

Meso-American Languages: An Investigation of Variety, Maintenance, and Implications for Linguistic Survival

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Abstract

Forty-five Meso-American language speakers, speaking thirteen Meso-American languages, were interviewed in the agricultural region in and around Colquitt County, Georgia. Language shift is common among such displaced immigrant populations (Fishman, 1967), specifically among less-dominant languages (Paulstone, 1994) such as Meso-American languages. The study used oral survey methods to record demographic data concerning Meso-American language speakers and the diversity of Meso-American languages spoken. The interviewers surveyed the use of and attitudes towards English, Meso-American languages, and Spanish among the speakers and their children (or hypothetical children). These responses documented language links to dominant socio-economic forces and generational language maintenance. The findings, such as differing rates for desired vs. reported language maintenance among the population, contribute to the national picture of Meso-American language maintenance among Meso-American speakers in the United States. The results of the study predict a gradual Meso-American language shift, but there was strong sentimentality for Meso-American languages. Such findings present implications to help stabilize language shift for those in common contact with Meso-American speakers in the United States, such as teachers and health workers, as well as Meso-American speakers themselves.

Context

Historical

As a cultural and geographic entity, Meso-America stretches from central Mexico to Honduras. Meso-American history includes significant cultures of the Americas, such as the Olmec, Maya, Aztec,

and Teotihuacan; pre-dating the arrival of the Spanish in the 15th and 16th centuries, these pre-Columbian societies prospered for centuries. The Aztecs, historically noted for large-scale construction, resourcefulness, and militancy, were so named by the Spanish refers to the Nahuatl speaking people group located in central Mexico; many anthropologists date the Aztecs to 1100 CE (Blanton, Kowalewski, Feinman, & Finstein, 1993). To the south, the Maya possessed both complex mathematical systems and a well-established artisan tradition, with verified dwellings dating to 1800 BCE along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (McKill, 2004). Linguistically, by 2100 BCE in this area (the Yucatan and the border of Chiapas and Guatemala) the Maya principally spoke Cholan-Maya (Campbell, 1984).

This distinct Meso-American cultural dominance ended with Spanish colonialism. But, millions of direct descendants of these cultures survive today, creating one of the largest concentrations of Indigenous peoples in the world, speaking hundreds of Meso-American languages. Many modern-day Guatemalans, Mexicans, and other Central Americans speak Tzotzil, Mixteco, Cajoval, and dozens more Meso-American languages as their first language, originated from the tongues spoken by pre-Colombian Meso-American groups (Campbell, 1986; Clemens et al., 2011; McKill, 2004).

Today, all Meso-American languages are endangered in that there is gradual language shift, as not all Meso-American speakers pass the languages on to the next generation. All Meso-American languages are threatened in their ancestral lands by what is clearly seen among the Maya, the monolingual adoption of Spanish by Maya children (England, 2003). In the case of some Meso-American languages, the languages border on extinction.

The strength of individual Meso-American languages, as defined by the number of active speakers of the language, varies widely. For example, Zapoteco, in the Oto-Manguen linguistic family, is spoken by over 500,000 people (Campbell, 2000). Within the Mayan language family there are languages such as Mam, Kaqchikel, and Kiche, with 500,000 to 1,000,000 speakers each. However, other Mayan languages barely survive, such as Itzaj, with roughly 30 speakers, all of them elderly (England, 2003). Even the Meso-American language with the most speakers, Nahuatl of the Uto-

Aztec family, has less than 2,000,000 speakers (England, 2003) and has experienced significant language shift/loss (Rolstad, 2002).

There are six major Meso-American language families: Chibchan, Mayan, Mixe–Zoquen, Oto-Manguen, Totonacan, and Uto-Aztec. Among these major families, the Oto-Manguen and Mayan families are the largest, and language isolates exist within the diversity of Meso-American tongues. There are traits broadly shared by many of these languages. In fact, researchers have concluded that the Meso-American linguistic area, a linguistic area being a group of languages that has developed some level of sameness and linkages, is a notably strong one (Campbell, Kaufman & Smith-Stark, 1986). These languages, many far pre-dating the colonized Americas, demonstrate unique linguistic phenomena such as entirely whistled languages, languages with extensive dream talk, and dialects of languages with five registers (Groark, 2009; Merrifield & Edmonson, 1999).

