

BILINGUALISM: A PERSONAL VIEW

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This is a report on some of my experiences with people of two different language backgrounds: The Nahuatl- and Spanish-speaking people of Tlaquilpan, Veracruz. It is presented in the hope that it will help ESL teachers gain a better understanding of their students' problems.

The word Tlaquilpan is a compound word containing two roots and a suffix: tlai, which means land, earth or soil (land in this context); quiltil, which means quelite, a type of spinach; and the suffix an, on the surface. This town is surrounded by pine trees, a great variety of other trees, and flowers of all kinds. It is approximately 2,000 meters above sea level, and it is extremely cold and humid all year round. The fact that it rains throughout the year has made people very conscious of the weather. There are special words for rain/clouds and dry/clouds, and people can tell if it will rain by simply identifying a type of cloud.

Until approximately thirty years ago, this town was about 98% monolingual. Now it is about 98% bilingual, although not bicultural, since their customs have not changed with the language. Currently Nahuatl is only used at home and by some people from the rancherías who have not learned Spanish.

Tlaquilpan has about one thousand people, 99% of which are Indians, the remaining 1% are people of Spanish descent. The area is served by four schools, one of which is a boarding school for children who have no money. In this particular school the children study half day and work the land the other half. The remaining three schools are primary schools.

When I went to school there, our teachers, who were from different towns, did not speak Nahuatl: therefore the classes were taught in Spanish. This caused about 90% of the students to drop out. If the remaining children did not learn or did not do their homework correctly, they were hit by the teacher. Since these children did not speak Spanish, they did not understand why they were being punished. Needless to say, this atmosphere of hostility was not conducive to learning.

Around 1958 the Department of Education started employing bilingual teachers (Spanish-Nahuatl speakers); although they were not trained in methods of bilingual education, the results have been most gratifying. Students have learned Spanish with surprising ease.

Today the use of Nahuatl is limited to what we could call intimate language, that is, it is used in very small groups (up to a maximum of four). When the group gets larger, the speakers switch to Spanish. Nahuatl is also used when speaking to a close friend, but Spanish is the language of choice if the speakers do not share an intimate relationship.

About ninety years ago a group of blond, blue-eyed people tried to settle in Tlaquilpan, but they were thrown out by the natives. They settled on the other side of the mountains in a town they called Masitualla. No one knows what the name means or where the settlers came from. Some people think they came from France; others think they came from Germany. The only thing that is known with certainty is that they spoke Spanish badly. Since they could not learn Nahuatl, the Indians called them *xoxos/sosos/* which describes a person who has difficulties with language or in performing a skill.

These people were also called *pecos* which means stained or freckled. They were given this name because they did not bathe regularly and the dirt would show up on their white skin, which was a novelty for the Indians whose brown skin did not show the dirt.

If a white man married an Indian woman, they could live neither in Tlaquilpan nor in Masitualla since they were then considered outcasts by both the whites and the Indians. So these people built another town called *Xoxocotla*, a word derived from *xoxo* (inability to speak well) and *ocotl* (pine tree), the sense of which would be, a stupid bilingual among the pine trees.

From this mixture of badly-spoken Spanish and Nahuatl, a new language has emerged which is neither Spanish nor Nahuatl, but a combination of the two. For example, the ending *ito* in Spanish forms the diminutive of the noun, as in *maíz*, forming *maicito*. In Nahuatl the diminutive is formed by the addition of *tzintle*; so Nahuatl *tleole* (corn) becomes *tleoltzintle*. But in Xoxocotla, they use the Nahuatl noun *tleole* and the Spanish diminutive *ito* giving *tleolito*.

From this simple but clear example we can see that the process of acculturation is time-consuming and often painful. Perhaps we as teachers of English need to become more sensitive to the native culture of our students. We are teaching both language skills and cultural awareness, but too often we focus on the target culture as we teach the target language. Many times teacher expectations, both linguistic and cultural,

are high. Any awareness of the time and effort necessary to create any process of acculturation on the part of English language teachers would perhaps generate more rapid assimilation of both language and culture by the student.