

## **Bolivia: Language Recognition and Social Inclusion**

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### **Abstract**

The cultural variety of Bolivian cultural heritage was not officially recognized for a great period of time; therefore, until 2009, education in Bolivia was delivered only in Castilian; indigenous and native people had to get rid or hide their mother tongue if they wanted to acquire education or avoid being discriminated against. This particularity created an environment of discrimination and sentiments of contempt towards native languages. Nowadays, however, the new Political Constitution of Bolivia and its Educational bill recognize and promote native languages as a language of instruction along with Castilian and a foreign language, though with huge challenges to achieve the ideal. This article highlights the importance to native languages and educating the pupils in the same language in order to make them aware of the richness of heritage and tradition. It also argues that educating in native languages gives respectability to the particular language.

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**Keywords:** Language, Native, Cultural Heritage, Castilian

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### **Background Remarks**

Bolivia is a country located in South America, with more than about 10 million people; according to the results of the national census of 2001, almost sixty percent of Bolivia's population is indigenous or indigenous descendant, though that percentage might have lessened in the last years. Currently, there are thirty six native nations recognized by the Bolivian Political Constitution of 2009. Each of these native nations owns a complete cultural structure and world-view in what it concerns to the conception of man and universe. This particular variety of cultural coexistence has brought up a challenge to the society and the educational system of the country, especially when it comes to use native languages as a language of instruction both at primary and secondary education.

To acquire a better understanding of the Bolivian cultural background it is worth to go back some centuries ago. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century "the area was populated by some 400 groups or tribes with an estimated total of 350,000 individuals who spoke about 39 different languages, most of which belonged to the Arawakan family".<sup>1</sup> When the Spaniards first came to what is now Bolivia, they found villages and farms with people with a variety of different cultural backgrounds. With the establishment of the Spaniards in this land and later the independence and foundation of the Republic of Bolivia in 1825 the language spread across the region was Castilian. The history of Bolivia as

<sup>1</sup> J. Baptista-Morales, *Los Misioneros Jesuitas de Mojos*, Universidad Católica Boliviana Cochabamba, Yachay 21, 1995, pp. 71-90.

an independent country, both in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, was characterized by the use of one official language with no attention to any of the native languages. Nonetheless, it was the resistance and strength of the native people who for decades preserved and kept the use of their own native languages against national instituted powers.

Without realizing it, and thanks to the strong resistance, the time for discrimination was coming to an end “...in the early 1990s the relationship between the indigenous groups and the Bolivian government changed. Whereas up to this point the relationship was based on exclusion, and even extermination, the State started to take the demands of the native groups into account”.<sup>2</sup> This change in the relationship between both of them was generated because of a new growing movement of indigenous organizations requiring attention from the government and the society.

**Table 1: General Information on Bolivia**

Official name	Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia (Plurinational State of Bolivia)
Form of government	unitary multiparty republic with two legislative houses (Chamber of Senators [36]; Chamber of Deputies [130])
Head of state and government	President: Evo Morales Ayma
Capitals	La Paz (administrative); Sucre (constitutional)
Official languages	Spanish and 36 indigenous languages
Official religion	none
Monetary unit	Boliviano (Bs)
Population	(2014 est.) 10,303,000

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, 2016<sup>3</sup>

### Language and Educational Exclusion

This unfair reality of the country touched the educational system as well. The language of instruction was Castilian from primary to higher education. Those boys and girls struggling to master the official language were subject to be mistreated by teachers and those in charge of the educational system. Students from country sides and native communities had to learn Castilian and put aside their mother tongue if they wanted to attend and succeed in school. This imposition of learning Castilian and forcing students to get rid of their mother languages had created a negative discriminatory environment inside the schools and into the whole society. Even more, those who struggled learning Castilian were victims of bullying and other negative reactions from both teachers and their own classmates, with no action being taken by authorities to stop this negative

<sup>2</sup> M. Crevels, “Why Speakers Shift and Languages Die: An Account of Language Death in Amazonian Bolivia”, in S. van de Kerke, S Meira, H van der Voort (eds.). 2002. *Current Studies on South American Languages*, Leiden, Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS), 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, recovered from <http://www.britannica.com/place/Bolivia>, 2016

behavior. One of the most common examples of this kind of bullying can be summarized in the following: in the Aymara language there are only three vowels (a, i, u), while in Castilian there are five vowels (a, e, i, o, u); this difference creates a hard difficulty in native Aymara speakers to pronounce accurately Castilian words.

