

Teaching practices and beliefs and language stimulation from the Mapuche Culture in rural children in the Araucanía Region

Prácticas y creencias de enseñanza y estimulación del lenguaje desde la Cultura Mapuche en niños y niñas rurales en la Región de La Araucanía

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What do we know about the subject matter of this study?

The importance of childhood for the *Mapuche* worldview goes beyond the weight and height condition but also intersects with value and cultural components.

What does this study contribute to what is already known?

Language is considered a pragmatic act, where meaningful speech will be seen as a developmental milestone.

Abstract

Language is one of the most relevant cognitive tasks in child development and its acquisition is mediated, among others, by ethnic and cultural factors. **Objective:** To characterize the practices and beliefs about language teaching and stimulation strategies of rural Mapuche Children aged between 0 to 4 years from an intracultural perspective. **Subjects and Method:** Qualitative study based on Grounded Theory, which generates an understanding of the study issue from the perceptions of the research subjects. Ethnographic techniques such as observation and field notes were used, and 20 in-depth interviews and four focus groups were conducted with caregivers (mothers, fathers, and grandparents), intercultural teachers and people with cultural roles (*longkos*, *machis*, and intercultural facilitators). 41 Mapuche people from the Ercilla, Curarrehue, Puerto Saavedra, Cholchol and Boroa territories of the Araucanía region, Chile participated. **Results:** Four dimensions were obtained that characterized the practices and beliefs regarding the acquisition and use of language in Mapuche children: a) Mapuche culture transcends through children and language, b) speech is a concrete and pragmatic process, c) there are traditional techniques for speech stimulation, and d) there are difficulties and easiness for the development of the indigenous language in young children. **Conclusions:** The preservation and recovery of the indigenous language is a process of reinforcing the cultural identity for the Mapuche people, which has not been valued as a cultural heritage in the national society.

Keywords:

Infant, Child, Preschooler, Language Development, ethnic group

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Introduction

In recent years, the need for focusing on reducing social inequalities and on vulnerable groups has strongly emerged within public policies. Therefore, better child protection is a strategy for addressing inequities and narrowing human development gaps¹.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) recognizes indigenous children as a vulnerable group within national societies and states that these children should be a target and concern of governments in Latin America³. In Chile, the region of *La Araucanía* has a high level of rurality, spread population, and inter-ethnic conflicts, which puts *Mapuche* children at risk or vulnerability for their full and potential development. There are approximately 65,000 children aged between 0 and 4 years in the region, 36% of them belong to the *Mapuche* ethnic group and 27.7% live in rural areas of *La Araucanía*, specifically in indigenous communities.

Different studies point out the importance of cultural protective factors as elements that contribute to care of children at risk^{4,5}. In Chile, studies on raising *Mapuche* children show a dynamic transition between tradition and change, with a significant loss of cultural patterns of stimulation and raising^{6,7}. Cultural parenting processes generate developmental monitoring strategies that encourage children to meet their basic needs for autonomy and belonging, thus making culture a protection factor of child development^{8,9,10}.

Moreover, language is recognized as one of the most relevant cognitive abilities or skills in the psychomotor development of children and its stimulation triggers highly complex socio-cognitive processes¹¹. However, an exclusively biopsychosocial perspective on language stimulation and use do not consider the possible social contributions of indigenous culture in the language skills building.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to recognize, from an intracultural perspective, the importance, practices, and beliefs surrounding language use and learning of rural *Mapuche* children aged between 0 and 4 years. Also, to describe how *Mapuche* children learn the indigenous language and how it is used from the perspective of their caregivers, teachers, and people with ancestral cultural roles, in areas with high concentrations of indigenous people in *La Araucanía* region and, in addition, to recognize the cultural forms for the use and stimulation of the *Mapuche* language (*Mapudungun*) within the rural communities of *La Araucanía*, and to promote processes of cultural relevance that support the families of the region.

Subjects and Method

Qualitative study based on grounded theory. This theoretical-methodological approach makes it possible, through constant comparison and contrasting of data (interview and focus group transcriptions), to generate an emerging theory of the study topic based on the repetitive reading of the study subjects' narratives¹². The methodological strategy of the grounded theory is an iterative logic between the narrative data and its analysis, which is carried out through coding processes.