The Spanish dominated and subdued Meso-American cultures, as they colonized the Americas. Within a century of initial contact with Spaniards, the native Maya lost fifty to ninety-five percent of their population (Arias & Arriaza, 1998; Wellmeier, 1998). Similarly, war and disease decimated the Aztec population (Cook, 1998). In modern times, the remaining Meso-Americans have not fared well. Specifically, all sides systemically targeted Indigenous peoples throughout the longest war in modern Latin American History, the Guatemalan Civil War, which lasted four decades, from the 1960s to the 1990s (Wilkinson, 2002). Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Meso-Americans sought legal refugee status in and/or fled to the United States during this “Maya Diaspora” (Burns, 1993; Vlach, 1992; Wellmeier, 1998). Because of proximity and challenging economic conditions in their native lands, Meso-Americans, speaking Meso-American languages, continue to immigrate.

Sociolinguistic

Language shift, the process of gradually changing from one first language to another over successive generations, often occurs among displaced immigrant populations. Language shift occurs from the first language to the language(s) of the dominant surrounding socio-economic forces. Specifically, the language(s) used at work and school, both dominant social forces, will ultimately come to be the

language(s) used at home (Fishman, 1967). Paulstone (1994) later tested these theories of Fishman's and proposed three linguistic results of prolonged contact between linguistic groups: language maintenance, bilingualism, or loss/change of native language, with the most typical result being language loss of the less-dominant language.

Among Meso-American language speakers in the United States, there are two dominant languages, English and Spanish, surrounding the speakers. Each language has specific economic and/or social incentives. English tends to be the language connected with education. Spanish is often connected with both work, commonly agricultural or construction labor, and social interactions among other Latinos. Thus, both English and Spanish have clear connections to dominant social forces (education and work). Many Meso-American speakers arrive as bilinguals, speaking a Meso-American first language and Spanish as their second language. In the transition to language shift, many Meso-American speakers become trilingual, speaking a Meso-American language, Spanish as a second language, and limited English. Peñalosa (1985) documented this trilingualism in Los Angeles, California, as a stage before the loss of Meso-American language speaking. He concluded from his data sample of 134 adults that the Meso-American community was in a state of transitional Qanjobal/Spanish/English trilingualism away from Qanjobal/Spanish bilingualism and towards Spanish/English bilingualism. Light (1995) investigated the community a decade later and verified much of what Peñalosa found, but with English increasingly utilized among the youth. Gladwin (2010) similarly predicted a potential language shift/loss of Meso-American languages among speakers in North/Florida and South Georgia.

Other approaches to the study of language maintenance involve social network theory and language dominance, as one lens focuses on personal communities and the other on feelings, beliefs, and identity awareness. Clearly linked to these concepts, "language attitudes affect language maintenance (García, 2003, p. 28). For example, recent language maintenance studies sought to document positive attitudes toward first languages (Smolicz, Nical, & Secombe, 2000) as well as positive attitudes toward general multilingualism (Dagenias & Bennon, 2001). Thus, despite newer emphases on the study of language ideology and network analyses in language shift

research, attitude remains an important focus and factor (García, 2003).

Meso-American language loss fits into the greater sociolinguistic narrative of minority language loss in the U.S. In fact, much language maintenance research has shifted to the question of how to encourage language maintenance and revitalization (García, 2003). Nevertheless, today, even Spanish, the most widely spoken minority language in the U.S., shows language loss (Fishman, 1996). This is coupled with a clear language shift away from, if not extinction of, Indigenous languages in most Native American societies in the U.S. (Crawford, 1996; Goodfellow & Pauline, 2003).

Geographic

Colquitt County, Georgia is a largely agricultural area in South Georgia. Specifically, the area is known for vegetable production, an industry dependent on migrant labor. The population of the county is less than 50,000, with an additional 15,000 migrants estimated to labor in the vegetable fields, other farming operations, and non-farm occupations. The Colquitt County School system is fifteen percent Hispanic (Oxford, 2007). The researcher chose this area for the study because of its long history of migrant labor linked to its agricultural heritage, which has led to a large Latino population, both permanent and seasonal, with roots in Meso-America.

