Developing Reading and Writing Skills for Quechua/Spanish-Speaking Students in Rural Peru through the Production of Stories, Poetry and Songs

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Anna Saroli is a lecturer in Spanish language and culture at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, where she has taught since 1985. Her research interests include the culture of the indigenous Quechua people and the survival and promotion of autochthonous languages in Peru. Her most recent research focuses on intercultural bilingual education in Peru, in both government programs and NGO initiatives. She is interested in creating North-South links between Quechua-speaking communities in rural Peru and the Mi’kmaw people of Nova Scotia, who face similar educational challenges. She holds an M.Ed. from Dalhousie University in Canada.
Abstract
This paper describes a pilot project which was carried out in a rural school near Cusco, Peru. Rural children from Quechua-speaking backgrounds are at a particular disadvantage in Peru’s school system, which is so far not living up to its promises to implement bilingual intercultural education. Nevertheless, progress is being made in some areas and there is interest in developing initiatives which will be of benefit to these students. The purpose of this project is to address the deficiencies in the teaching of reading and writing at the primary level for Quechua-speaking students. The project, which will continue throughout the school year, involves workshops for teachers, interviews with teachers, students and parent groups, and the publication of a small text containing examples of written work in Quechua and Spanish by each student, both to showcase local knowledge and to act as visual and concrete confirmation of the possibility of using written Quechua as a vehicle for communication.

KEYWORDS: intercultural bilingual education; indigenous; Quechua; writing instruction
Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) in the Cusco Region of Peru:  

Background  

In the past years there has been some progress in designing and implementing programs of education for the 15% of Peruvian children whose first language is not Spanish. There have been numerous departmental shakeups and policy changes in the central and local education authorities and the delivery of bilingual education programs has been subjected to changes both in name—with the term “intercultural” now taking precedence over the previous focus on bilingualism—and in nature. There are now a number of teacher training institutes (ISP in the Spanish acronym) in Peru which offer teacher training in IBE (Vásquez et al, 2009, pp. 106–7) and didactic materials are being produced in many of Peru’s indigenous languages.

Nevertheless, the reality often falls far short of the theory.\(^1\) Socioeconomic statistics present a sobering perspective of the situation of Peru’s indigenous people: over 52% are considered to be living in poverty, 29% of children do not attend school, and of those who do, 73% are over-age for their grade level (op. cit. pp. 18–19). Urban speakers of languages other than Spanish are not included in government IBE programs, only a small percentage of native speakers in rural areas have access to IBE programs (op. cit. p. 111), the support network for teachers is inadequate and the quality of teaching is often poor.

Perhaps the main obstacle to the implementation of quality intercultural bilingual education is the mindset of many of those on both sides of the debate. In spite of increasing awareness at the political level of Peru’s indigenous peoples as a force for social and political change,\(^2\) mainstream Peruvians still tend to view the traditional ways of life and indigenous languages as being only mildly interesting from a folkloric perspective and largely irrelevant to life in the 21\(^{st}\) century. Although most people would not dispute the pedagogical benefits for children of receiving at least primary education in their first language, Spanish is the language of power and for most Spanish-speaking urbanites “bilingual education” is for the others.\(^3\) In communities where Quechua is the language most people grow up speaking, Spanish is the key to a better future and there has been much discussion of the so-called parental “resistance” to the

\(^1\) Luis Enrique López refers to the progress of the Política Nacional de Educación Bilingüe as “cuarenta años de incumplimiento” (Vásquez et al., 2009, p. 16).

\(^2\) With the new Humala government, indigenous rights are now very much in the public eye, as evidenced by the groundbreaking “Ley de Consulta Previa” which was passed in 2010.