Study participants were caregivers (parents, grandparents), bilingual intercultural teachers, intercultural counselors, and traditional *Mapuche* community agents such as *machi* (ancestral therapist) and *longko* (community chief or guide). The final sample included 41 participants, divided into 20 interviewees and 21 participants in four focus groups (table 1).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus groups using a guideline of six questions or topics that addressed the study objectives. These techniques allow flexibility in the answer of the participants by deepening their individual and personal experiences. Twenty interviews and four focus groups were conducted with five to six people participating in each group. Ethnographic techniques such as observation of family dynamics and field notes were used that contributed to data triangulation.

The study locations represent the three geo-socio-territorial zones of *La Araucanía* which include *lafquenche* (coast), *nagche* (valley), and *pehuenche* (mountain chain). As a starting point for the selection of places and participants, the rural health centers with the largest *Mapuche* population and children under 4 years of age were identified in each territory, and then the intercultural counselor of each center was contacted, who facilitated contact with families, schools, and traditional community agents.

Inductive data analysis was carried out by repeating the reading of the narratives (interview transcripts, focus groups, observation records, and field notes). The data were segmented into units of meaning that were coded textually and conceptually. A list of codes was created and then grouped into similar units of meaning or conceptual dimensions, which summarized the findings of the study. Four dimensions (with their respective codes) were identified which exemplified the way in which the individuals of the study interpreted and represented the use of the indigenous language in *Mapuche* children.

The findings' validity was consistent with the qualitative paradigm through the triangulation of information sources, data collection techniques, and independent analysis (data were analyzed by several re-

Table 1. Sample distribution by territory and data collection

Territory	Caregiver interviews	Professor interviews	Traditional Health/caregiver interviews	Focus groups/participants	Total participants	
Puerto Saavedra	2	1	1	1	n= 5	9
Kurarrewé	1	0	1	2	[n= 8] [n= 4]	14
Ercilla	4	2	1	1	n= 4	11
Boroa	2	1	0	0	(-)	3
Chol Chol	2	1	1	0	(-)	4
Total Participants	11	5	4	4	21	41

searchers). The adherence to scientific rigor was based on theoretical and methodological coherence, adherence to data through their representation in vignettes, and external evaluation of their design and results.

The study was approved by the scientific ethics committee of the *Universidad de La Frontera*, and participants signed an informed consent form that ensured the confidentiality of their identities.

Results

Four dimensions were identified that characterize the practices and beliefs regarding the language use and stimulation in the *Mapuche* child population:

1. Children and language learning represent the continuity over time of *Mapuche* identity.
2. Speech is a concrete and pragmatic process.
3. Traditional techniques for speech stimulation.
4. The ease and difficulties of teaching *Mapudungun*.

1. Children and language learning represent the continuity over time of *Mapuche* identity

Mapuche children represent the continuity of society and culture. They are responsible for maintaining and continuing 'being *Mapuche*' in today's society. This responsibility is more relevant by understanding that the child represents the future and the language. The child is a subject under construction and formation and, therefore, a culturally relevant raising will allow the transfer of practices, beliefs, and language from generation to generation, in order to last the *Mapuche* life.

"Without our children, our people disappear. That's why we insist that our children learn to speak our language again because then we'll continue to grow as what we are" (Ñaña, Puerto Saavedra).

The importance of language is appreciated as a way

of preserving *Mapuche* culture, knowledge, and wisdom. In addition, it is noted that children are freer in the countryside, so they learn to be independent and free, and that, from a young age, children are taught to *che* (be) a person of integrity in the *Mapuche* language.

"We raise... (the child) has to be kimche, norche, zak-inche, all that has to be. (The child) has to be a good, loving, and affectionate person, all that. So all that one's saying to her/him from that age since the child was a little girl/boy in the countryside. To be free in the countryside, more freedom, more autonomy" (Ñaña, Puerto Domínguez).

