

Bilingual Intercultural Education in  
Guatemala: Exploring the theory, the  
practice and the potential

Mary Alivia Bryan  
SOAN 252  
Prof. Jay Levi  
March 7, 2006

---

Abstract:

This ethnography explores the history and current state of bilingual intercultural education (EBI) programs in Guatemala. Research, evidence and observations from a month of field research are compared to the theoretical goals, objectives, and statistics provided in literature. The general conclusion was that theory does not necessarily materialize in practice. Both the government sponsored *Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural* (DIGEBI) program and the more community-based Maya schools that are affiliated with the *Consejo Nacional de Educación Maya* (CNEM). The paper presents ideas about what factors lead to the creation of successful EBI programs and what leads a community to reject the very idea. The distinct histories of EBI in Guatemala schools is useful to the real objectives, current attitudes towards their EBI programs, and their potential for future success.

## Introduction: Indigenous Education in Guatemala

In Guatemala, formal education has historically been a place where indigenous children are subjected to monolingual instruction of westernized values and beliefs, in addition to subjective accounts of historical and current events. The non-indigenous elite that administered the Guatemalan state used policies of assimilation and integration, promoting a “national culture” based on the perception of a single culture (CNEM 2003a:2). This policy discriminated against the members of all other cultures, who were completely excluded from educational discourse and thus treated as a disposable and invisible part of Guatemala. Additionally, cultural knowledge, values and learning techniques in the community often clashed with the teaching style and material taught in the classroom. Parents placed little importance on formal education because the skills and knowledge taught in school did not pertain to the educational needs of the students. For the majority of indigenous parents, formal school serves to teach reading, writing, and basic math. The quicker their children can learn these skills, the better, as they can then dropout and contribute more to the family and community (Hernández Ramírez 2004:40).

At school, non-indigenous *ladino*<sup>1</sup> teachers could not relate, and many times not communicate, with the indigenous students. Changes in the national educational system were instituted to address low achievement and high drop-out rates among indigenous children. Bilingual programs first formed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have diversified into their currently forms. Schools funded by the government either teach monolingual in Spanish or are a part of the *Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural* (DIGEBI) program. In the last fifteen years, cooperative and

---

<sup>1</sup> **footnote 1:** The term *ladino* refers to the non-indigenous population in Guatemalan. Some define *ladinos* as *meztizos*, the decedents of European and Maya unions. Monolingual, urban Maya who no longer speak a Maya language or wear traditional Maya dress often identify as *ladino*. The recent 2004 census when Guatemalans self-identified their ethnicity, the results were 60% *ladino* versus 40% Maya. However it is argued that the real ethnic breakdown is 60% Maya decedents and 40% non-indigenous.

community schools who share the vision of conserving Maya linguistic and cultural values have joined together under the *Consejo Nacional de Educación Maya* (CNEM) calling their schools *escuelas mayas*.

Currently, Mayan activists run both the DIGEBI and the CNEM efforts to teach students with the principals of the bilingual intercultural education (EBI) but the programs had distinct beginnings. The schools associated with CNEM joined together after already working at the local level in individual schools in distinct language communities. On the other hand, the Guatemalan *Ministerio de Educación* (MINEDUC) decided to institute nationwide EBI program on schools, across different Maya language regions. In Guatemala, there are 7,832 government funded primary schools in communities where the a Maya language is spoken. Of these schools, 76% (5,963 schools) are monolingual in Spanish, while 24% (1,869 schools) officially offer EBI though the DIGEBI program (Red EBI 2004). Additionally, 126 community-based *escuelas mayas*, though not legally recognized by MINEDUC, serve 28,000 indigenous students (CNEM 2003a:5).

The main rationale for EBI in both programs is that more than basic skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, the school can also act as a vehicle to transmit and conserve linguistic and cultural values. The EBI movement has developed into a “very fashionable political topic” as the pan-Mayan movement and interest from International aid organizations has ignited the movement in Guatemala (Heckt 1999:333 and Zimmerman 1997:113). Across Latin America, 17 countries have educational programs that focus on bilingual education; these programs are known as bilingual education, EBI, EIB, indigenous education, or ethnoeducation (López 2005). Across the globe, in Asia, Africa, and within the Native American population in the United States and

Canada, EBI programs are working to address the educational needs of the diverse populations in these regions.

### **Proposal and Expectations**

My proposed project was to study the formal education system and informal education in the household in a small indigenous town in Guatemala. I expected to find bilingual education in some or all of the schools, indigenous teachers from the community instructing in the schools and adults transmitting cultural values in the home. On a more general level, I expected to find a varying degree of traditional values and beliefs, as well as a varied sentiment about being Maya<sup>2</sup> among families in the town. I was interested to see if the community had reclaimed the school as a space to teach values and if those lessons learned in school agreed with or conflicted with values learned in the community.

In researching this topic, I discovered an intriguing study of a EBI program at two schools located in the political *departemento* of Chimaltenango, within the Kaqchikel-speaking region in Guatemala. Wilhelm spend the 1990 academic year observing teaching style and curriculum content in the classroom, interviewing teachers and analyzing the textbooks used at a two elementary schools that were a part of the *Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe* (PRONEBI); these schools were established in indigenous communities by the MINEDUC's Maya-language-Spanish-language-bilingual program.