\(^3\) For a contrasting perspective, see Manley, 2008.
implementation of bilingual education programs. However, this resistance may be due to a number of factors. Badly-handled past initiatives and a lack of training workshops for teachers have often resulted in bilingual education being considered to be an unnecessary distraction at best or at worst, as an initiative aimed specifically at rural communities which will have the result of holding back their children from learning to read and write Spanish. Problems common to many schools, particularly in rural areas, include frequent teacher or student absence, inadequate infrastructure, lack of basic services such as internet or even electricity in some isolated communities, and a scarcity of teaching materials and resources. Teachers are poorly paid and have little incentive to invest their time and often their own resources in providing something extra for their students. Many must moonlight to make ends meet and, like the students they teach, put in their hours at school and then go off to work at something else. There are indeed shining examples of dedicated professionals even in the most isolated rural schools, but most students will never have the good fortune to be taught by one of these teachers. Naturally, the opinions and perspectives of the teachers themselves in their role as policy implementers may often conflict with or challenge top-down government policies (Valdiviezo, 2009).

The Local Situation
The province of Urubamba, Department of Cusco, where the pilot project was carried out, comprises seven districts of which Ollantaytambo is the second largest. In Ollantaytambo there are 129 teachers working in the public system and 10 in private schools, with 1803 students registered at the primary level and 664 in secondary school. There are three urban and nineteen rural primary schools and one urban and two rural secondary schools in this district. It is notable that, for a number of reasons, most students do not go on to secondary school. The performance of students in this region is below the national standard. In 2007 nationwide tests in mathematics and reading comprehension were applied to students in Grade 2. In mathematics, 39.70% of students in Ollantaytambo performed below Level 1, 54.50% performed at Level 1 and only 5.80% performed at Level 2, the desired result for their grade level. Similar results were found in

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4 This problem is recognized by the local education authority in its 2008 analysis “Urubamba al 2021”: “a consecuencia de su remuneración que no cubre la canasta familiar, [el docente] busca otras fuentes de ingreso distraeyendo su dedicación exclusiva a la labor educativa que debe desempeñar” (p. 71).
5 The source for the following data was COPALE. PEL: Urubamba al 2021.
the test for reading comprehension, with 67.20% of students performing below Level 1, 28.90% performing at Level 1 and only 3.90% at Level 2. It should be noted that these tests were widely criticized by educators and community groups as all children were tested in Spanish regardless of the language they speak in their homes, and so the tests were not considered to be a fair assessment of the performance of non-Spanish-speaking students. The first language in the majority of communities in the province of Urubamba is Quechua, though most people also speak Spanish more or less fluently except for older people and those in the more isolated communities.

There have been attempts to implement the government IBE program in this area but so far most students do not have access to the program: of the 77 primary schools in the province, only 17 (22.1%) participate in the IBE program, and there is only one IBE school at the secondary level. There are 47 IBE teachers at the primary level (15.36% of all teachers) and 8 at the secondary level (1.7%). Only 948 students out of 9723 (9.7%) participate in the IBE program at the primary level and 78 out of 5738 (1.36%) at the secondary level. Changes at the institutional level in 2002 meant that IBE teachers have been left more or less to their own devices. In an analysis by the Consejo Participativo Local de Educación of the current state and future goals for education in the province of Urubamba (COPALE, 2008, p. 80), the authors recognize that because of a lack of leadership, funding, and adequate training for IBE teachers, this program is currently rudderless, and has more or less been entrusted “to the attitude and professionalism of each teacher” under the auspices of the local education authority.

The idea of interculturality as an integral component of bilingual education is hard to pin down. Everyone claims to understand the concept but it is challenging to come up with a definition that makes practical sense. COPALE describes it as “a permanent process of communication and learning among persons, groups, different forms of knowledge, values and traditions, a permanent process of relation and the construction of mutual respect and development, of diminishing more and more rapidly the criterion of discriminatory hegemony, homogenization and of the idea of a dominant culture.” The authors then admit, not surprisingly, that “It is not easy to understand interculturality”! It is quite understandable that when even administrators are unable to articulate the concept clearly, teachers find it challenging

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6 COPALE. PEL: Urubamba al 2021, p. 79. Translations from the Spanish are the author’s.
7 Op cit. p. 63.
to implement in the classroom (Valdiviezo, 2010). Nevertheless, the door has been opened and if discussion continues among and between the different stakeholders, the idea of the implementation of interculturality in practical terms, nebulous at present, may begin to take shape.

