, relating, valuing the language, etc; as well as having the mouth and tongue muscles exercised and adjusted. The mind needs to differentiate the sounds that exist in other known languages and the new ones and to get used to them to pronounce them. Finally, it has to understand the most difficult part: figuring out how to organize words in a dialogue.

In this particular experience, we could clearly observe that for the learning of a second language, the children first became aware of the fact that the original language existed, that their grandparents spoke it but that it is currently rarely used. They became aware that they can communicate amongst themselves with it, they can name the natural and social worlds and that it is different from Spanish (their first language). However, it is just as valuable and as important as the latter.

Most of the children understand and follow instructions in Mixtec. Thus, we can see that their oral understanding is growing, since they interact with actions and signs. The most advanced children pronounce and use loose words in the right contexts and situations.

At the community level, the population is becoming interested in rescuing and valuing Mixtec. Many people acknowledge they cannot speak it but they do understand it and

would like to know more. The ones who do speak it tell jokes and try to improve their pronunciation.

Challenges and tasks:

In spite of the very important progress achieved in the language nest, which is different from other nests, it also faces challenges to obtain better results:

Spreading the information and materials that have been constructed for rescuing the original language.

Rescuing community knowledge for producing yukes, mezcal, cheese and other products that are no longer being made and reinforce those activities that are still alive.

Promoting and looking for strategies to encourage parents who speak Mixtec to do so with their children at home or when doing chores.

Implementing strategies that allow the language spoken in the community to be used in different spheres and activities, so that the children become more fluent.

Some concerns

The progress made by the language nests has been very important, though it is fair to say that they all have different levels of language and cultural development due to the reasons why the original languages were abandoned for years to begin with. The nests of Yolotepec, Yosondua and Tlaxiaco, in Oaxaca are no exception, and they have their challenges in the short, medium and long run. We also found that there are several concerns to be addressed, such as the generations who understand the language but claim they don't, and refuse to speak it. At different levels, there is a scorn towards the language and culture, even amongst the teachers. Another concern is that all of the school activities are carried out in Spanish, as in the rest of the institution where Spanish is the official language; a fact that weakens Mixtec.

Another question is how to keep the teacher in the language nest so that they are not transferred to other schools. Obviously, teachers look for their self-interest and the communities and children come second. Even though there are the guides selected by the communities, they cannot be there all the time, so the role of the teacher is pivotal. However, having a teacher makes the activities school-centered, which goes against the objective of the nest of being school-independent.



Ms. Agripina, Mr. Asuncion and Mr. Francisco, guides of the Language Nest.
Photos taken by Julian Jimenez Ramirez