Research Questions

Research shows Meso-American language shift in ancestral Meso-American lands (Rolstad, 2002) and Indigenous language shift among Native-Americans in the United States (Riegelhaupt, 2003); however, there are fewer studies of Meso-American language maintenance in the United States. In this void, this study focused on the issue of language maintenance among Meso-American language speakers in the United States. Despite some revitalization efforts and bilingual education programs in Mexico and Central America, Meso-American languages are threatened with language loss in their native lands. Speaking these threatened languages, Meso-American language speakers in the United States are further impacted by the potential language shift common to displaced immigrants and those surrounded

by dominant languages-in this case, both English and Spanish (Fishman, 1967, Paulstone, 1994). This study seeks to forward generalizable findings linked to Meso-American language maintenance and desire among this population, Meso-American language speakers in the United States.

Using oral surveys conducted in Spanish, the researcher sought to answer the following research questions.

1. What demographic features do the Meso-American speakers display in terms of age, gender, country of origin, and languages spoken?
2. In what context are the specific languages spoken?
3. Do the children of Meso-American language speakers also speak Meso-American languages?
4. What are the linguistic attitudes towards the learning by children of specific languages?

Methods

Three graduate students, all full-time public school teachers in Colquitt County, assisted the author with data collection and tabulation. The interviewers, including the author, were all familiar with the area studied and spoke Spanish. All survey questions were asked in Spanish and results were written in Spanish. Meso-American language-Spanish bilingualism is common among Meso-American speakers (Garzon, 1992). Thus, Spanish was the shared language of communication among interviewers and interviewees. In the case of monolingual Meso-American speakers, a friend of the interviewee, who spoke the same Meso-American language and Spanish, translated.

Survey Questions

After biographical information was assessed (gender and age), the following questions were asked of each individual surveyed:

1. *¿De dónde es usted?* ¿Where are you from?
2. *¿Tiene hijos?* ¿Do you have children?
3. *¿Cuáles son los idiomas que habla?* ¿What languages do you speak?
4. *¿Cuándo usa _____?* ¿When do you use _____? This question was repeated for each language spoken.

5. *¿Cuáles son los idiomas que hablan sus hijos?* ¿What language(s) do your children speak?

6. *¿Quiere que sus hijos hablen _____?* *¿Por qué?* Do you want your children to speak _____? Why?

This question was asked with reference to English, the Meso-American language(s) spoken by the respondent, and Spanish. To establish community desire for future language maintenance, if the person did not have children, the person was asked the question referencing his/her future or hypothetical children.

Demographic data and most survey data was recorded exactly as stated. Answers to when each specific language was used were recorded on the survey sheet, as were the answers to why they want their children, or hypothetical children, to learn specific languages. Thus, questions four and six produced extended answers (anywhere from one word to several sentences).

With the goal of linking the responses to one of sixteen codings, the interviewers, as a group, analyzed each response. The codings for this study were based on terms directly tied to seminal research on dominant languages (Fishman, 1967, Paulstone 1994) to document home-directed, educational, or work-related factors. Additionally, some codings developed, or were refined, organically from commonly occurring data responses from Gladwin's 2004 and 2010 studies. The sixteen codings were 1) Always, 2) Church, 3) Culture, 4) Education, 5) Family, 6) Friends, 7) Helpful, 8) Home, 9) Homeland, 10) Improvement, 11) Live Here, 12) Never, 13) School, 14) Seldom, 15) Work, and 16) Not Coded. Table 1 presents nine of the codings as specific groupings tied to their research purpose, factors that link to language dominance. To achieve inter-rater reliability, all four interviewers had to agree unanimously that the answer as written was clearly represented by a specific coding. Answers that were not unanimous or that a majority believed did not fit one of the sixteen codings, were recorded as not coded (see Tables 3 & 4).

Table 1: Codings and Factors Linked to Language Dominance

Factor	Coding
Educational	Education, School
Home-Directed Homeland,	Culture, Family, Friends, Home,
Work-related	Improvement, Work

Results

Forty-five Meso-American language speakers were interviewed in Colquitt County, Georgia in multiple locations. Survey sites included a grocery store, convenience stores, outside a public high school, and on a produce farm (K. Bejarano, S. Earley, & C. Marsh, personal communication, April 11, 2013). Demographic results revealed a respondent population of seven females and 38 males. Seven respondents appeared under 30 of age. Thirty-three appeared between 20 and 50 years of age, and five appeared older than 50 years of age. Eleven of the respondents were from Guatemala and 34 were from Mexico. Table 2 presents the data as percentages.