The Project

The recent focus in Peru on indigenous matters in the political arena may well result in a new appreciation of the country’s rich linguistic and cultural traditions, even if the political spark fizzles as it so often does. Grassroots initiatives have often been very successful and more productive than government-led top down programs. The current pilot project is one such initiative, designed for a primary school in the community of Rumira, near the town of Ollantaytambo in the province of Urubamba. Rumira has approximately 400 inhabitants, with 116 families in the civil registry. Approximately 80% of the adult population is bilingual with Quechua as their first language and the one they use in daily interactions. Nevertheless, the typical pattern of language shift can be seen in the community as Spanish is increasingly becoming the language of choice among the young people and children, unless they are speaking with older people. As Rumira is only a few minutes by car from the larger tourist centre of Ollantaytambo, it is provided with basic services such as water and electricity and a public telephone. There is a health centre in Ollantaytambo. Most of the town’s families make a traditional living from agriculture and belong to the local Association of Agricultural Producers. Tourism is increasingly a source of income, both from selling handcrafts in the market in Ollantaytambo and by serving as porters on the Inca Trail. A handful of people are small business owners or provide transportation services, usually with “mototaxis,” which are relatively cheap to buy and to run.8

Rumira School itself is small, with 54 students in three classrooms: grades 1/2, 3/4 and 5/6. All of the teachers hold permanent positions and have from 10 to 24 years of experience. Although Rumira School was not considered as a candidate for the government IBE program, as one teacher9 commented “because of the lack of an adequate evaluation from the Ministry of

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8 This information was provided during an interview with a teacher who also held office as a town counsellor, on June 6, 2011.
9 Personal interview, June 6, 2011.
Education and from the UGEL\textsuperscript{10}, several children at each grade level grew up in monolingual Quechua-speaking homes. The number of children who spoke little or no Spanish when they started school varies from two in Grade 1 to seven in Grade 5.

The intention of the pilot project was to address the deficiencies in the teaching of reading and writing at the primary level, which have resulted in many students completing their primary education without being able to understand written texts or to construct coherent written texts of their own. Even when working in Spanish, many of the students have difficulty reading and writing original work;\textsuperscript{11} it was thought that allowing students to use their first language as a vehicle for expressing their ideas would motivate and stimulate them. The goals of the project were to develop a love of reading and writing among the students and to provide a concrete example of the fact that Quechua can be used as a written language in the form of an edited collection of stories, poems and songs written by students in each classroom, which would be printed and kept in the classroom for parents and students to look at in future years. Most of the children had rarely read and never written anything in Quechua and so this was a novel concept for them.

Funding was obtained to cover the material costs of the project and to provide a small incentive for the teachers who had agreed to take part.\textsuperscript{12} The project was developed over a two-week period. The first stage involved observation in each of the three classrooms. Teachers were interviewed individually about their work and their attitudes towards IBE in theory; all teaching was in fact carried out in Spanish in this school although all of the teachers often spoke in Quechua to individual students. A workshop on best practices in the teaching of writing skills was given for all three teachers, and individual “model classes” were held in each of the classrooms. These model classes were designed to illustrate possible techniques for encouraging written production using different methods at each grade level. In the Grade 1/2 classroom, each of the students, under the supervision of their teacher, wrote a letter to “Profesora Ana”, the visiting teacher. Some of the students in Grade 1 were unable to produce more than a scrawled

\begin{footnotes}
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\item[10] The local education authority or Unidad de Gestión Educativa Local.
\item[11] A lot of the classroom work I have observed during a number of visits to different schools over the years involves rote copying, either from a textbook or from the blackboard. This practice seemed to me to be particularly prevalent in classes taught by weaker teachers. Students often asked for something to copy; presumably this gave both them and the teacher the impression of production and gave the students comfort in completing an undemanding task.
\item[12] Thanks to the generosity of the Rotary Club of Wolfville, Nova Scotia.
\end{footnotes}
drawing and an attempt at copying “Profesora Ana” from the board, but I spent an evening composing a reply for each of the letters and one of the children was chosen to be the mail carrier and deliver the replies the next day, to great excitement. In the Grade 3/4 classroom I tried to link our Nova Scotian Mi`kmaw heritage with the children’s local myths and legends by reading the beginning of a number of stories about the Mi`kmaw god and trickster, Glooscap, and having the students work in groups to finish the stories. Each group read their version to the class and then the stories were illustrated and put up on the wall. The students were fascinated by the stories of Glooscap and provided some very imaginative alternate endings for these stories. The Grade 5/6 students, who have been in the care of a very dedicated and experienced teacher, were of course the most productive of the three groups. The lesson in this class took the form of a workshop in which the class was divided into small groups depending on their first language. Each group wrote a tourist “blurb” either in Spanish or in Quechua, extolling the attractions of the village of Rumira, and then illustrated it. The Quechua-speaking students seemed particularly interested in this activity and wrote long and detailed descriptions. The Grade 5/6 class was the only group that wrote both in Quechua and in Spanish; because of my limited knowledge of Quechua I left those groups in the hands of my colleague and worked with the students who were working in Spanish.

