

MMEG TALKS FROM LAC

INTRODUCTION

:05

V:

Good afternoon, Marleen, Bertha, Yina. What a pleasure to have the 3 of you joining us! We are hosting these webinars as part of the 40th anniversary celebration of Margaret McNamara Education Grants, or MMEG.

This webinar is particularly significant, because it is the first event we host in Spanish, and therefore we wanted to focus on a matter specific to the region, such as working with indigenous languages and indigenous communities.

Joining you, on behalf of the Board of MMEG, are Reiko Niimi and Vivian Familiar. Both of us have been members of MMEG in various roles for many years. We are currently members of the Board of Directors, but we have also volunteered within Selection Committees.

We have already had the opportunity to talk with the three of you individually, but we would now like to ask you to introduce yourselves, so that you meet each other, and our audience can get to know you. Who would like to begin? Bertha?

1:14

B:

Hello to you all and everyone who is listening to us: it is a pleasure to be with all of you this afternoon. My name is Bertha Pech, I am originally from Maxcanu, Yucatan. I am in Mexico; I currently live in Merida.

I'm a teacher, a social activist, a promoter of Mayan culture. I'm currently pursuing my Doctorate in Education at the Universidad Iberoamericana, as well as assisting different projects linked to the issues of political participation of women, leadership workshops and the strengthening of languages, of the Mayan language in Yucatan.

2:08

V:

Thank you very much. Marleen?

2:14

M:

Good afternoon to all of you, colleagues, and good afternoon to all of you who are listening to us, watching. I would like to thank you for this great opportunity to talk and share with the general public but especially with my colleagues.

I'm Marlene Haboud; I'm from Ecuador; I come from a small town, Ambato. I have worked for many years as a teacher in the areas of linguistics: socio-linguistics, ethno-linguistics, linguistic anthropology and research. Research on all areas related to indigenous languages, indigenous communities, relationships between language and culture, language and identity, bilingual education, and literacy.

In recent years I have worked a great deal with linguistic documentation issues, specifically to determine the vitality of the indigenous languages of Ecuador, which are 13 in all, and I have been lucky enough to work with 12 of those languages and the different dialects of those languages.

At the same time, we have worked with a series of initiatives of revitalization of languages, because all of the languages in Ecuador are somewhat vulnerable. So, this is a great opportunity to share all of these grassroots community efforts, always with a collaboration methodology, and also to learn from other experiences.

4:07

V:

Thank you very much. Yina?

4:13

Y:

Good afternoon, it's a pleasure to be with you. My name is Yina Rivera, I was born in Lima, but my parents come from different areas of Peru, some from the north, others from the south.

I am a teacher, just like my mother and my grandmother, I work in a rural school. Thus, my vocation for working in rural education has existed since my childhood, when I heard my grandmother and my mother share their experiences.

I have worked on State education policies. And now I'm in the final year of my PhD, writing a thesis on the digital literacy of a rural community in the Central Andes, in Huanuco; it's an ethnography. I also coordinate a project on democratic dialogue between teachers and children from a rural network in the Central Andes.

I am also a consultant, supporting the State, on its "Learning from Home" program. I review the scripts for the television show that the Ministry of Education has designed as a response to the Covid pandemic, to assist the students who cannot physically return to school yet.

5:44

IMPORTANCE

16:30

V:

Thank you very much. We are delighted to have with us 3 MMEG grantees mainly focused on the subject of education in indigenous communities. If you could please share with us:

What is the importance of indigenous languages? What led to your calling, to follow this path, to seek this career?

16:40

16:56

M:

All languages in the world are certainly important. The issue of indigenous languages is all the more important because of the significance it has not only in terms of the language itself, in terms of the richness of the language, but also in terms of the life of the communities, the care of the environment and everything it faces so as not to get lost.

Since the vast majority of indigenous languages in the world are in a situation of subordination, spoken only by minorities, people are losing them in order to seek a better job, because of the status of the other languages, because of the very difficult situations that many of the communities are experiencing.