Any group of people create a particular culture and language as a way to express their emotions and their permanent coexistence<sup>4</sup>; therefore, it expresses the way they understand man and the universe, in short, they create a unique world-view based on certain kind of values. In the Aymara world-view, to name an example, it is understood that the future is not in front of man it is behind him, while in the European world-view the future is in front of man. The explanation is simple, Aymaras believe that the future is uncertain or unknown, it cannot be seen; therefore, it is behind man. The same happens with the past, Aymaras trust more in the past given that, it is known, it is certain and it can be seen; therefore, it is in front of man. The same logic does not apply to the European world-view.

### **Growing Voices for Change**

The differences mentioned above and of course more of them, created in the society contempt towards native languages because it not only meant an academic difficulty for passing grades but also a reason to be discriminated against or be treated with some kind of disregard. Considering that sixty percent of Bolivia's population belonged to a certain native nation, discrimination against was a huge problem of social exclusion at a national level. As a consequence, being a native or descendant of one of the native people was not a reason to be proud of.

One of the first efforts to change this negative situation in education came to light when "the Bolivian Worker's Union and the Peasant's Labor Organization in the late eighties had demanded that the education system acknowledge the country's linguistic and cultural diversity".<sup>5</sup> In response, UNICEF opened the Bilingual Intercultural Education Project (PEIB) between 1990 and 1995 in 130 pilot schools in the three major native languages such as, Quechua, Aymara and Guaraní, the three most spoken native languages in Bolivia.

Another national attempt to overcome this problem can be tracked in the Education Reform of 1994, in which, in the words of Regalsky (2008), was "...directed to the attainment of basic learning competencies and pay attention to cultural, linguistic and individual diversity. Instead of relying on the transfer of content, it builds on student knowledge and values, relying on active classroom participation".<sup>6</sup> In the same fashion,

<sup>4</sup> H Maturana, G Verden-Zöllner, *Amor Y Juego Fundamentos Olvidados De Los Humanos*, Santiago de Chile, Comunicaciones Noreste Ltda, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> IS Regalsky, *Bilingual Intercultural Education in Bolivia: The Education Reform since 1994*, Cochabamba, Training Program in Bilingual Intercultural Education (PROEIB Andes), 2008.

<sup>6</sup> IS Regalsky, Op. Cit., p. 7

Regalsky (2008) emphasizes that the World Bank had identified several factors to explain some of the Bolivian educational problems at the beginning of the nineties. Among others, there was one observation related to the native language as a barrier to access and succeed in education. The problems were related to “lack of materials, inadequate teacher training, inattention to the needs of non-Spanish speaking populations, and deficient infrastructure, all of which particularly affect girls and rural populations”.<sup>7</sup>

After these two attempts to transform these educational and social conditions, Bolivia started a journey to finally solve this problem. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bolivia went through a large period of protests, riots and strikes started by social movements and political organizations in order to institute a new political scenario in which all Bolivians, regardless of their backgrounds, were taken with equality and equity. As a result the National Constituency Assembly was installed to draw a new Political Constitution. Finally, Bolivia’s Political Constitution of 2009, resulted from the National Constituency Assembly, stated that “the official languages of the State are Castilian [Spanish] and all the languages of the indigenous nations, peasant and originative peoples”.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2009 Bolivia has recognized all its native languages in its Political Constitution and with it, the time of discrimination for speaking a native language seems to have been left behind. After the promulgation of the new Constitution and the recognition of all the native nations along with their own languages, the pride of belonging or speaking a native language has become a reason to feel proud without the feeling of fear or shame.