Table 2: Meso-American Language Speakers (Colquitt County, Georgia)

Variable	Results
Sample size	45
Gender	16% Female; 84% Male
Age	16% under 20; 73% 20-50; 11% 50+
Country of origin	24% Guatemala; 76% Mexico
Children	87% Yes
Languages	4% Monolingual; 76% Bilingual; 20% Trilingual
Language maintenance	64% Yes
Positive desire	89% English; 80% Meso-American; 91% Spanish

Two of the respondents spoke only a Meso-American language. Thirty-four individuals reported speaking a Meso-American language and Spanish, and nine individuals reported speaking a Meso-American language, English, and Spanish. Table 2 notes these respondents as mono-, bi-, or tri-lingual. Thirty-nine of the 45

respondents reported having children. Of these 39, 25 reported that their children spoke a Meso-American language, representing maintenance of the Meso-American language.

Thirteen individual Meso-American languages were reported from the study (see Table 3). Nahuatl was the most commonly spoken, followed by Mam. Three of the major Meso-American language families were represented among the languages surveyed, along with one language isolate, Purépecha. Four of the languages only had one speaker in the sample.

Table 3: Meso-American Languages (Colquitt County, Georgia)

Language	# of speakers	Language Family
Nahuatl	10	Uto-Aztecan
Mam	8	Mayan
Otomí	7	Oto-Manguen
Zapoteco	5	Oto-Manguen
Purépecha	4	Language Isolate
Tzotzil	3	Mayan
Chuj	2	Mayan
Kanjobal	2	Mayan
Mixteco	2	Oto-Manguen
Chinantec	1	Oto-Manguen
Huichol	1	Uto-Aztecan
Mazatec	1	Oto-Manguen
Tlapaneco	1	Oto-Manguen

The respondents reported varied times for when English, Meso-American languages, and Spanish were used (see Table 4). For English, the most common response was *never* and the second most common response was *seldom*. The third most common response for English was *work*. For Meso-American language use, there were four top responses: *family*, *friends*, *home*, and *homeland*. Spanish had two common responses, *work* and *home*, and then *always* was the third most common response.

Table 4: Number of Responses Linked to Codings for Question #4 - Language Use

	English	Meso-American	Spanish
Always	-	1	9
Church	-	4	-
Culture	-	-	-
Education	-	-	-
Family	1	11	5
Friends	-	10	6
Helpful	-	-	-
Home	3	12	13
Homeland	-	11	1
Improvement	-	-	-
Live Here	1	1	2
Never	10	-	-
School	4	-	2
Seldom	7	-	1
Work	6	4	14
Not Coded	3	1	2

Forty of the 45 respondents wanted children to speak English, while 41 wanted the same for Spanish. Thirty-six desired that children speak a Meso-American language. When explaining why they desired children to learn English, the most common reasons were *live here* and *improvement* with *work* closely following. For Meso-American languages, the reasons given were clear with *family* mentioned 17 times and *culture* 15 times. When responding to why they wanted children to learn Spanish, the responses were the most varied. *Helpful* was mentioned ten times, but then seven different codings, representing from one to six responses, were recorded (see Table 5).

Table 5: Number of Responses Linked to Codings for Question #6 - Language Desire

	English	Meso-American	Spanish
Always	-	-	-
Church	-	-	-
Culture	1	15	1
Education	2	-	-
Family	1	17	5
Friends	-	-	-
Helpful	1	-	10
Home	-	-	-
Homeland	-	7	6
Improvement	11	-	5
Live Here	13	-	5
Never	-	-	-
School	3	-	3
Seldom	1	-	-
Work	8	-	4
Not Coded	4	3	2

Discussion

The results showcase the great linguistic diversity found among Meso-American speakers in the U.S. The respondents reported speaking thirteen different Meso-American languages. These findings were representative of actual language speaking numbers. Exact numbers for Meso-American languages differ depending on the research cited; however, the five most commonly occurring languages in the survey have at least 150,000 global speakers. Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs with over 1,000,000 speakers today, the most

of any living Meso-American language, was spoken by the most respondents. Nahuatl's strength is supported by this study. The only other language in the sample of the Aztec family was Huichol, with one speaker. This is a representative finding in that Huichol is a small language with only 30,000 speakers (Lopez, 2007).

Mam was the second most spoken language in the sample. This finding supports current language realities, as Mam is a widely spoken language of the Mayan language family. Other Mayan languages reported were Tzotzil, Chuj, and Kanjobal. Of these languages, Chuj is the smallest with 40,000 speakers, having lost 20% of its total speakers in a generation. This is notable considering that there are so few Chuj speakers worldwide, but two were interviewed in this study. But research supports that the Guatemalan civil war severely impacted the areas inhabited by native Chuj speakers, forcing many to flee to the U.S. (Clemens et al., 2011).