When you lose a language, when you lose an indigenous language, you lose invaluable knowledge, which is very difficult to recover. Furthermore, we have already seen that as this linguistic diversity is lost, biodiversity is also deteriorating. So, when I had my first chance to start working with an indigenous language,

18:13

When I wrote my Bachelor's thesis, I had to pick any subject, such as English as a second language, or French, or anything,

18:23

I chose to work on an analysis of the education system in 2 high-altitude indigenous communities: a bilingual system and a Hispanic system, where everything was taught in Spanish.

The moment I entered this complex world of so much need, and of so many answers lacking, I could not leave, because there is a whole world that we have to know and that we still do not know, and that enriches all of us in the world.

18:55

V:

Thank you very much and thank you for your enthusiasm and dedication. Yina, what would you like to say?

20:10

Y:

My work is not directly with indigenous languages, but with rural education in general. From my position, I support the work of Marleen and Bertha, since I was reviewing what they have done and the work with languages is closely linked to the rights of speakers. It is sometimes dissociated, and it is seen as the language for the language itself, without linking it to the speakers, and I say this because there are certain discourses in my country that remain on a superficial level.

20:38

20:47

So, if you don't ground it with some community work, with the reappraisal of people, then it's going to remain on a superficial level, and then it may become something that is articulated, but that doesn't transform people's lives, because people who speak an indigenous language are people who are also associated with poverty.

And it's no coincidence; there are historical factors there. Historical, social, cultural. So, it's important to have the general, global approach to the whole situation and address it that way.

21:27

That's precisely why, as a teacher, I felt my formation was lacking. Because when I studied to become a High School Grammar and Literature Teacher, our main focus was at the school level, and this evolved at a later time.

21:44

For the master's degree, precisely in Sociology of Education, you take some courses at the Academy of the Quechua language of Cajamarca. Cajamarca is a department in the north of Peru, mostly rural, but Spanish speaking, except for 2 communities that are Chetilla and Porcon.

In this small area, a Quechua language Academy is strengthened with its own characteristics, with a well-established identity, and it uses language as a political strategy to relate to other actors:

with the mining industry, since Cajamarca is a mining region, to relate to various churches, to various social actors. So, it is not only language, but language linked to politics, and that is another link that is important to make: language is political.

22:38

V:

Bertha, what can you tell us?

22:56

B:

Well, in my case it was just like claiming this relationship, strengthening this relationship with my community and with my ancestors, a way to preserve all those principles, those values that my grandparents taught me. Nowadays, I have no one, they're all gone.

But the fact of having my degree, and through my work, is my way to contribute to that and to continue recovering those values, which are often weakening within communities.

Because, as Yina said, it is not only the language, but also not only an element that defines identity. It goes further, because it is this relationship with everything that surrounds you, with the earth, with all beings and everything that is around you.

So, it is also a way to create life and a way to relate to others, with the endurance of these values. Native language is often lost, and in several places, due to discrimination, parents do not want to teach the language to their children, concerned for their "social success."

But often times, this "social success" is making you lose, or you are leaving behind, all this wealth of knowledge, and also a wealth of values related to taking care of the place where you live. Looking after the place where you live, because by taking care of it, you are also taking care of yourself.

24:35

It's a well-being in those spaces, and that is not always related to "social success," which is often centered in owning material things, or letting others see what you have, so if you have things, you are successful because you studied and you have things.

24:55

If you graduated from college and you do not have what they perceive as a successful career, people link it to an issue of poverty, like Yina said. They say: oh, well, you see? That's what you get for having studied Indigenous Education. For example,

I remember that when I told people in my village that I was going to study Primary Education for Indigenous People as my bachelor's degree, many people didn't appreciate it, because they see it as a poor career choice.

It is not associated with social success, because it's seen like you're going to preserve what you have learned and what you're learning, and what you're living through. Well, I think that's what is important and it's precisely why I decided to study it, because I didn't want to lose that bond.

25:37

Today, it's something that reminds me of my ancestors, especially my grandparents, and that's what we shouldn't lose sight of. The relationship we have not only with our peers, our moment in life, but to not forget all those memories, of what we are.

