

**Ownership through knowledge:  
Introducing a hands-on literacy method to indigenous people of Mexico**

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To begin with, I'd like to present some voices – what I am hearing about bilingual education for the indigenous people of Mexico, who represent nearly 10% of Mexico's population – voices from the highest levels of Mexican government to the very homes in which these languages are spoken in rural Mexico.<sup>1</sup> May these voices help us understand more clearly the situation today for Mexico regarding bilingual education in a land so rich in diversity of culture and languages. After listening to these voices, it will be obvious how the literacy method I will describe below can be a significant part of a solution for the desperate need for increasing community level involvement in indigenous education.<sup>2</sup>

**1. About bilingual educational issues, local and non-local voices**

**Some voices at the Local level:**

Voice of a Tepehua<sup>3</sup> bilingual schoolteacher assigned to translate textbooks for his people:

When I gave them all the work I'd written in Tepehua, it didn't have the mistakes that I now see in the book they returned to me. Whoever typed up my writing in Mexico City must have made those mistakes.

Voice of local speakers of the same language:

These textbooks have lots of mistakes in them. They are beautiful books and the pictures are nice, but the words are full of errors.

Voice of a bilingual educator in another Tepehua language:

Yes, we received the Tepehua textbooks, here they are on our shelves. We cannot use them. They are written in the way people over there in Tlachichilco speak. For us they are useless. We asked for books in our language but were told, 'The textbooks for the Tepehuas are already made. Use them. There are no more resources allocated for the Tepehuas.'

Voice of a parent who speaks Tepehua:

We are thinking we should petition for a change of teachers in our village. The three teachers we have all speak Nahuatl, not Tepehua. Our kids are not getting good scores in their Tepehua tests because the teachers can't teach them.

Voice of a bilingual kindergarten teacher, in Tepehua (in the hearing of the mothers who were doing school yard cleanup):

Children, think about how lucky you are. Your parents did not have teachers who spoke Tepehua. They were punished if they spoke Tepehua in school. But here you have no fear of punishment. With love and kindness we teach you and you can speak Tepehua and Spanish.

A mother responded:

Yes that is true. We suffered because the teacher struck us if we spoke Tepehua.

### **Some Non-local voices**

Voice of a indigenous person in a high office in indigenous education in Mexico City, upon seeing materials created via SIL work:

It would be really nice to have the freedom and time to create materials in my own language, according to any way I wished.

Voice of a top official in indigenous education in Mexico City:

What is important is that people on the local levels get together to decide how to write their languages. This should not be a top-down decision. And meanwhile, until the final decisions are made on how to write these languages, people should go ahead and keep writing, making materials in their languages.

Voice of a indigenous person in a high office in indigenous education in Mexico City:

We know there are more than 56 languages in Mexico, but we do not have the resources to prepare textbooks in more languages, so we are working with these.

Voice of the government of Mexico, in the General Law of Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous People:<sup>4</sup>

***ARTÍCULO 4.** Las lenguas indígenas que se reconozcan en los términos de la presente Ley y el español son lenguas nacionales por su origen histórico, y tienen la misma validez en su territorio, localización y contexto en que se hablen.*

This new law states in article four that the indigenous languages and Spanish are all national languages and are of equal worth where they are spoken.

***ARTÍCULO 9.** Es derecho de todo mexicano comunicarse en la lengua de la que sea hablante, sin restricciones en el ámbito público o privado, en forma oral o escrita, en todas sus actividades sociales, económicas, políticas, culturales, religiosas y cualesquiera otras.*

Article nine declares the right of every Mexican to communicate in the language they speak, without restriction, in public or private domain, in oral or written form, in all activities, whether social, economic, political, cultural, religious or anything else.

Voice of a Zapotec teenager:

If I'd known about this Law of Linguistic Rights, I'd have shown it to that teacher I had last year who punished us for speaking Zapotec in class.

## 2. About adequate training needed for bilingual teachers

Voice of a school director involved in innovative redesigning of the bilingual school program in his town:

I long for the freedom to create curriculum that is relevant to us as Purepecha, course material to teach our children from this world right here in which we live, and how we know it. Instead we have to work with a structure imposed on us from Mexico City. And many of our own teachers, at least 80%, don't even want to speak (our language). This program is a start, but it is being carried out so far in only three of our schools, out of 850 in our region.