Wilhelm explains in his article, “schools may be understood appropriately as arenas of cultural conflict—contested terrain in which the power relations of a society are constantly being reproduced, challenged, and reformed” (1994:173). In the PRONEBI schools, Wilhelm found the curriculum and teacher practice to be “a

---

<sup>2</sup> Though Maya is the recently appropriated term used in academic discourse, the Maya I worked with in Guatemala referred to themselves using the terms *indígenas*, *naturales*, or *de corte*.

denunciation and critique of dominant versions of ethnicity and interethnic relations with the announcement of alternative interpretations of the Guatemalan experience (1994:174). In my research, I looked at the educational situation for not only subjective westernized education designed by *ladinos*, but also inaccurate information that might be published and propagated by indigenous educators. In addition to presenting evidence of counterhegemonic practices in a government-funded EBI school, Wilhelm's article presented research methodology relevant to my field research within the educational system.

### **Arrival and Homestay**

On a sunny morning, we arrive to a flurry of excitement in the small urban center of San Andrés Xecul. A man with his face lit up in anticipation races proudly across the plaza to meet our van; the first thing I notice is his freshly-ironed American flag button-down shirt. A throng of women dressed in *traje* flank him crossing the plaza. A group of kids scurry to catch up and see the foreign students that are to live in their town for a month. We are soon engulfed into the crowd and led through the winding streets to the welcome party. On the way, a seemingly excessive amount of *bombas* are ignited, announcing to the town our arrival. Everyone applauds. An elderly but feisty woman, who talks over others throughout the welcome party, decides that the freshly painted room with the new curtain in her house will be my new home for the month of February. I can hardly resist as the other families vie for Nicolina and Seth, and the *Doña* who snatched Joe without hesitation blushes at her quick decision making skills.

The first few days in Xecul consist of touring the other students' host houses, and exploring the small urban center, or *cabecera municipal*, as the relatively condensed residential area around the central plaza is called. In Guatemala, the *cabecera*

*municipal* of a town is usually surrounded by neighborhood units known as *aldeas* and then smaller *parajes*. The 2004 population of the *cabecera municipal* was just 3892 people; however, the total population inflates to 16,955<sup>3</sup> when the inhabitants of the four surrounding *aldeas* (Chajabal, Nimasac, Palomora, and San Filipe) and two *parajes* (Tzambaj and Llano de la Tuises) are included (Municipio de San Andrés Xecul 2004:3). The *aldeas* are a 10 to 15 min walk away from the *cabecera municipal* and separated physically by *milpa*, mountains, or a combination of the two. Thus, the Xecul where I lived felt small and personal like 4,000 inhabitants, many of whom knew my name, or at least my face, by the end of the month.

In my homestay, only a block away from the town plaza, live Romi (age 65), María (age 24, an orphan that Romi's parents adopted as a child), and a small cat named simply *negrita*. Romi's son, Gustavo (age 20, adopted at 11 days old) currently lives in San José. He has been in California for over a year, working in a factory and sending money home to buy a *terreno* and renovate the house. It took some time to understand the relationships between the people in my homestay family. Over dinner on my first Sunday in Xecul, Romi explained how she moved away from Xecul to start a family on the coast. In 1965, a fire destroyed their house, killing all four of her children and severely burning her and her husband. After a year-long hospitalization, her husband left her and she returned to Xecul, only to move to the capital and work as a maid for 18 years. She returned to Xecul twenty years ago, adopted a baby boy and raised him alone. I had to alter my plan to observe informal education in the homestay because we did not have kids around, childrearing was a difficult subject to approach with Romi, and María had never been to school a day in her life. I turned my attention to assessing the formal education system and the population that is served in San Andrés Xecul.

---

<sup>3</sup> 2004 urban census collected data only for the *cabecera municipal*. The other population stats are from the most recent national population census in 1994.

## Realities: Language and Education in Xecul

Only a few kilometers away from Spanish-speaking Xela, the second largest city in Guatemala, San Andrés Xecul is a very bilingual town. It is located within the political *departemento* of Totonicapán, and the Maya linguistic region of K'iche'. Walking through the streets in the *cabecera municipal*, conversations in both Spanish and K'iche' fill the air; women and the older generations speak K'iche' more often than men and children. The townspeople greet each other in K'iche' and even vendors at the weekly market broadcast their sales pitch over the microphone in both Spanish and K'iche'. At the small store in my homestay, I noticed the customers usually called out to my host family and ordered what they wanted in K'iche'. When I wasn't in the room, my host family would almost instantaneously revert to speaking in *dialecto*<sup>4</sup>.

Officially, in the 2001 urban census, the self-determined language competency of the adult population of the *cabecera municipal* was determined to be: 86% bilingual K'iche' and Spanish, 10.4% monolingual K'iche', and 3.6% monolingual Spanish (Municipio 2004:61). In the *aldeas* outside the *cabecera municipal*, K'iche' is the main language of communication, as Joe and Seth discovered. They followed a trail to the other side of one of the mountains flanking the *cabecera municipal*, and asked a resident “¿como se llama este pueblo?”. The women responded, “¿heh?”. Joe put his rudimentary K'iche' knowledge to use and asked, “¿jas a bi ri tinamit?”. She responded with the name of one of the *aldeas* of Xecul.

I decided to contain my scope of investigation to the *cabecera municipal* and set out to find and characterize the schools. After realizing there were three elementary schools and only one middle school, I further focused my project on the education at the

---

<sup>4</sup> In San Andrés Xecul, the language K'iche' was referred to as dialect, what most indigenous people in the area speak in addition to Spanish.

elementary level. The three primary schools are spread out in different neighborhoods in the urban area. However, the attendance is not directly correlated to *barrio* as parents can choose to send their children to any one of the distinct schools. The large official Urbana and the smaller PRONADE (*Programa Nacional de Autogestión Educativa*) offer classes in the morning; children arrive between 8am and 9am. Although both official and *auto-gestión* schools are part of the national school system under MINEDUC, a parent committee at the latter gives families more control over the way the school is run, including the hiring of new teachers (Chan Tonoc 16 Feb 2006). The other official school, Varones, has classes in the afternoon, and only recently changed to mixta, so the school has significantly more male students than female students. General information is presented in table 1 below, and I collected more specific information in Xecul through school visits and multiple interviews with the directors of both the Urbana and PRONADE.