VALUATION

26:02

V:

That's marvelous. The next question I have for you is, whether you've seen, if you have had any experiences where a revaluation of these cultures has been seen or achieved.

26:14

26:21

M:

Maybe I'd like to go first, if that's ok, because I want to say something related to what Bertha and Yina have said. When I enter a classroom, when I'm talking to people, I always remind them that languages do not walk on their own in the world.

Because just like they've been saying: we only focus on the language system. No! Languages do not walk on their own; they are human beings, each of us, a human being with a history, with knowledge, with expectations, with ways of seeing the world.

And that is what we have to consider when we are talking about working with languages, strengthening languages, and reconnecting with languages. That it is not only the speakers of these languages, but also their lives, and their territory, their space, and so forth.

27:11

27:57

Recently, I've had a great experience, trying to reconnect with ancestral knowledge in health. I'm always working with community groups, with teams from the communities, speakers of their languages, and some are young people who have forgotten the language but, as Bertha says, have wanted to reconnect with that ancestry.

So, in this task that began as "let's see which are the medicinal plants of the region and how they are used," we have been able to find the exact answer on this subject, by conversing with grandparents, with the "mamas and taitas,"

listening to their language, learning from their knowledge of the land, where they are planted, how they are planted, how they are kept, and the use of the plants – really, prescriptions and proscriptions, and this is also intimately related to their concept of the body.

29:00

V:

Right

29:54

M:

There were guys who were working on the team, and they said: Finally, I understand! I didn't know what had happened to my grandparents, or my parents!

But we started with a plant, we started with a name, maybe with "chamomile," spoken in their language. And that word converted into many seeds of knowledge and unity.

30:19

30:35

V:

Bertha, what do you see in the University, with young people? Are there any newfound values? New ideas to bring back their communities, their languages?

30:40

30:54

B:

Mainly, when it comes to universities, you try to create a space, some momentum in university life, where you can incorporate situations that lead you to reappraise, to find yourself, as Marleen said, because it is very necessary.

For example, I remember that my dad always told me that people find their "air" and he said that in Maya a lot, and it means that "he found his air," that is, he remembered his air.

Remembering your air is to reconnect with what is yours, which for some time, for some reason, you stopped embracing it, you stopped wanting it, you said no, no more. And although you spoke the Mayan language, you say no, I don't speak it.

And it has happened, because many times you prefer, while attending the university, you would rather not to be perceived as if you were a native speaker, or from such a place. And suddenly, this moment of encounter arises.

Sometimes, you try to have that cultural week. But also, something that has been very positive in my experience as a Mayan language teacher, is precisely when study plans have articulated the fact that at some point you can take, like an elective class that you can take at any time

32:29

some language and culture course, which would have to be precisely like that, bonding language and culture, because in the end, the idea is that, not only are they are signs and symbols, but you have to be immersed, you have to live it to be able to understand and define what it is to learn a language.

32:49

Personally, those are my experiences, even as a Maya language teacher, where university students find themselves. Where they find meaning, to value their last names. Some of us here still have Maya last names.

And others, changed them in order to improve their presence or their social standing. They translated it. And the fact they can find a class during our Cultural Week, or at some point in their college career, that leads them to find themselves, to “find their air,” can make them wonder: why did my parents change their last name? I think that going through this process is necessary, because it leads you to better understand yourself.

V:

Of course, and it's essential to continue this effort to avoid the loss of such valuable languages and communities. Yina, would you like to share your experience with us?

34:03

Y:

Yes, and I also wanted to connect what I'm going to say to Bertha's testimony, that she felt the opposition when she said she wanted to be a teacher of bilingual education, that people advised her against it.

Well, the same thing happened to me: I also wanted to study bilingual education, but that was not an option, at that time.

So, when I told my parents that I wanted to be a teacher, and my mom is a teacher, but anyway, it was like: No! How can you be a teacher? Because it's not a highly valued profession. Rather, we are working towards changing that.