Voice of a bilingual school teacher, and director of a bilingual school in northern Veracruz, speaking to me in Tepehua:

We are still trying to figure out the best way to write our language. The linguist sent to us (from the state capital) wants us to write (a certain sound) like thus. But when we try to write that way, we get confused. Truly, we would like to get some help on this. Your way of writing makes a lot of sense. The books your team has made are easy to read. We have never had the training we need to help us understand our language. We would like to learn.

Voice of a graduate from the masters in linguistics program in CIESAS in Mexico City:

How is it, that at our National Pedagogical University, which trains our bilingual teachers, there is still no program of linguistics, no preparation of future teachers to study or understand their own languages. Yet they are expected to know how to teach in their languages and about their languages, simply because they speak it.

Voice of an indigenous person, a Ph.D. student currently studying in the US:

The reason the bilingual schoolteachers do not know how to write their language is they have not studied linguistics like I have. I understand much more how my language works and how it should be written because of the linguistic training I have had.

Question asked of a speaker, at the conference celebrating the International Day of the Mother Tongue in Mexico City:

'What methods are being used for literacy for the indigenous peoples?' Answer: 'We don't really have a method, we just practice reading and writing.'<sup>5</sup>

Voice of Andres Hasler – Mexican linguist, in an open letter to the Asociación Mexicana de Lingüística Aplicada:

*Existe un lamentable divorcio entre la ciencia lingüística (como teoría) y la así llamada educación indígena (como práctica). ...hay, entre el nombre de la "educación indígena" y su contenido, abismos insalvables.* There exists a regrettable divorce between the science of linguistics (as theory) and the so-called 'indigenous education' (as practice) ...there are, between the name of 'indigenous education' and its content, unsolvable abysses.<sup>6</sup>

### **Summary of above issues:**

Mexico has been a leader in the Americas when it comes to indigenous education. However, bilingual teachers in Mexico still face overwhelming challenges. Training is given them in Spanish, but they are expected to teach in their own languages. Children may laugh at them if they try using their own language, because Spanish is the expected language of schools. Parents may insist on their children being taught only in Spanish even in "bilingual schools" because they see no economic benefit from education in their own language. Bilingual teachers are often sent to a village where a different language than their own is spoken.<sup>7</sup> They are mandated to teach in their language, but don't have materials, or the materials they have were prepared in a related dialect they cannot understand.

The materials may actually be in their own language, but their production is supervised and edited by a person who doesn't know their language, so the final product is full of errors. Textbooks, though colorful and sometimes containing local area photos, are translated from Spanish texts. Sometimes the bilingual teachers are instructed to make their own materials, but have no preparation for reading, much less writing, their own languages. A written form of their language may not yet exist. They are often away from their family all week long, and have to travel a day or more to get home. Actual class time suffers as the teacher may leave on Thursday afternoon or Friday morning to go home, and not return until Monday. Finally, the few indigenous groups who do have representation in the academic world, for example, through establishment of the *Academia mixteca*, may have a difficult time relating orthography decisions made by an elite few outside of the language area to the various community groups where the language is actually used (cf. Lewis:1996). This is the current reality of rural bilingual education in Mexico as I and my colleagues have observed firsthand.

## **3. SIL and literacy work in indigenous languages of Mexico**

### **A. History**

While much literacy work in indigenous languages has been done by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in Mexico, the materials produced are usually used in non-school educational contexts, because formal education in Mexico is government controlled, and SIL is an international non-governmental organization.

Over the years SIL, working with indigenous speakers and writers, has produced literacy materials for over 150 language communities of Mexico, from alphabet leaflets to entire bilingual dictionaries, from news sheets and calendars to volumes of folk stories. In the late 1970s, SIL branch policy encouraged development of transitional reading materials, instead of basic primer materials, to avoid any sense of competition with the reading and writing materials produced through governmental bilingual educational groups. The personal spiritual motivation of SIL members combined with their mostly foreign status have at times created unfortunate and unnecessary tensions between Mexican bilingual educators and SIL field workers.<sup>8</sup> However, respect for SIL publications both in Spanish and the indigenous languages and the obvious rapport of SIL fieldworkers with indigenous people because of long-term commitment to relationships and language

projects has not gone unnoticed. New opportunities to cooperate with bilingual educators are now emerging.