The outcome of these model lessons was written production from each student according to his or her level of competency. Each teacher has committed to producing a collection of work (stories, songs or poems) by each of his or her students by the end of the school year in December. This work will be edited for consistency of spelling and transcribed by the Grade 5/6 teacher; it will then be printed and a copy will be provided for each classroom. The children will write in either Quechua or in Spanish and some of the pieces will be translated. Each student will then be able to see his/her own work in printed form. The decision was made to type the stories and poems, which would make this look more like a “real” book, but to scan the children’s original drawings. If the budget allows, copies will be made in colour.

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13 I cannot recall ever having seen a classroom as barren as this one—while the other two classrooms had many posters on the walls (but no work by students), there was not one single thing on the walls in this room, just an expanse of green paint.

14 The intention was originally to translate all of the pieces to Spanish or Quechua depending on the language each had been written in, but it was eventually decided to translate only the shorter pieces, mainly the riddles, in order to reduce the total length of the book and stay within our budgetary limit for the printing costs.
Results to Date/Left to Complete

This is intended to be a long-term project, so any results will be cumulative. The main concrete result will be the production of a small printed compilation of the students’ work in each classroom by the end of the school year in December. The students and teachers have been working on the drafts of the pieces that will be included in the compilation, and each class has already produced a collection of work which includes poems, stories and riddles, all illustrated. As well as their work in the classroom, the Grade 5/6 students wrote reading comprehension tests both in Quechua and in Spanish.\(^\text{15}\) Two versions of each test were designed, and in December the students will write a post-test using the alternate version in each language.

Interviews were held with groups of three students from each of the Grade 3/4 and Grade 5/6 classrooms, in which they were asked about their use of Quechua and Spanish and how they felt about learning to read and write in both of these languages. All of the students’ grandparents are Quechua-speakers and the majority of them use this language when speaking with their grandparents or when they travel to Quechua-speaking communities. As expected, Spanish is perceived as the most important language from a pragmatic perspective, and all of the children spoke about the practical need to dominate this language: “...it’s spoken more, it’s important for talking with the tourists”; “[it’s important for talking with] people who come from Lima and only speak Spanish”. As well as the practical need for Quechua they demonstrated pride in their ancestral language (“We’re Peruvian”; “It’s the language of the Incas”) and they were all very positive about the idea of learning to study Quechua as well as Spanish in school. Some saw future benefits in learning both languages: “when you’re a professional, you can be a teacher of Quechua and Spanish”; “[it’s important to know how to read and write] both, because it’s good for our education”; “in both, to be better professionals”.

Four parents were also interviewed individually. Three of the parents said they spoke a mixture of Spanish and Quechua with their children; the other used Quechua only occasionally when she spoke with her own parents and commented that her children sometimes did not understand what was said in Quechua. The main concern of all of the parents was understandably the future success of their children and they all spoke of the importance of education “so that they won’t be like us”, as one father put it. The idea of bilingual education was unfamiliar to

\(^{15}\) See Figures 1-4. Please note that these indicate the results of the pre-test only, as the post-test had not been completed at the time this paper was presented.
them but none of them saw any inherent obstacles to its implementation ("Sure, why not?"; “It would be a good idea”) as long as this did not detract from basic education. There was agreement in general that schools could act positively for strengthening culture and there were some comments about how much traditional knowledge had already been lost. Nevertheless, there were also criticisms of the education system: “They don’t do anything in school”; “We want a better education”. Most parents were well aware of what their children were doing (or not doing) in school; here again, the need for better training and more support for teachers is clear.