34:37

And then, when I studied in Canada, my uncles would say: you can bring us there! And I would say, no, I'm coming back and I'm writing my thesis on the Quechua Academy of Cajamarca, because I want to return home.

And they would say, no! What do you mean you're coming back? But I did. So, to many, I haven't been successful since I'm not living abroad. But everyone can have their opinion, and I tell them:

35:15

I am very happy with what I do, I have always wanted to work with rural education and that is what I am doing. So, we have to expand and question those prevailing models of success.

35:28

37:26

On the positive side, the Quechua Academy of Cajamarca is an example of natives teaching Quechua themselves. I also studied Quechua in that academy, not enough to say that I'm fluent in Quechua. But I finished my first year.

It is not the case that there are outsiders teaching you. It is the native Cajamarquinos themselves who are academic directors and teachers. I find that very interesting.

Because the effort to reach this point, was not done only by themselves. Indeed, there was someone, an anthropologist from another country, who began to organize the Quechua of Cajamarca and launched the whole process. But they've managed to empower themselves.

38:17

38:41

I need to add that, in order for me to obtain this PhD, my doctorate in Anthropology, in Andean Studies, at the Catholic University, I have to pass the Quechua test. I have to speak 2 languages, and one has to be a native language. Otherwise, I can't graduate. And I think it's perfect that this is the case, so I have to keep up with my Quechua.

39:01

Regarding innovative uses of Quechua on the internet, it is not the case in Peru, but Lourdes de León has a very interesting project in Mexico with the Tzotzil, and wrote a book called "Love Texting." She's studying how new words in Tzotzil are generated through text message interactions.

CHALLENGES

6:00

V:

That's very interesting. Could you share with us the main challenges you are currently experiencing in this field of work?

6:06

6:41

Y:

With the pandemic, it's the lack of contact, having to impart lessons over the internet, where there is no internet, no electricity, no cell phones, or not all of them are smartphones. So, learning conditions are depleted.

Something that could have facilitated the situation is community-based education, having native educators, within the community, empowered and supported by the State to teach.

However, since this policy has not had sufficient support in my country, then, during the pandemic, local initiatives have emerged but not as an articulated, strong response from the State, which can deal with social immobility.

So, one remaining challenge is to strengthen community education and local actors, another pending challenge is internet access in remote areas.

7:23

The new Peruvian president campaigned offering internet access as a basic right. It's a challenge, figuring out how this works in the Amazonian region, and other locations that are far away from urban centers, where internet services are concentrated.

Another challenge for teachers is the link with students, connecting with them through a phone, not necessarily Whatsapp, sometimes it's a phone call, and learning by listening.

8:04

Additionally, teachers have another challenge, because now they are working with students who are learning without seeing them, but only listening. It's a whole new world of skills, a new set of methods to tutor, new ways to listen and connect.

That can be beneficial because, even when you have physical eye contact, if listening skills are enhanced, learning improves. So, that can be a positive thing after the pandemic. Right now, it's a challenge.

8:39

V:

That's a very interesting point of view! Bertha, what do you think?

8:50

B:

Yes, similarly, one of our needs is the internet issue, because not all of the schools, in all regions, have internet.

9:04

That has been one of the challenges. On the other hand, we're at a point where a teacher prepares a syllabus, but with limited contact, we are going through many different emotions.

We don't know what our students' families are going through, many pressures, and that is another challenge. Because it's not only planning the content for our lessons, so that our students can continue learning, that the class moves forward, and they can learn under their conditions.

9:14

But definitely, one of the challenges we are going through, with very limited direct interactions, it's hard to read the student's mindset, their spirits, and the series of emotions we are all going through, it's very hard for us to know what each student is living through, and that's a big challenge.

10:02

On the other hand, families are also assuming the role of the instructor; it is no longer as it used to be, when teachers would prepare and give a lesson to the class. But now, teachers face the additional challenge of interacting with the family, because depending on the student's grade in school, the collaboration with the families will vary.