## **B. My voice**

For well over twenty-five years I have been involved in various literacy projects among indigenous language groups of Mexico. I have helped prepare materials for teaching reading and writing in several languages. One of the biggest challenges in working with the indigenous speakers to prepare teaching materials in their languages is bridging the gap between literacy theories and lesson designs. Few of the indigenous people I know have been to college, most only finished elementary school or maybe did the equivalent of a year or two of high school. All their education was in Spanish.<sup>9</sup>

I observed that SIL fieldworkers working with indigenous speakers on production of literacy materials ended up being in charge of the project, not necessarily from choice but because the theoretical content of primer production was not easy to transfer to the world of indigenous speakers with less formal education. So the indigenous speakers would help by writing stories as requested, often with limited alphabet options depending on the place of the lesson in the primer. The 'outsider' actually designed and put the primer together. The whole process could take months or more often, years. Then the indigenous people had to be trained how to use the materials.

## **4. A new literacy method, and where does it fit?**

### **A. CÓMELE – a balanced literacy method**

Returning to the analogy of an abyss so eloquently described above by Andres Hasler, the unsolvable abyss between theory and practice in indigenous education, I offer a narrow, but significant bridge, a literacy method I and my colleagues have named CÓMELE (Combinación de Métodos de Lectoescritura). This is the Spanish version we adapted from what is known as M-SEM (Multi-Strategy Economy Method.)<sup>10</sup> The theory behind the method is straightforward – it is a combination of both whole language and analytical approaches to literacy.

Glenys Waters points out that there is more than one way to teach people to read, from a continuum with phonics on one side, to syllable, to word, to sentence, to whole language on the far end:

I think that... educators have helped put things in proper perspective. It should not be phonics versus whole language, or phonics versus word, or syllable versus whole language, but a recognition that each way of teaching reading has something important to contribute. The different reading skills need to be taught in a balanced way, i.e., skills linked with reading for meaning. (Waters:1988)

The four basic elements to a strong literacy method address not only reading skills but also writing skills. They include both the whole language and the analytical approaches, which are also known as the Top-Down and Bottom-Up approaches, as in the diagram below (Rempel:1994):

Top Down

Bottom Up

Reading	Whole Stories- language natural	Word Attack - how to read words at first sight
Writing	Creative Writing	Forming Letters Spelling

### B. Components of a CÓMELE lesson

Each lesson contains a story track and either a pre-primer track or a primer track.

#### Nuntaj̃yi lesson (Sierra Popoluca) preprimer lesson draft:

The right side is the pre-primer track which teaches visual distinction of letters, syllables and words; and aural distinction of the sounds of their language. Pre-primer lessons do not teach the alphabet. They consist of 15-18 lessons and take about 5 weeks to teach. Persons with preliminary reading skills do not need to be taught from the pre-primer lessons but can start directly with primer lessons.

Lección 14 "JÉM cunqui"



Tum jama yip cunqui° tsam  
icutiidic jem sojtim. Pero iquiday  
jem ites jeeyucm, siip dam iculpa  
jem soj itim, nomas jem galleta y chocolate.

1. ¿Ti ñasca jem cunqui° ?  
2. ¿Jué moŋpa jem cunqui° ?

jepe	meme jepe ciapa
meme	tsotso xapun meme
jama	oyo meme jama
pepe	pepe ciapa wayi°
j̃j̃j̃	nits j̃j̃j̃ xapun
ciapa	ciapa tsotso meme
utsu	wayi° ñicu utsu
tsuc	éaca tsuc ñicu

**Yuhu (Eastern Otomí) primer lesson:**

Again we see the story track, along with a primer track.

The story track takes about an hour to teach. The teaching includes focus on the whole language story, an experience as a class having to do with the key word, and group composition, individual creative writing and a free reading session. The two questions are carefully crafted: question 1 is a comprehension question, question 2 is an open question about the topic of the story, with many possible answers that require critical thinking on the part of the students.

Ran xōdi ná 'dato



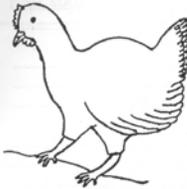
ra ɔni

Nu'a ra ɔni di ho da za yɔ zu'wē 'by xɔn dini; 'ne ge'y yó xō ní 'ye'ma hōi ɥ zí ɔni 'by i honyɔ zu'wē nge da za.  
Nu'y yɔ ɔni i ja yó hwa pege hingi tsō da zōhmagāts'i.