This new national phenomenon has increased the demand for learning native languages in the society. Quechua, Aymara and Guarani, the three major native languages, are now being offered by institutes, universities and other educational places. According to Felix Laime, a communist and columnist of a national newspaper, “Today, those who know native languages have more and better choices”.<sup>9</sup> Public employees in all public institutions must learn at least one native language of the region in which they work.

Additionally, Bolivia’s educational system has challenged itself to teach students three languages: Castilian (the national language), a native language (depending on the region they live), and a foreign language (most preferred English). Thus, every high school student must speak three languages by the time he or she is graduating from high school. The Education bill named Elizardo Perez and Avelino Siñani points out that “Education must start in the mother tongue, and its use is a pedagogical necessity in all aspects of students’ instruction”.<sup>10</sup> After that, the students from native communities must also learn Castilian, and finally a foreign language. In cases when Castilian is the

<sup>7</sup> IS Regalsky, Op. Cit., p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Plurinational State of Bolivia, *Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia*, La Paz, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> F Laime, “Jayma: Las dos Etapas de un Periódico Indígena”, in *Democratizar la Palabra: Las Lenguas Indígenas en la Comunicación de Bolivia*, La Paz: Goethe Institut.

<sup>10</sup> Plurinational State of Bolivia, Education Bill 070 Avelino Siñani-Elizardo Pérez, La Paz, 2010.

mother tongue of a community, students must learn a native language of the region where they attend school and a (modern) foreign language as well.

### Current Challenges in Implementing the Ideals of Languages

Since Bolivia recognizes Castilian and thirty six other native languages, there are two big challenges to face: prepare native and foreign language teachers, and educational material such as textbooks.

**Table 2: Indigenous people and their languages**

Region	People	Language	Population
Andes (valley and high plateau)	Aymara	Aymara	1,600,000
	Quechua	Quechua	2,500,000
	Uru	Uru	1,200
Chaco (dry lowlands)	Guaraní	Guaraní	90,000
	Tapiete	Tapiete	41
	Weenhayek	Weenhayek	1,800
Eastern lowlands	Ayoreo	Ayoreode	1,240
	Chiquitano	Bisiro	196,000
	Guarayo	Guarayu	11,950
Amazonia	Araona	Araona	160
	Baure	Baure	885
	Canichana	Canochana	400
	Cavineño	Cavineña	1,680
	Cayuvaba	Cayubaba	790
	Chácobo	Chácobo	520
	EsseEja	EsseEja	730
	Chimán	Tsimane	8,600
	Guarasugwe	Guarasugwe	15
	Itonama	Itonama	2,790
	Joaquiniano	Joaquiniano	300
	Leco	Leco	4,180
	Machineri	Machineri	30
	Maropa (reyesano)	Maropa	4,920
	Moxeño-ignaciano	Moxeño	2,000
	Moxeño-javeriano	Moxeño	300
	Moxeño-loretano	Moxeño	2,200
	Moxeño-trinitario	Moxeno	30,000
Moré	Moré	65	
Mosetén	Mosetén	1,590	
Movima	Movima	12,230	

Region	People	Language	Population
Amazonia	Pacahuara	Pacahuara	45
	Sirionó	Sirionó	500
	Tacana	Tacana	5,500
	Yaminahua	Yaminawa	95
	Yuki	Yuki	210
	Yuracaré	Yurakare	2,830
No specification			55,180

Source: Lopez, 2006<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1: The Map of Bolivia's Languages  
 Source: Rojk, 2016<sup>12</sup>

The vast majority of Bolivian teachers can only speak Castilian, given that the education they have acquired both in regular education and at the normal school for teachers are provided in Castilian. However, to fulfill the need for having native and foreign language teachers and proper educational material, the national government has taken some steps to face these new educational and cultural challenges such as, the opening of the Plurinational Institute for Languages and Cultural Studies, IPELC. This Institute is responsible for linguistic and cultural research in coordination with universities and school for teacher training. Furthermore, "This Institute's duty is to recognize, promote,