10:26

For young children in early education programs, this collaboration is especially important in order for the schooling process to be successful.

10:44

So, those are some of the existing challenges because families are also currently immersed in a situation that presents economic and employment difficulties.

10:54

So, even though we might be thinking about academic content, it ends up involving another set of circumstances we are living through. The challenges are there, but the digital world is allowing us to continue educating, and that's a positive we can take from this situation, something we can adopt going forward, to improve even certain in-person situations.

V:

Exactly! It's great that you can find something positive, a lesson that contributes to the future, once this pandemic is over.

Marleen?

11:40

M:

Well, it's basically the same thing that my colleagues have mentioned. A series of challenges that, from my point of view, are much greater because of the issue of inequity, inequities.

And when we think, for example, of educational institutions in rural areas, inequality has become evident: the lack of resources, the lack of equipment, zero technology.

And then, certain institutions have taken advantage of people's needs and anguish to have access to the internet, for example. Some providers in Ecuador, had been selling monthly unlimited access plans for US\$5, but after the pandemic hit, they increased the price to US\$ 10.

For high altitude communities in extreme poverty, where 2 or 3 family members could buy food for two weeks with US\$ 8. This has all come to light.

Continuing with a formal education has meant a great effort. In some cases, communities have been supported in their internet access through campaigns, of computer donations, or making a better internet service available in the region. Others have been more creative, like teachers that go house to

house on bikes or motorcycles, reaching students. That has been an excellent lesson, even for privileged institutions in well-off sectors.

14:01

The other issue that has been quite complicated, and where I think that interesting initiatives have been presented, is trying to re-integrate the education system with the communities.

For example, previously, we had the local schools as bilingual intercultural schools, where certain activities were integrated into the community. Later, after several changes in the system, that was shunned, and communities were completely separated from the educational system.

With the current needs, it has been possible to reconvene the community to try to work together. But of course; there is a lack of materials, there is a lack of technology, there is extreme poverty in some places.

14:52

CONCLUSION

42:28

M:

It would be great if this were a first initiative to continue this conversation, because the problems that afflict us, and the solutions we are proposing, are so similar.

The obstacles that we have overcome to be able to advance in what we do, what we believe in, should motivate us to continue this exchange, first among ourselves, now that we have met, and then with many others, to be able to persist and to spread!

42:58

V:

Of course! Would any of you like to share an experience that has in some way reaffirmed or shaken your conviction to follow your path?

43:36

Y:

I'd like to say something about my thesis. As my colleagues know, literacy in rural areas always had this "but," an excuse, since there is no social practicality: books do not abound, there is no reason to write.

Neither in Spanish nor in indigenous languages. Even worse in indigenous languages, but also in Spanish: there is no reason to write unless it is to communicate with the State, to submit a request or some claim.

So, what I'm finding in my thesis is that, with the incursion of new technologies, there is a reason for young people in rural spaces to write. So, this is going to change the conceived potentials and possibilities of reading and writing.

44:36

In the case of Lourdes de Leon, whom I had previously mentioned, it's in an indigenous language, Tzotzil. And in my case, in Spanish. In the ways it's being used, and since the usage of languages isn't very strict, it becomes a hybrid.

I have found "Mexicanisms" in my students from central Huanuco: "Cutey! Pa! How you doing?" That's a part of my thesis research: I believe it means a change in rural communities' writing.

45:29

V: That's great! Bertha, would you like to wrap up your thoughts?

45:29

B:

I think it's important to mention that this space, the opportunity we have to listen to the experiences that we share, leads us to consider the need to rethink what used to be the classroom.

It seems to me that we have to connect through other tools that we have and not only through the classroom. And we should also think about the resources to include other voices, necessary to make these practices more diverse, more equitable.

Like we were saying, persist in this networking process created by our current situation, because in the end, through this opportunity, we can continue to communicate, and we can continue to exchange our strategies, our challenges, our feelings, and everything we are building within our own spaces.

Mainly, that's my final thought. Thank you very much, and this has really been a very, very interesting and rich space.

46:42

.