---

1. 'Be'a di ho da za ɥ yɔ ɔni.

2. 'Bepɥ ní zehju ɥ yɔ ɔni.



o O

ɔni

ɔni	o
ɔ-ni	ɔ-ni
o	ɔni

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o	z	i	n
a	f	o	i
z	n	a	f

zɔ	fa	na
zi	ni	fɔ

o	n	i	f	o	n	i	z	o	n	i
ɔ-ni			fɔ-ni				zɔ-ni			
ɔni			fɔni				zɔni			
ra ɔni			di fɔni				bi zɔni			

Nu rá fani ra Ana bi za ra ɔni, bi zani.



**Me'Phaa Smajiin (Tlapaneco de Zilacayotitlan) primer lesson draft:**

Again, below the double lines, the students read where the teacher indicates – but without the teacher reading first. There are various steps in this part, focusing on individual sounds, syllables, construction of new words and in later lessons (as this one is), reading a controlled text written with only the new sound and previously taught sounds. There is also a dictation exercise.

**Lección 21**



**X̣ida'**

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Mbáa x̣ida' diápú  
kue'tséén. Mbekha' dí  
nakhí'náa, nagí'dy na'dúun ixi  
asndõ naruvan'. Xígí skájma  
x̣ida' dí nakhí'náa dú'khuín  
nanguá guváá itáán ñy'lyun  
goyáá, dá'ni muvan' idúún  
ithan.

---

1. Xá'ni skájma x̣ida' dí nakhí'náa rá.  
2. Diájun khiná i'khu x̣ida' rá.



d D

**x̣ida'**

x̣ida'	d
xi-ḍa'	ḍa'
ḍa'	xi-ḍa'
d	x̣ida'

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d	i	d	xi	xa	ḍa
a	d	'	'	xí	lí
d	i	d	lá	ḍa	x

x-i-d-a'                    x-í-l-í  
xi-ḍa'                        xí-lí  
x̣ida'                        xílí

Mbáa x̣ida na'duun xtóo mbá ixi.

3

Yet another strength of CÓMELE is that it is economical to produce in terms of time and expense and training. It takes only three weeks to learn the method, produce a complete set of literacy lessons for your language, and even have some initial training in how to use the lessons created.<sup>11</sup>

**C. CÓMELE in Mexico**

I have had the privilege of teaching the CÓMELE literacy method in three week courses three times now:

- Mexico in July 2002 - ten participants representing five indigenous languages
- Mexico in July 2004 - 15 participants representing seven indigenous languages
- Mexico in July 2006 - 18 participants representing 12 indigenous languages.<sup>12</sup>

**After CÓMELE 2002:**

Of the 10 participants who came to this workshop only one was a bilingual teacher, but 5 had leadership positions in their churches. A total of 199 primer lessons were created, and 90 pre-primer lessons.

**After CÓMELE 2004:**

Of the 15 participants who came to this workshop, 9 were bilingual teachers with a classroom, or supervisors, or in charge of training teachers or preparing indigenous language text books. The potential for the further spreading and application of this literacy method multiplied greatly. The total number of lessons produced, in seven languages: 330 primer lessons, 126 pre-primer lessons.

**After CÓMELE 2006:**

The 18 participants (ten women and eight men) speaking a total of 12 languages, learned the CÓMELE literacy method, applied it to their languages, created a total of 197 pre-reading-writing lessons and 327 reading-writing lessons, and produced these lessons in 30 preliminary books. Each student practice-taught each of the three modules which comprise the pre-reading-writing and reading-writing lessons. More than 70 additional lessons were completed in the days following the workshop as not all the participants were able to create all the lessons they needed for their language during the three week period.

The CÓMELE method has also been passed on outside of the formal workshop experience. One team consisting of an SIL colleague and 3 native speakers of an indigenous language prepared a set of lessons, with minimal input from me and my CÓMELE team. The 3 native speakers are now team-teaching in three schools in an after school program. They are not bilingual teachers but are respected for their knowledge and the success all are seeing through this method. One of the three who are team-teaching was my teaching assistant at the July 2006 CÓMELE course.