School Name	Common name	Grade Level	Funding
<i>Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta Juan Ruperto Chic Aguilar</i>	Urbana	<i>Primaria</i> (equivalent K-6)	Official (public government school)
<i>Escuela Oficial Urbana De Varones</i>	Varones	<i>Primaria</i>	Official (public government school)
<i>Auto-gestión Comunitaria Calvario</i>	PRONADE	<i>Primaria</i>	<i>Auto-gestión</i> (funded by government and international organizations)
<i>Instituto Básico por Cooperativa</i>	Cooperativa	<i>Básico</i> (equivalent grades 7-9)	Cooperative (funded by the state, the <i>municipalidad</i> , and the community)

Table 1: Schools in the *cabecera municipal* of San Andrés Xecul

Within my first week onsite I discovered that in practice, EBI was not only absent in Xecul, but it had been actively resisted by the community. Both elementary schools I focused on, Urbana and PRONADE, theoretically had bilingual *preprimaria*

(kindergarten), and Urbana had bilingual education in *primaria* (first grade) as well. However, in subsequent interviews with the directors, Carlos Xicay Aguilar (Urbana) and Tomás Chan Tonoc (PRONADE), they revealed that these classrooms functioned no differently than their monolingual predecessors. Both directors cited parental opposition and unqualified teachers as the central reasons why the schools continue to work only in Spanish. Both directors explained that the children already speak K'iche', but what they needed was to gain proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking in Spanish. After two full weeks of searching in his official books of handwritten acts, the Urbana director located a salient *acto* he referred to in our first interview. In response to my question, why do EBI programs not exist in Xecul?, he referenced a document where parents in the community definitively decided against functional bilingual education in the classroom (see Appendix II).

In an interview with a young mother of two school age children, I found a similar attitude. She was opposed to bilingual education in the schools because she was very concerned about the success of her two daughters when they move on to *básico* and have to attend school in Xela. She explained that she “never graduated from anything” and thus the education of her daughters is very important to her. The daughters are among the small minority of girls in Xecul that do not wear traditional *traje*, but instead dress in westernized clothing typical of the *ladino* populations. She claims that this clothing is “more comfortable”. She explained that although she speaks K'iche' fluently, and her daughters can understand, she discourages them from speaking K'iche' thus Spanish is the language of their household (Doña Mercedes, 3 Feb 2006).

### **Expanded Project: EBI in Guatemala**

The teachers and parents in the *cabecera municipal* of Xecul have no interest in *la educación bilingüe e intercultural* (EBI) that the MINEDUC, international

organizations, and certain Maya activists support. What are the objectives and principals of EBI, when did it start, why did it start, and most importantly, why are massive educational reforms being drafted calling for nationwide EBI if there is such resistance on a community level?

I mentioned in the introduction that the EBI movement in Guatemala has been and continues to be promoted from two main sources, the government and from Maya cultural organizations. In Xecul, both Urbana and PRONADE were theoretically part of the MINEDUC's DIGEBI program but were monolingual in practice. The next goal in my research was to locate EBI schools, where teachers, parents, and the community support EBI. In speaking with proponents of EBI from both the DIGEBI and CNEM programs, I was hoping to learn what factors lead to the creation of successful EBI programs and what leads a community to reject the very idea. I also began researching the histories of EBI in the different cases of DIGEBI and CNEM. Understanding how these movements started would help me understand the real objectives and current attitudes towards their EBI programs.

### **Indigenous Education and EBI *Estatal***

Formal education historically functioned as a tool to assimilate the indigenous population. Those in power in Guatemala perceived cultural and linguistic diversity as a problem that impeded national identity (López 2004). Starting in the 1940s, the first year at government-funded schools for indigenous children was called *castellanización*, literally to convert to Spanish-speaking. Monolingual *ladino* teachers attempted to teach the children Spanish in an immersion environment, ignoring the linguistic and cultural learning styles present in the indigenous communities. Formal bilingual education in Guatemala was first offered in official schools (public schools funded by MINEDUC) as an extension of previous discriminatory policies. In 1965, the

government changed the name of the first year of school to *castellanización bilingüe*, and introduced indigenous bilingual teachers. Maya languages were used “only as a transitional step to aid in the acculturative process of Indian children,” because “the use of even a limited bilingual method by native language speakers helped to increase school achievement and to reduce drop-out rates” (Harrera 1987; Richards 1987; Amaro and Letona 1978, as cited by Richards and Richards 1998: 211). The same year, the Ley Orgánica de Educación stated that “education should be an instrument of community development...to promote cultural, economic, and social progress” (Richards and Richards 1998: 210). Though this progress was defined by the efforts to hasten *castilianization* through bilingual education, “this was the first time since the early colonial period that the opportunity for Mayan language use in the school was opened” (Richards and Richards 1998: 210). There was no value placed on indigenous languages nor values or beliefs in the early bilingual programs.

The first bilingual education model consisted of just one year, which MINEDUC soon realized was not sufficient to complete *castellanización* of the students. In 1980, with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the *Proyecto Nacional de Educación Bilingüe* was born. Although the first school year was renamed *preprimaria*, the new project was essentially an extension of the *castellanización* methods of teaching to the first three school years (Richards and Richards 1998: 212). The project failed due to the political violence that intensified in the early 1980s, resulting in the murders of technicians and teachers working on the project (Richards and Richards 1998: 213).