<sup>11</sup> LE López, "Pueblos Indígenas, Lenguas, Política y Ecología del Lenguaje". In López, Luis Enrique (ed.) *Diversidad y Ecología del Lenguaje en Bolivia*, 17-46. La Paz: PROEIB Andes/Plural Editores, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Rojk, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License, 2016.

spread, develop, and regulate the linguistic rights, individually and collectively, of all the habitants of the Plurinational State of Bolivia."<sup>13</sup>

At a national level, school teachers are not being trained in native languages; the language of instruction at teachers' schools is still Castilian, except for some isolated efforts. Most of the curriculum materials are provided in Castilian and the development of educational material in native languages is still insufficient. Besides, not all thirty six languages are being taken into account when it comes to developing educational material; only languages most spoken are taken into consideration. As stated in Table 2 some of the native nations have a very small number of members, and most of them are elderly people.

The young generation is more open to learning Castilian rather than any native language, they perceive that native languages have no use and no future; therefore, it is better to learn Castilian and a foreign modern language. Every year there are fewer and fewer students in rural areas, most of the children are taken to the big cities under the understanding that they have better education environments, infrastructure, materials and teachers.

As for foreign and modern languages, though it is a good idea to make students learn at least one of them, there is not enough number of foreign language teachers (especially English teachers). The Ministry of Education has open invitations to receive university graduates to teach English in schools. In Bolivia only those graduated from a Normal can teach at public primary schools and high schools, and having university graduates to teach English is an exception to achieve the challenge of teaching foreign languages.

Teachers are now being trained to know the new educational system better. The government has launched a national program called Complementary Training Program for Teachers - PROFOCOM. This program is attempting to make teachers understand the diversity of cultures and languages of the new Plurinational State of Bolivia, its cultural heritage, language variety and native and indigenous roots. This Program will grant university degrees in Intercultural Education and will become criterion for teachers to apply for a position at any public or private school or high school.

### **Concluding Observations**

Less than a decade ago, speaking a native language was a barrier to acquire education. Most of the native language speakers were "forced" to learn Castilian and feel shame of their own cultural heritage. Nowadays, native and indigenous communities feel very proud of their own cultural roots. Even more, it is common today to hear people speak native languages with a great openness; some others are considering learning a native language, and some others must learn a native tongue in order to keep their jobs in the public sector.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Education of Bolivia, *Comunidad: Descolonización de la Educación*, 5: 8-9, La Paz, 2012.

The Bilingual Intercultural Education Project (PIEB), mentioned at the beginning of this piece, had already highlighted the great benefits of using together both a native language and Castilian. That “study undertaken between 1992 and 1995 revealed that bilingual girls and boys developed significantly higher levels of self-esteem, a greater capacity for adaptation and a more tolerant attitude in cases of frustration. Last but not least, there were improvements in internal efficiency and equity in the educational system”.<sup>14</sup> What is more, the same report emphasizes that it is well known that having proficiency in one’s mother tongue (L1) brings greater benefits to acquiring a second language (L2).

Recognizing native peoples and their own languages is showing willingness to have a different country, a better country, a country that cares about its people and the wellbeing of every one of its citizens. It is for sure that the vast majority agrees that our cultural heritage is amazing and no one should feel ashamed of it, but because, most of the native backgrounds were viewed with disregard, the self-esteem of the individuals were not as good as it is now.

All individuals by nature need some kind of recognition to be healthy in a positive environment; the right action to recognize the native cultural heritage and their languages as a valid and equal to any other language in the world has increased the self-esteem of individuals previously discriminated against, but they can now look, feel and develop actively and that is for sure social inclusion.

<sup>14</sup> IS Regalsky, *Bilingual Intercultural Education in Bolivia: The Education Reform since 1994*, Cochabamba, Training Program in Bilingual Intercultural Education (PROEIB Andes), 2008.