**Discussion**

Although the preliminary results of the project are highly encouraging, there were a few setbacks. One difficulty that was evident from the start was that although two of the teachers were highly motivated and interested in the project, one was not, although he did agree rather reluctantly to take part. This teacher was absent twice during the two weeks I was at the school, once because of his other duties in the community, when a substitute teacher was sent to replace him, and once for personal reasons. On this occasion no substitute appeared; the teacher had left “busy work” for his students and I offered to supervise them. The whole school lost yet another day as students and teachers were expected to attend a civic ceremony in the neighbouring town of Ollantaytambo. These scheduled and unscheduled absences are quite typical, especially in rural schools, and mean that it is often difficult to find time just to cover the official curriculum, let alone for extra initiatives such as the writing project.

Another stumbling block is the fact that although almost all rural teachers speak Quechua, they have never learned to read and write it in an academic setting. Two of the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their inadequate knowledge of written Quechua and told me that one of the main obstacles to the idea of using Quechua as a written language in the classroom was precisely the fact that they had never learned to write it themselves. This fact was also pointed out by one of the parents as a reason for not using written Quechua. Obviously, more resources will have to be put into training courses for the teachers themselves in the mechanics of written Quechua.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{16}\) The fact that there is still no resolution to the thorny issue of whether Quechua should be written using a trivocalic or a pentavocalic alphabet presents a challenge to efforts to remedy this situation.
Tremendous respect for authority and the prevalence of top-down methods can often impede participation and creativity. For example, in the preliminary meeting with the parents to present the project, the head teacher, who was also present, several times stepped in when they hesitated with an answer, providing an answer that supported our project. The parents then all agreed with this answer (“Ya, Profe”) but it was not their own. It may have been that they were hesitant to say what they thought in front of him, or they may have felt intimidated and reluctant to come out with something for fear of his (or my) disapproval. The fact that this meeting was held before my own individual meetings with a number of parents may also have “primed” them with the answers they felt I would like to hear when I talked individually with them.

This project is still far from complete. As well as the presentation of the printed draft of the students’ work in December, the reading comprehension post-test will be given to the Grade 5/6 students and follow-up interviews will be held with groups of students and with parents to assess how their feelings towards bilingual education in general and towards the possibility of using written Quechua as a vehicle for communication may have changed. It is also hoped to develop and continue the project both in Rumira School and in other schools in the area which have a Quechua-speaking population but which do not participate in the government’s IBE program.

Without exception, all of the children showed great enthusiasm for the reading and writing project. This may have been due in part to having a break in routine or because of the novelty of having a visiting teacher, but most of the students became completely engrossed in what they were doing and the end results were highly encouraging. The Grade 3/4 students in particular seemed excited to have their work displayed on the walls of their classroom.

This willingness and interest on the part of the children has already been communicated to some of the parents, especially those in community leadership positions. A number of students have brought in stories from their parents and grandparents to use as their contribution to the book. The challenge will lie in having this initial energy translate into making fundamental and systemic changes to the education system starting with teacher training and better incentives for teachers working in rural areas. There also needs to be more supervision and support for these teachers.

One of the high points of the whole experience for me was when the reading comprehension test in Quechua was given to the Grade 5/6 class. All of the students were excited
at the idea of reading a story in Quechua, and one student, who had started school as a monolingual Quechua-speaker, beamed at me and said “Munaycha” (Lovely). It is high time that the linguistic needs of this student and of the many like him are acknowledged and addressed.

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**FIG 1: Grade 5 Reading Comprehension in Spanish**

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**FIG 2: Grade 5 Reading Comprehension in Quechua**

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FIG 3: Grade 6 Reading Comprehension in Spanish

FIG 4: Grade 6 Reading Comprehension in Quechua
References


The 2011 Symposium for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (STLILLA) was the second in a biennial series of symposia organized by the Association for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (ATLILLA). The Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame hosted STLILLA-2011 in collaboration with partner institutions.

For more information: kellogg.nd.edu/STLILLA