In 1986, the nationwide bilingual education program was revived under the name *Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe* (PRONEBI), again with the funding of USAID. Though working under almost the exact same name as its predecessor, this

new program was founded on different principals. Instead of the transitional use of Maya languages, PRONEBI worked towards a parallel development of Spanish and the Maya language for the first five years of schooling (Richards and Richards 1998: 214). It was under this program that Wilhelm encountered teacher instruction and use of textbooks in Maya languages, as well as counterhegemonic messages in the curriculum during his fieldwork in 1990 (Wilhelm 1994).

In 1995, the program changed form yet again, changing its name to *Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural* (DIGEBI), which has lasted until today. Note that the title explains that the objectives of indigenous education were now theoretically not just bilingual in character, but also intercultural. Bilingual education can be defined as the use of the first language to achieve competency in a second language (transitional), or developing communication skills in the first language while achieving competency in a second (parallelism) (CNEM 2003; Richards and Richards 1998). Intercultural education is defined as the study, respect and coexistence cultures different than your own (Azmitia 2005). The DIGEBI program was designed to include both models of education into indigenous classrooms.

This theoretical change in indigenous education corresponds to the development of the *Acuerdos de Paz*, which were signed in 1996 (PROASE/UE 2002). In the *Acuerdo on Indigenous Rights and Identity*, it states,

The educational system is one of the most important vehicles for the transmittal and development of cultural values and knowledge. It must be responsive to the cultural identity of indigenous people and the values and educational systems of the Maya and other indigenous peoples (MINUGUA 1995).

In addition to pressure from the Accords to fulfill the right to EBI in indigenous communities, EBI is a central theme in the MINEDUC educational reforms, which began in 1998 and are yet to be completed. On the DIGEBI website, I encountered a

link to the *Resumen Ejecutiva* of the “Bilingual Intercultural Education Model for Guatemala”<sup>5</sup> where the specific objectives of EBI through the DIGEBI program are presented:

- to satisfy the educational needs and demands of the indigenous population
- the enrich the education for the *ladino* and *criollo* population
- to contribute to the complete formation of Guatemalan adults and children
- to install permanent processes of educational innovation in order to ensure the success of linguistic, social, and cultural competencies that the Guatemalan population requires
- to institute the principle of acceptance and respect for the diversity, as much in the pedagogy-curricular sense as in the institutional-administrative sense (DIGEBI N.d.:23-24).

Due to past policies of assimilation and discrimination associated with government bilingual education programs, some teachers and parents view “efforts to promote native language literacy instruction as part of the government’s conspiracy to permanently exclude indigenous peoples from *mestizo*-dominated political and economic spheres” (Freedson González 1998: 42). The director of Urbana was very skeptical of the motives of DIGEBI and previous governmental programs (Xicay Aguilar Feb 2006). He showed me the untouched piles of K’iche’ exercise books that sit in his office, printed and distributed free of charge by DIGEBI, and told me the story of his former colleague who is now working for the government organization. He explained, when the first bilingual education programs were being piloted in the late 1970s, most teachers, including his colleague were strongly opposed to the program; they thought of it as a conspiracy to keep indigenous children communicating in Maya languages and thus in an unthreatening position to the ladinos in power. As with other areas of the pan-Mayan cultural movement, the government has offered government jobs to indigenous leaders to remove them from their community and lessen the threat

---

<sup>5</sup> On the top of the first page of the 33-page document, it reads in bold and underlined, *Versión preliminar para la discusión y la consulta. Favor no citar.* (Preliminary version intended for discussion and consultation. Please do not cite.) I understand this to mean do not cite this document in published work

of organization and thus social change. The director explained, the government offers a nice salary and his colleague now supports the bilingual education movement.

Currently in Maya-speaking communities, twenty-four percent of public primary schools (1,869 schools) offer EBI, however at the majority of these EBI schools, there is only one teacher certified as a bilingual teacher (Red EBI 2004). As a part of the educational reforms, EBI high schools were founded in 2002 offering a new bilingual teacher *carrera*. Near Xecul, there is one in Xela, one in Totonicapán and two in Momostenago (Esteras, 21 Feb 2006). Only two classes have graduated as bilingual teachers, going on to fill the EBI classrooms in DIGEBI schools and Maya schools. There is one certified bilingual teacher at PRONADE and three at Urbana. I asked Isabel, a 17-year-old student from Xecul why she chose to study to be a bilingual teacher. She told me, “my cousin said it would be easier to get a job” (Isabel, 27 Feb 2006). I asked her, “where do you plan to look for a job when you graduate this year? Do you plan to work in her hometown?” She replied “if I can’t get a job in a bilingual classroom or a monolingual school, I will continue to university or study to be a nurse”. I asked her, “do you think the situation will change in Xecul? Is EBI important here?” She replied, “yes, I think EBI is important for the children of Xecul; however one person cannot change things if the community is opposed to EBI”.

The DIGEBI classrooms in Xecul refused to instruct in K’iche’ but I was determined to find a functional government-funded EBI school. The Sub-director of the EBI high school in Xela gave me the name of the four schools near Xela where her students go to complete teaching practicum (Esteras, 21 Feb 2006). Within the *cabecera municipal* of Zunil, I visited the public DIGEBI school *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta Chacap Zunil* (common name Chacap). The director and I talked about EBI in Guatemala, how EBI works at Chacap, and why parents, teachers and communities are

often strongly opposed to it. In speaking with the director and the 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher at Chacap, I learned that the school is bilingual out of necessity; all students arrive in kindergarten fluent in K'iche' and many are monolingual (Colop Calija'u, 1 Mar 2006). The kindergarten and first grade classrooms work almost exclusively in K'iche' but by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, the children are working almost exclusively in Spanish. I saw used DIGEBI exercise books in the classrooms and bilingual exercises on the chalkboard when I toured the 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom. This example of bilingual language use corresponds to DIGEBI's recommendations for bilingual schools (see Figure 1 below).