In light of the above history and results (also see Appendix A) it is clear that CÓMELE's unique strengths are especially appropriate for this period in Mexico's indigenous educational history.

- The materials are easy to produce.
- The method is transferable in the LWC to individuals who then can apply it to their own languages.
- The reading-writing lessons are created entirely by the native speakers, so the content reflects their culture and views of life.
- Because they have learned the CÓMELE method, they can revise and edit their lessons as needed, in their own villages.
- They don't have to wait for materials to arrive from Mexico City or deal with errors introduced into the texts by people who don't know their language.
- These lessons are theirs to teach and share.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. CÓMELE voices**

Voice of a husband-wife team of bilingual school teachers who were in the first graduating class of bilingual teachers in 1964, with 40 years experience in the bilingual school system of Mexico, spoken while attending the CÓMELE course:

We have been to many, many workshops and training courses over the years, but we have never taken a course so helpful as this.

Voice of a bilingual teacher taking the CÓMELE course:

All the other training workshops I have attended are about ‘teoría, teoría, teoría’ but they don’t teach us how to apply it.

Voice of a state supervisor for bilingual education, after seeing a demonstration CÓMELE lesson taught by a Nahuatl man who designed the lessons in his language, and co-teaches Náhuatl literacy with two other Nahuatl friends in three bilingual schools:

We must implement this method in all our bilingual education programs in the state!

Voice of a Tepehua mother regarding her second grader who read me a text easily in their language (and who was being taught with CÓMELE lessons in her language):

She can read anything. She can write too.

Voice of a man who taught CÓMELE lessons in his language in five schools, during after school classes, for a year:

All the teachers are happy that I am there, because the kids are really learning to read and write Tének. They all want me to come back next year.

Voice of the principal author of CÓMELE lessons in Tének:

I taught two young women the CÓMELE method and gave them the lessons. They have taught 16 kids. I tested the kids and they can really read and write Tének now.

Voice of a CÓMELE graduate who nine months later taught the CÓMELE method to Mayo and Raramuri speakers in northern Mexico:

They were enthusiastic about the method, because it is so practical. Also they said it was really good to have a teacher come who is an indigenous person like them.

#### **5. The future of CÓMELE...**

Three things impress me about the CÓMELE literacy method:

1. It is simple enough to be transferable through a second language.<sup>14</sup>
2. Because the format is fixed, lessons can be produced quickly by indigenous authors. The stories are natural and culturally appropriate.
3. Most importantly, CÓMELE places the power of creating the materials directly into the hands of the indigenous speakers at the community level, and the

ownership of these materials is clear. Their pride in producing these draft copies of their very own materials is hard to express adequately.

CÓMELE offers a great deal of flexibility according to the particular cultural models and discourse structures of indigenous people creating the lessons. The lessons can be taught one-on-one, to a small group, or a large group. Lesson content can focus on children or be prepared for adults. Lessons can be prepared according to a theme, such as farming, or cultural values or beliefs.

The method involves both individual and group participation and can be modified according to preference. All the writing and reading is done in the indigenous language, and each lesson's story is written by native authors and is not tied to the structure of the Spanish language. The whole-language aspect of CÓMELE offers incredible freedom of expression for both students and teacher, yet the structure of the analytical side of CÓMELE develops accuracy in reading and writing the indigenous language, and should perhaps appease any obligation or expectation on the part of supervisors or educational leaders for a more western-based model of teaching-learning.

It is important to keep in mind that the primers produced through this method are obviously not the complete answer to the need for literature in a given language. But the prominent focus on creative and accurate writing as well as reading should produce individuals who can begin to develop vernacular literature – a desperate need among indigenous language communities.

Richard Ruiz has explained why effective language development must be connected to the ground level:

Language maintenance and efforts to reverse language shift in non-LWC communities require endoglossic policies. These policies, by themselves, will have little effect on language behavior. The implementation plans that accompany them must work to strengthen both instrumental and sentimental functions for the indigenous language in the community. They also must be comprehensive in scope. Generally, the more formal the contexts in which the language policy is implemented, the less effect it will have in language maintenance. Since languages live in communities, the common life activities of the community must be the targets of language policies. This means that the electronic and print media, social activities, social service providers, and other everyday centers of community life must be included in the implementation strategies by which language policies are promoted. In this way, our language policies have more of a chance to become more closely associated with our language behavior. (Ruiz:1995)

This CÓMELE method has significant potential, not only in meeting governmental mandates for decentralization of education, but also in placing ownership for indigenous language literacy directly into the hands of the mother-tongue speakers at the community level.