The third and fourth most reported languages, Otomí and Zapoteco, are part of the Oto-Manguen language family. Four other languages of this family were reported, Mixteco, Chinantex, Mazatec, and Tlanpaneco, giving the Oto-Manguen language family the highest language representation in the sample. All of these languages have at least 100,000 speakers, according to the Department of Education of Mexico (INLA, <http://inali.gob.mx>). One language isolate, Purépecha, was reported, with four speakers. The language itself has 120,000 speakers (Chamoreau, 2012)

The results parallel national data referencing the age, gender, and country of origin of a sample consisting of many migrant farm workers. Most U.S. migrant workers are from Mexico or Guatemala (Passel, 2006). In fact, the 2007-2009 National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) reports that 68% of migrant agricultural workers were born in Mexico. The survey also reports that the average age of a farm worker is 36 and that 78% are male.

From the data linked to language use, ninety-eight percent of the sample reported speaking Spanish, and one in five reported speaking English. Thus, 80% did not speak English, a result verified by the most common response to when English was used, *never*. Even among those that did speak English, the second most common response to English use, *seldom*, suggested minimal interaction in English. However, the third most common response, *work*, pointed to

economic incentives for English, as does the fourth most common response, *school*. Spanish use was clearly dominant. The third most common response for Spanish use was *always*. Also, Spanish's most common response to when used was *work*, pointing to economic incentives and its establishment as a dominant language. However, Spanish also showed strong home-directed sentiment, with the second most common response, *home*, followed by *friends* and *family* the third and fourth most common. But Meso-American languages also showed significant home-directed strength with the most common four responses, *home*, and then *homeland* and *family* tied, followed by *friends*.

From the data linked to desire for maintenance, and why, among the majority who wanted Meso-American languages to be spoken by children, there were significantly strong home and culture directed reasons and sentimentalities. In fact, all the coded responses for desire clustered around *family* and *culture* with *homeland* the third most common response. Dissimilarly, Spanish responses were spread out over eight codings. *Helpful* was the most common coding reported for Spanish. In examining the original surveys, the researcher notes that many of the responses coded as *helpful* discussed "helping out with the family" or "helping us" or "helping others." The coding was clearly home-directed. English responses were also spread out, but less so. *Live here*, *improvement*, and then *work* were the most common responses, and all directly linked to economic incentives and commonly established connections to language dominance.

Actual Meso-American language maintenance for this study was 64%. There was a 16% gap between the desire for Meso-American language maintenance at 80% and the reality of maintenance at 64%. Twenty percent of the Meso-American speakers do not desire or are ambivalent about Meso-American language maintenance, and almost 40% percent report that the languages are not being maintained.

In comparing the results to two similar studies (Gladwin, 2004 and 2010), several noted differences emerged. The sample had more males and more respondents from Mexico. Also, there were more Uzo-Aztec and Oto-Manguen language speakers. Finally, there were monolingual Meso-American language speakers reported for the first time, and Spanish received a higher desire rating than English. One reason for these differences is the fact that a large percentage of the Colquitt respondents were agricultural workers on a farm. Thus, the

study statistics skewed toward farm worker statistics, more male and more of Mexican descent, as noted in the 2007-2009 National Agricultural Workers Survey. This also supports the finding of the numerical strength of both Uzo-Aztecan and Oto-Manguen languages in the sample, both language families predominately located ancestrally and presently in Mexico. Also, the management of the farm noted that some of their workers participate in the H-2A guest worker program, which permits the legal hiring of foreign agricultural workers on temporary work permits. Thus, they are temporary residents in the United States, although many have been working in the U.S. every year for years, for up to ten months at a time. Having a large percentage of the sample be guest-workers underscores the findings of several Meso-American monolingual speakers and a strong desire for Spanish, as both of these results would be more common in Mexico than in the United States. Finally, both interviewers that went to the farm to conduct field research anecdotally noted that many of the farmworkers specifically mentioned that they were from the Mexican province of Hidalgo. This is a reason for the number of Nahuatl, Otomí, and Zapateco speakers, all languages with a strong presence in the Hidalgo region of Mexico.