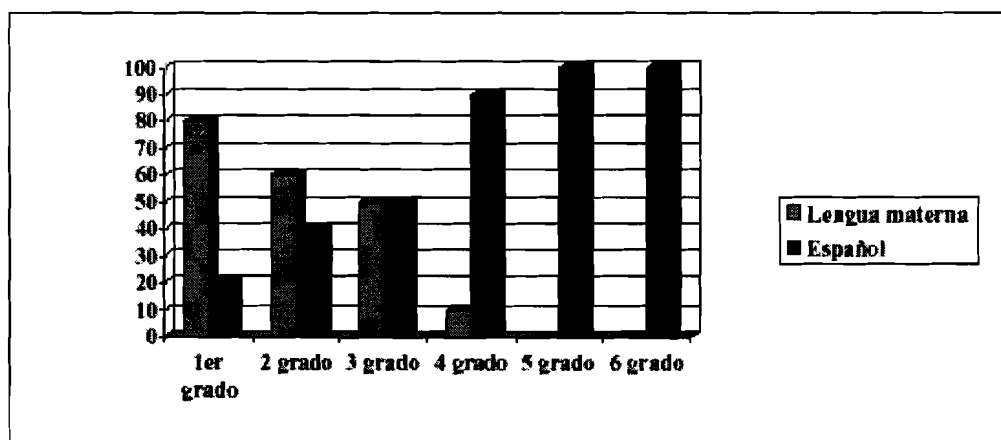


Figure 1: Theoretical language use in the DIGEBI classrooms in Official schools. Source: CNEM 2003

The other option for bilingual language use is the introduction of the second language working up to 50-50 usage by 4<sup>th</sup> grade and equal competency throughout the rest of elementary school. Due to my research of the DIGEBI programs in Xecul and Zunil, I agree with the CNEM in their claim that “the national educational system in Guatemala is still applying policies of transition in the practice of bilingual education” (CNEM 2003:5).

### ***Escuelas Mayas and EMBI***

The schools associated with the national organization CNEM are all community-run and funded schools known as Maya schools. They are affiliated with one of many

organizations that focus on cultural revitalization in education, such as the *Asociacion of Escuelas Mayas* (ACEM) and the *Centro de Documentación e Investigación Maya* (CEDIM). These organizations are then members of the CNEM, forming the network of Maya schools that serves communities across Guatemala. These schools are not legally recognized by the MINEDUC.

Many Maya Schools existed before they were a part of the nationwide network and were individually founded with “in-depth objectives for maintaining, developing, and fortifying its own languages and cultures” (CECMA 1992:11 as cited by Richards and Richards 1998:217). A Maya activist eloquently explains the difference between the state-sponsored EBI programs and the real efforts that are taking place in Maya schools. He explains “it is not sufficient to concern ourselves only about language, the construction of some school buildings, the filling of them with desks, and the handing out of some teaching and learning materials if [these actions] are not accompanied by conceptualizations, philosophies, and actions coming from within the indigenous cultures (CECMA 1992:11 as cited by Richards and Richards 1998:217).

In place of EBI, Maya schools aim to use EMBI, the M standing for Maya. I explained the difference between bilingual education and the more complex bilingual, intercultural education. Adding Maya education is the addition of cultural values, beliefs, conceptions, calendars, traditions, principals, science, arts, and elements of the cosmovision Maya that have been developed and transmitted between generations of indigenous Guatemaltecos (CNEM 2003:3). The educational model of EMBI includes an interaction between Mayan and Western education, to for a universal education (see Figure 2 below). It is important to not that while linguistic continuity is thought of as central to the Maya culture, Maya schools can serve the monolingual, bilingual and multilingual populations.

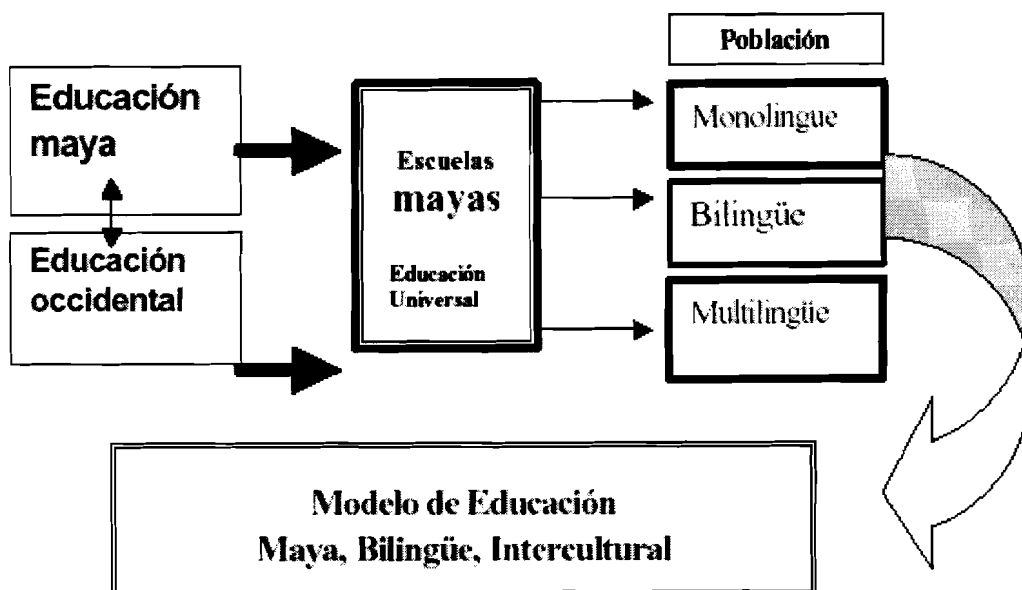


Figure 2: EMBI is the educational model supported by CNEM and the Maya Schools.