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## Appendix A

### Follow up from CÓMELE 2002

**Team 1** taught through all the primer lessons (30 lessons) with 9 adults who are now writing and reading their language.

**Team 2** used their materials in a bilingual school teaching a second grade class, and taught other grade levels using their CÓMELE materials, until ill health forced him to stop. The second member of team 2 used the lessons intermittently to help the Nahuatl teachers in his town's school teach children reading and writing in Tepehua. A problem with hearing eventually stopped him from teaching all the lessons.

**Team 3** though successful in creating the lessons, did not find an adequate place to test teach them, they are not connected to the bilingual schools. These materials were used by some individuals to teach their children to read their language.

**Team 4** went on to edit their lessons and publish them for use in a wide area, they shared them with others, and began a class that was closed when it was seen as competition with local teachers. I have no recent news of how they are using their CÓMELE lessons.

**Team 5** contained one especially gifted man, L, who although not a bilingual teacher was eager to learn how to help his people become literate in their own language. He taught two young women the method, and they in turn taught about 15 children all the lessons. He personally tested the children and was thrilled to see they had truly learned to read and write their language. He also taught the method to a friend who then got permission to test teach the lessons in five public schools for about 5 months. Students came on their own time, after school hours. The children who studied all the lessons were honored with special certificates and a final party. The teachers asked this man to return again the next year. Meanwhile, L had shared with some colleagues in UNTI (Unión Nacional de Traductores Indígenas) about this wonderful literacy method, and promptly was invited to travel to Chihuahua to teach speakers of two other indigenous languages how to make CÓMELE lessons. He agreed, and using only Spanish (as the LWC) taught them CÓMELE and they prepared their lessons. He made a second trip later to review their work and advise them. It was this same man, L, whom I invited to help me teach the CÓMELE course in 2004.

### Follow up from CÓMELE 2004

**Team 1** – One person only. He had previous experience teaching reading in his language and planned to use his materials in the several reading classes he held for adults and children. (I have not heard any more from him).

**Team 2** – One person only. This man had the incredible challenge of preparing a total of 69 lessons, to cover all the sounds in his language, plus review lessons. He not only drafted all the lessons, he also keyboarded them onto his laptop. And he was the first of all the teams to turn in his complete set of lessons. He later sent me a copy of his revised lessons, all printed out. (I have not heard how he has used his lessons, but he is a bilingual school teacher and was intending to teach the method to fellow teachers and share his materials.)

**Team 3** – This was a four person team. They have revised their lessons three times, and done some initial teaching with them. They have not taught through all the lessons yet.

One SIL colleague has visited their area to give further review and help with preparing to teach the lessons. None of the four are bilingual teachers. They have taught the lessons in a Catholic church context, and as a community service open to all.

**Team 4** – Two people, neither bilingual teachers. They intended to use their lessons in the church context or to teach community classes. I have had no word from them.

**Team 5** – This husband-wife team have 40 years of experience as bilingual teachers. They have taught two three-day sessions to train fellow teachers in their region how to use the CÓMELE method and materials. I have no further data as to whether the materials have been test taught with children in actual classrooms yet.

**Team 6** – two bilingual teachers. The most recent word I'd heard was that one of them was going to use the materials this past school year as he was finally out of the office and back teaching in a class. The other was still holding an office job and had not test taught the lessons.

**Team 7** – two bilingual teachers and one non-teacher. This team revised their lessons twice and have shared them with others, but I don't know if anyone has actually used them yet. The challenge for the bilingual teachers is how to fit the teaching of literacy lessons around the daily required subject matter. This comes up over and over in conversation. In order to teach CÓMELE during class time, they would be omitting something required by law to teach. The option of after class instruction is appealing only to the highly dedicated few. This team does intend to teach these lessons, but they haven't solved the logistics yet. One member of the team is currently on a scholarship studying in Peru.

### **Follow-up from CÓMELE 2006:**

The results are not yet in.