Implications

The coding data presents a mixed picture. The codings for language use and language desire strongly link English and Spanish to economic and educational factors. These findings support that Meso-American speakers in the United States are surrounded by two dominant languages, English and Spanish, and that language shift will occur over time. The results concerning language maintenance note that such shift is taking place. Meso-American language maintenance was reported at 64%. Gladwin's 2010 study, a similar albeit smaller sampled investigation, reported an almost identical language maintenance rate of 62%, supporting the reliability of this result. Most likely these languages fall in the stage 2 of language loss, as identified by Schmidt (1993). In this stage the language is being transmitted intergenerationally, but not to all new learners. In Schmidt's classification stages, stage one languages have strong vitality and stage five languages are near-death.

Thus, there is some language loss and shift; however, the languages are being transferred. The codings showed strong desire for Meso-American language maintenance, four in five wanted children to learn a Meso-American language, and a majority of the children reported were learning one. Furthermore, the codings for use and desire showed strong home-directed, community, and cultural linkages to Meso-American languages. This clearly classifies Meso-American languages as less-dominant, with their connections home-directed and cultural factors instead of socio-economic ones. However, such familial and cultural ties to languages also provide a needed base for language revitalization (Fishman, 2000).

Conclusion

The author forwards two generalizable findings to join the national picture of Meso-American language maintenance among Meso-American speakers in the United States. First, the desired Meso-American language maintenance rate was 80%. Second, the reported Meso-American language maintenance rate was 64%. Language shift is occurring among Meso-American speakers in the United States.

Not only is it difficult to stop language shift, but the thought of systematically seeking to save languages is modern, starting around the early 1990s with the research of Joshua Fishman (Fishman, 1991; Garland, 2006). Institutionalized efforts have followed with schools, specifically bilingual language education, being a vital step in saving endangered languages. Across Latin America, there has been growth in Meso-American language education, as part of bilingual education in community schools (Hornberger, 1988). These have had some successes, and there are now programs in both Guatemala and Mexico that teach the young many of the Meso-American languages recorded in this study (Hornberger & Horn, 1996). Even in the U.S. there have been some, albeit very few, Meso-American language teaching programs established for immigrants at the community level. These programs have proven to be popular, but they are rare, often over-enrolled, and continually short on funds (Brannock, 2003; Driscoll, 2004). There were no such resources found in North Florida or South Georgia. However, after-school programs do exist in communities. For example, the Escuelita Maya in both Lake Worth, Florida and

Boynton Beach, Florida offers Mayan art and dance classes along with Kanjobal lessons for children and adults (Driscoll, 2004). Also, there are a few schools that teach Meso-American languages, such as the community-based charter school Xinaxcalmecac Academia Semillas del Pueblo in Los Angeles, California, in which students receive direct instruction in Nahuatl (<http://www.dignidad.org>).

The researcher hopes this study publicizes these languages as living embodiments of ancient cultures and contributes to raising the status of Meso-American languages. Improving the status of a language is a crucial step in stabilizing language shift. Specifically, those that speak the language must respect it, and the greater community surrounding the speakers plays a role in not denigrating these languages and raising their societal status (Clemens et al., 2011). Meso-American languages are spoken in the United States, and the simple acknowledgement of their existence by those in contact with Meso-American language speakers, such as teachers, contributes to this goal. For specific language instruction, the researcher recommends helping speakers locate resources such as an Escuelita Maya, usually an after-school program, or other community-based center. A recommended website, dedicated to both preservation of and promotion of Indigenous languages is the Native American Language Net, located at (<http://www.native-languages.org>). This long running website is primarily linked to Native American languages, but the internet site also has excellent Meso-American content, with specific resources for children. Also, Reyhner's (1997) *Teaching Indigenous Languages* is a useful resource to support, sustain, and build community based, native language, early childhood programs, ideally through two-way or maintenance bilingual programs, but also through other school and community offerings. Teachers play a critical role, through attitudes and awareness, in affirming, or not, heritage language maintenance among students (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). Teachers in particular are also encouraged to help and focus on parents. The role of parents in language maintenance is crucial, to support, value, and use children's first language (Fillmore, 2000). Losing a language is more than just losing a mechanical skill; these are mystical markers of identity, gifts from one generation to the next (Fishman 1996). Language bestows a sense of community, kinship, and value to a people and its loss is a significant cultural impairment (Fishman, 2000). With the gift comes

the responsibility to pass it on, as the gift is truly a communal wish for continuity only possible by language maintenance.

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