I observed at the *Centro de Formación El Patriota* (common name El Patriota) in San Francisco El Alto, a Maya school affiliated with the *Asociación de Representantes de las Escuelas Primarias Mayas* (ASRCEM). When I observed at the school, I noticed that the students were mostly monolingual Spanish speakers, and many did not wear traditional dress. Richards and Richards explain that “in many of the urban *Escuelas Mayas* of the highlands, the schools were established for the purposes of ‘rescuing’ and ‘revitalizing’ Maya language and culture” (1996:219). I was observing in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom on a Friday<sup>6</sup> as the class worked on a unit of K’iche’ vocabulary. When he explained an assignment, the kids asked, “in K’iche’?” and the teacher responded, “yes, you have to do this exercise in K’iche’”. As the students wrote down the vocabulary, they practiced pronunciation, which the teacher had to constantly correct. It was obvious that there were only a few bilingual students in the class (see Table 3 for exact statistics).

<sup>6</sup> The teachers informed me that all classrooms work more in Maya language and cultural themes on Thursdays and Fridays so I chose to observe on those days.

Town	Common Name	Type	Public or Private	Bilingual EBI offered in...
Xecul	Urbana	Official, DIGEBI	Public	preprimaria primaria
	Pronabe	Auto-gestión, DIGEBI	Public	preprimaria
San Francisco El Alto	El Patriota	Escuela Maya ACEM	Private, no language requirement	preprimaria-sexto
Cantel	El Progreso	Escuela Maya CNEM?	Private	Preprimaria-básico
Zunil	Chacaj	Oficial, DIGEBI	Public	Preprimaria-trecero

Table 2: Local Schools and EBI

## Methodology

I lived in the *municipio* of San Andrés Xecul in the *departemento* of Totonicapan from February 1-28. My field research was concentrated in the *cabecera municipal* of Xecul but also expanded outside my town of residence. I visited schools in the *municipio* of San Francisco El Alto, in the *departemento* of Totonicapan, and the *municipios* of Zunil, Cantel, and city of Quezaltenango in the *departemento* of Quezaltenango.

With one exception, the directors, teachers, and teachers-in-training were all very welcoming and willing to talk to me about EBI in Guatemala and allow me to observe at their schools. With the director of Urbana, I noticed that the more I spoke with him, the more he opened up about the real situation of education in Guatemala. When I told him I was going to San Francisco El Alto to visit a Maya school to see how EBI is carried out there, he told me frankly “intercultural bilingual education does not exist in practice” (Xicay Aguilar, Feb 2006).

It was difficult to discover the real situation from just a few school visits but I did quickly learn that EBI in practice was nothing like the lofty goals and declarations

of DIGEBI and CNEM. It is important to note that I only did research in a small area, and only in the K'iche'-speaking region, whereas both types of EBI programs exist in all the major linguistic regions across the nation. I expect there to be a lot of variety in the quality of these programs, and thus cannot expand my results in this region to the EBI on the national level.

General logistical problems I encountered were not overwhelming but did affect the quality of the report I was able to produce. I arrived in Guatemala without any research or previous knowledge on my topic of field research. Access to internet and online sources of information limited my ability to access the entirety of academic literature on the topic. Only the larger players in education, like MINEDUC, CNEM and DIGEBI, had websites, thus I had trouble contacting local organizations that work with EBI in the region.

I found the schools outside Xecul were almost by chance. I was amazed that no one in the community or in the school system, including the directors, had heard of CNEM or the concept of a Maya school. Using the 1996 Richards and Richards article, that had a map (but not names) of the location of Maya schools associated with CNEM, I showed up in San Francisco El Alto and asked around. If the sub-director at the EBI high school did not give me the names of the functional DIGEBI primary schools, I don't know if I would have located the one in Zunil. She also gave me the name of a private EBI school in Cantel, that I assume is associated with CNEM. Due to the time restraints of this project, I was unable to speak with the director there or observe classes.

Within Xecul, research and interviews were easy to set up. I would mention my project and would immediately have a contact with a cousin, that was a director, a niece that was studying to be a teacher, etc. The majority of my time in the field was spent in casual conversations about education, reading literature, sorting out the complex

educational system, and using this information to formulate interview questions for my interviewees (see Appendix IV for interview details).

### **Conclusion: The Future of EBI in Guatemala**

When I asked the Urbana director, Is the classroom a place to teach children about cultural values?, he responded that “there is not space in school for cultural values” (Xicay Aguilar Feb 2006). This was my first interview within the formal school system, only after talking with Doña Mercedes about why her Maya children don’t speak K’iche’ or wear *traje*. After these two interviews, I began extensive research into EBI in the area and the DIGEBI and CNEM versions of EBI. As I explored the functioning DIGEBI school in Zunil and the Maya school in San Francisco El Alto, the situation in Xecul was always on my mind. I was constantly thinking, what makes a community, the parents, teachers, and town leaders decide to pursue EBI?

In Zunil, where the MINEDUC’s DIGEBI textbooks are actually opened and teachers instruct in K’iche’, I soon realized that this bilingual education is done out of necessity. The teachers must use K’iche’ exclusively in preprimaria and primaria because many children do not comprehend Spanish at all. K’iche’ is phased out by third grade, though all students understand it, and is not used the rest of the elementary experience after *castellanización* has occurred. The teachers and parents are not necessarily thrilled about their children working in school in K’iche’; the director told me that like in Xecul, many parents are opposed to the use of K’iche’ in school because they are concerned solely about developing the children’s Spanish communication skills (Colop Calija’u, Jaime, 1 Mar 2006).