### **Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Today the indigenous population of Mexico is estimated at 8-12 million people. They live in all 32 states and territories, but primarily in 24 states. ( INEGI:2006)

Government statistics show that 75% of indigenous people haven't completed elementary school, twice the national average, and more than 30% are illiterate, three times the national average. (Geri Smith:2006)

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all these voices were heard by the author personally, in her travels and work in Oaxaca, Veracruz, Michoacan and Mexico City. All conversations with Tepehua speakers were in Tepehua. All the other conversations were in Spanish, except for one in Popoluca. The quotes are not verbatim, because they were not recorded. But they are as true to the original conversations as the author can make them.

<sup>3</sup> The Tepehuas referred to here and in subsequent paragraphs come from either the Tlachichilco Tepehua language community or the Pisaflores Tepehua language community. Both regions are located in the north of the state of Veracruz.

<sup>4</sup> see Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de Los Pueblos Indígenas

<sup>5</sup> As reported to the author by her husband, who was present at said conference.

<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from email essay by Andrés Hasler to members of AMLA, October 2004.

<sup>7</sup> A Pisaflores Tepehua bilingual teacher who is a friend of mine does have an assignment in her home town. But her husband, who is a Nahuatl speaker, was assigned to an Otomí area, and had to travel out of the Pisaflores Tepehua area, through the Tlachichilco Tepehua area, finally reaching the Otomí area. This is an all day journey on microbus or truck, including a two hour hike.

<sup>8</sup> Mexico has a long tradition of separation of church and state. And those trained as bilingual teachers may be uncomfortable working with anyone who professes a belief in God.

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<sup>9</sup> Except for one person I know who is studying in the U.S. in a state university.

<sup>10</sup> "my colleagues" refers to the Spanish Editing department of SIL- Mexico, as well as Jan Johnson and Mary Hopkins, literacy consultants with SIL-Mexico.

The literacy method called CÓMELE in Spanish is derived from the Multi-Strategy Economy Model (M-SEM). M-SEM was developed by SIL literacy specialists working among lesser-known language groups of Papua New Guinea. (It, in turn, was derived from the original Multi-strategy method developed by Stringer and Faraclas.) M-SEM has been successfully used in language areas with little access to formal education. I heard about M-SEM from a colleague, Robin Rempel, who was its primary developer. She first worked in Papua New Guinea and is now working in Kenya. She has found the M-SEM useful in Kenya as well as Papua New Guinea, and other colleagues have used it in Nigeria. All the materials available for this method were prepared in English because both Papua New Guinea and Kenya use English as an official language.

<sup>11</sup> For those who have not had the experience of preparing literacy materials in newly written languages, it should be mentioned again that the time involved in preparing a set of lessons for reading and writing in other methods can easily take months and even years. I heard of a set of reading primers that were completed for the Dinee, the Navajo, which had been 12 years in the making.

<sup>12</sup> I led a third CÓMELE workshop in July 2006 after the WAIL presentation of this paper in April 2006.

<sup>13</sup> This period in Mexico's history is perhaps the most favorable yet for indigenous language communities as far as government policy. Yet the local communities must take more and more ownership of their own education. One of the best comments I have found on the positive and negative aspects of bilingual education follows: 'The argument for bilingual education has been proposed by those who favored the indigenous languages (an early example being Ignacio Ramirez, governor of the state of Mexico in 1857) and those who wished them destroyed (such as Justo Sierra, Minister of Education at the turn of the 19th century). (Heath) This paradox is still observed in our times. "Native languages are under assault in Mexico. Education appears to be the 'villain', and bilingualism its weapon. Paradoxically, if native languages are to thrive in the next millennium, their salvation likewise will be education and bilingualism their hope.' (McCaa and Mills:117)

<sup>14</sup> It should be mentioned that the first two days of a CÓMELE workshop are extremely challenging to the participants, and they all admitted later that they were overwhelmed with all the new concepts and enormity of the task. The CÓMELE 2002 participant who on his own taught a CÓMELE course in northern Mexico, and reported by email to me about teaching this method to Mayo and Rarámuri speakers, said, 'The head of the Rarámuri translation committee told me that towards the beginning of the workshop she was about to leave because she couldn't understand it and it seemed really difficult, but as the workshop continued she began to get it, and she realized that this would be really useful and practical for them to teach their own people.' (My translation from an email written in Spanish.)

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