Though I’ve only visited three official schools with the DIGEBI program, I am making the assumption that due to strong pressure from parents, Maya languages and government-distributed EBI textbooks are only used when the majority of the children

are monolingual Maya-speakers. In Table 3 below, I present the five main schools I investigated and certain characteristics that I believe represent the potential for a successful EBI program. I determined the approximate percentage of students that completely fluent in K'iche'. Zunil uses bilingual education but it seems that the K'iche' speakers at PRONABE are fluent in Spanish as well so that the DIGEBI mandate for bilingual education can be ignored.

Town	School	Total Students (elementary)	K'iche' spoken at home*	teachers EBI-trained	Teachers from the community
Xecul	Urbana	800	u.d.	3 of 24	11 of 24 Director no
	PRONABE	294	54.5%	1 of 8	8 of 8 Director yes
SF el Alto	El Patriota	258	13.5%	1 of 8	7 of 8 Director yes
Cantel	El Progreso	u.d.	u.d.	u.d.	u.d.
Zunil	Chacaj	425	100%	0 of 14	5 from Zunil 7 from Cantel

Table 3: Resources available and potential for successful EBI in selected local schools  
 \* See Appendix II for more information about how these data were obtained for each school.

After my disappointing experience at Urbana, and learning that the teachers were not from the community and EBI was considered inapplicable, I hiked up to the *Calvario* neighborhood and found PRONABE. As an auto-gestión school, PRONABE is funded partly by MINEDUC but receives the majority of funding from international organizations. Though they have more freedom (and less support) from the government, these schools are “still subjected to the decisions of MINEDUC” (Chan Tonoc, Tomás, 27 Feb 2006) thus have the choice to embrace the DIGEBI program or remain monolingual. Over half of students at PRONABE speak K'iche' in the house, and all the teachers are from the community (and are bilingual). Right now, only the

*preprimaria* teacher is trained to be an EBI teacher but I discovered at El Patriota that desire, not the title of one's diploma determines successful EBI in the classroom.

At El Patriota, the Maya school in San Francisco El Alto, the small scale community effort to rescue Maya language and values is driven by very dedicated teachers, only one of whom is EBI trained. The efforts to preserve and celebrate the K'iche' language and culture, is reduced to an effort to rescue them. Perhaps when the school was founded in 1994, the student population was more proficient in K'iche'. However, currently the bilingual teachers are forced to treat K'iche' as a second language for the majority of students, working only on simple vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation, not developing proficiency or literacy in K'iche'. This type cultural rescue effort is often started after at least one generation has become distanced from the traditional culture, language and values. Though the teachers are all bilingual, and the DIGEBI and older PRONEBI books (also sent to non-official schools) are utilized in the classroom, the children are essentially learning a foreign language and perhaps culture. The student population is from the urban center of San Francisco, thus may not relate to the pictures and activities developed to make education accessible to rural Maya children. Additionally, the focus on Maya spirituality functions to make students who have other religious beliefs feel distant from the Maya identity. I am not proposing that the EBI rescue effort in San Francisco was invaluable, just that the EBI principals could be achieved in a more traditional town, like Zunil or Xecul. Though many believe that linguistic continuity is central to the conservation of culture, CNEM explains that the EMBI concept of intercultural universal education does not necessarily have to be bilingual (see Figure 2).

The influence of Maya schools is on a much smaller scale than the DIGEBI program, but that may be only when comparing the statistics on paper. On paper, the

DIGEBI program claims to serve 1869 schools whereas there are only 126 Maya schools. As I discovered, these statistics do not necessarily represent the number of functionally bilingual intercultural classrooms in Guatemala. From the comparison of the Zunil functioning DIGEBI school and the San Francisco Maya school, the community supported small scale EBI operation appears to be more effective, especially when local teachers are so concerned about the future generations of Maya children in their own communities. I do not understand why the director at PRONADE, who is from Xecul, or the teachers-in-training from Xecul, appear to have little to no interest in EBI programs within their own communities. Until a leader emerges from the community with a desire to change the educational system, put EBI as a priority, and locate parents and educators prepared to support it, the education in Xecul will continue to contribute to the forces of ladinization, reaching out to the most vulnerable members of the community.

## Works Cited

Azmitia, Oscar

- 2005 La Educación Bilingüe Intercultural en Guatemala. Educación Sin Fronteras, 30 December (2 Mar 2006) Available: <http://www.aulaintercultural.org/article.php3?idarticle=1252>

CNEM

- 2003 Las Escuelas Mayas: Una experiencia educativa en Guatemala. (Feb 2006) Available: <http://www.ebiguatemala.org/article/articleview/85/1/2/>

DIGEBI

- N.d. Resumen Ejecutivo: Modelo Educativo Bilingüe Intercultural para Guatemala. (Feb 2006) Available: <http://www.mineduc.gob.gt/administracion/dependencias/Centrales/digebi/iframe.html>

Freedson González,

- 1998 Indigenous Rights and Schooling in Highland Chiapas Cultural Survival Quarterly, 22(1):41-43

Hernández Ramírez, Zoísmo

- 2003 La educación indígena en Guatemala. Revista América Indígena LX (1): 23-46.

López, Luis Enrique

- 2004 Desde arriba y desde abajo: Visiones contrapuestas de la educación intercultural bilingüe en América Latina. Programa de Formación en Educación Intercultural Bilingüe para los Países Andinos (PROEIB Andes), Universidad Mayor de San Simón, Cochabamba, Bolivia, 4 March (4 Mar 2006) Available: [http://www.aulaintercultural.org/article.php3?id\\_article=1311](http://www.aulaintercultural.org/article.php3?id_article=1311)

MINEDUC

- 2003 Políticas de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural del Ministerio de Educación. (4 Mar 2006) Available: <http://www.ebiguatemala.org/article/articleview/124/1/2/>

MINUGUA

- 1995 Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous People. (2 Mar 2006) Available: <http://www.minugua.guate.net.gt/Default2.htm>
- 2002 La Educación: una condición para la paz

Moya, Ruth.

- 1997 Interculturalidad y reforma educativa en Guatemala. Revista Iberoamericana de Educación 13: 128-156.

Municipio de San Andrés Xecul

- N.d. 2004 Diagnostico Integral del Municipio de San Andrés Xecul.

PROASE/UE

- 2002 Textos de Apoyo Docente, módulo 1: "Educación Bilingüe Intercultural: Realidad y estrategia" (4 Mar 2006) Available: <http://www.ebiguatemala.org/filemanager/fileview/255/>

Red EBI

- 2004 Boletín EBI no. 1. Feb 13 (5 Mar 2006) Available:

Richards, Julia Becker and Michael Richards

- 1996 Maya Education: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Mayan Language Education Policy. *In* Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala. ed. Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, eds. Pp. 208-221 Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wilhelm, Ronald W.

- 1994 Columbus's Legacy, Conquest or Invasion? An Analysis of Counterhegemonic Potential in Guatemalan Teacher Practice and Curriculum. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 25 (2): 173-195.

Zimmermann, Klaus.

- 1997 Modos de interculturalidad en la educación bilingüe. Reflexiones acerca del caso de Guatemala. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación* 13: 113-127

## **Appendix I**

### List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACEM	Asociación de Escuelas Mayas del nivel medio
ASRCEM	Asociación de Representantes de las Escuelas Primarias Mayas
CNEM	Consejo Nacional de la Educación Maya
EBI	Educación Bilingüe Intercultural
EMBI	Educación Maya, Bilingüe, and Intercultural
ENBI	Escuela Normal Bilingual Intercultural, level básico diversificado, equivalent to high school grades 9-12
ENRO	Escuela Normal Rural
DIGEBI	Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural
MINEDUC	Ministerio de Educación
MINUGUA	Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Guatemala
PAEBI	Proyecto Acceso a la Educación Bilingüe Intercultural
PRONADE	Programa Nacional de Autogestión Educativa
PROASE	Programa de Apoyo al Sector Educativo en Guatemala
PRONEBI	Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe

## **Appendix II**

La Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta Juan Ruperto Chic Aguilar  
Acta No. 17 – 2005 (my translation)

### **INTRODUCTION:**

In the town of San Andres Xecul, department of Totonicapán, the La Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta Juan Ruperto Chic Aguilar met, teachers and parents of students 2:30pm Tuesday, 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 2006, to have the first family school meeting

### **PRIMARIO:**

The principal, Prof. Xicay Aguilar welcomes everyone and presents the first item on the agenda for first grade. He explains, the Minister of Education proposes teaching first grade in the indigenous language or each community, which would be K'iche' for San Andres Xecul. The principal then leaves the microphone open for any parents who wish to share their opinions on the matter. Mr. Juan Ramon Santay expresses his desire that the education remain in Spanish, and invites others to support his opinion. Mrs. Ana Tonoc expresses her opinion that the education should be bilingual. Mr. Juan David Chay proclaims that the education in K'iche' would represent a backwards step for the community, although he acknowledges the indigenous origin of the language, he supports continuing education in Spanish. The opinions were taken into account and it was concluded that due to the wishes of the majority of the parents, first grade with continue to be taught only in Spanish.

Note: Following the text of the act were two full pages of parent signatures.

### Appendix III

#### Classroom Survey Data

K'iche' spoken in the home?

Notes about data collection:

At PRONABE, in classrooms that were available, I surveyed students directly on (Feb 27<sup>th</sup>). After introducing myself, I explained that I wanted to ask a simple question, and that it wasn't a test. I asked the students in each class to raise their hands if they spoke K'iche' at their house with their family. This quick head count was divided into a total students to find the rough percentages. These numbers could be influenced by students who are ashamed of speaking K'iche' and thus, of raising their hands. However, at Pronabe, the students were excited to raise their hands and shout phrases to me in K'iche'. In fact, the teachers reminded the students to raise their hands only if they spoke and understood K'iche'.

At El Patriota, my last visit I was planning to do a similar survey, but arrived to find that classes were cancelled for the day for a staff meeting (March 2<sup>nd</sup>).

At Chocaj, it was also a day without classes (March 1<sup>st</sup>).

School, town	Grade level	Students that speak k'iche' in the home/total students
PRONADE, Xecul	2	21/35
	3	25/50
	4	25/40
	5	19/40
El Patriota, SF el Alto	2	3/34
	3	5/43
	4	5/34
	5	6/30
	6	5/37

## **Appendix IV**

### Cited Interviews:

Chan Tonoc, Tomás. *Director and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher at PRONADE* (16, 27 Feb 2006)

Colop Calija'ú, Jaime. *Director at Chacap* (1 Mar 2006)

Doña Mercedes. *Parent of 2 daughters in elementary school* (3 Feb, 2006)

Estera, Juana. *Sub-director at ENBI in Xela* (21 Feb 2006)

Gomez, Eduardo. *Director at El Patriota* (20 Feb, 2 Mar 2006)

Isabel. *In final year of high school studying to be a bilingual teacher* (6, 27 Feb 2006)

Tax, José Luis. *5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at El Patriota* (17, 24 Feb 2006)

Xicay Aguilar, Carlos. *Director at Urbana* (9, 23, 27, 28 Feb 2006)