*"The thing is that through speech we can preserve what's ours, that the people are people. If we lose our speech, we lose our kimün and rakizuam, we lose our horizon, so as long as it remains, we'll continue to be *Mapuche*"*. (Ancestral agent, Ercilla).

2. Speech is a concrete and pragmatic process

We speak when something must be said. Speech is a communicative, coherent, and meaningful act. Otherwise, children only need to observe attentively and silently, a quality that is taught from a very early age.

"The child speaks when necessary... not for any reason... (the child) must speak when she/he has to (...) what she/he says is understood and speaks loudly... (she/he has to say) coherent things and must make sense". (ELCI, Puerto Saavedra).

"Children have to be attentive, looking... seeing everything... they have to be quiet to understand everything. First, observe, don't interrupt... and speak when asked". (Cultural Counselor, Ercilla).

It is said that every child has a different pace of language learning. This will depend on their maturity or the family they live with. If the language does not ap-

pear at an early age, it is not seen as a problem because every child has his or her own pace.

“I feel that it’s wrong, in the sense that we divide, separate, go in stages, it’s that such stage has to have this or that ability. But those stages or skills will develop depending on the context where the child is getting along. It’s a whole process that we can’t rush, that if you don’t comply with this, (the child) is a little delayed... it’s frowned on”. (Ancestral agent, Temucucui, Ercilla).

“There is an age when they say: I already speak, I speak, I’m a speaker, I speak and I communicate (...) at the age of twelve or so because here all the children say at that age ‘I am Mapuche’”. (Ñaña, Puerto Saavedra).

3. Traditional techniques for speech stimulation

The water that flows appears as a contribution to the discursive capacity. Drinking cold water gives vigor, strength, and fluency to the language.

“Drinking water in the morning, three drinks and we had to drink that water pretty early, and it was pretty early in the morning and it was very good to be clear to speak, very clear (...) drinking water from the spring helps to speak loud and clear”. (Mother, Boroa).

There are also some practices that help children talk when they notice problems such as saliva drop or disfluency.

“The bird helps to communicate; a hen or the dog’s saliva helps to keep the child from dropping her/his saliva.” (Ñaña, Curarrehue).

One stimulation mechanism is the active observation and imitation of sounds. In various accounts, the observation of gestures and conversations is mentioned as an active mechanism for the stimulation of speech, where the use of *kupulwe* (wooden frame to put babies upright), allows the child to observe the dialogical context of the *Mapuche* communicative act.

*“If you listen permanently, you listen and listen, you’re going to learn, but now our contexts of life have changed. When putting the little baby in the *kupulwe*, and the baby’s standing, she/he looked at your mouth, and now, they put the baby in a crib that doesn’t allow her/him to see anything, she/he only listens to you, she/he’s looking at the ceiling, then is something different in this other position, the baby doesn’t see how they gesticulate”.* (Cultural counselor, Ercilla).

“For example, when my dad and I went out to look for

firewood or to the mountains, and my dad said listen, and it was the sound of water (shhhhh) (...) or when the treile (southern lapwing) appeared, trugül, trugül, it is very concrete and he made us listen to the little birds, you see the little bird and learn. First, they were telling you why, in the end, the Mapuche language comes all from nature”. (Intercultural Counselor, Ercilla).

The triad “see, feel, do or practice” is when the child observes the situation, feel the sound, and see how it is articulated, she/he relates it and perform the concrete action to which she/he was exposed. Such action may be delayed, not being carried out at the first attempt, a situation that describes language learning as a persuasive and comprehensive process.

“Listening, seeing, and doing. If you only listen to it, you won’t understand, the same happens if you only see it. That’s what happens with the sheets of pigs and that’s why you have to be concrete and visual because through the images and what you’re looking at, you’ll learn, and in a real context, not an imaginary one (...) it’s essential, that’s the way teaching should be, but it can’t be done, and if there are these spaces in the school, you have to take advantage of them, you have to do it”. (Ancestral agent, Saavedra).

“Back to the concrete, it’s that, you always have to have all three, listening, seeing, and doing.” (Ancestral agent, Boroa).

Stories, tales, and advice are practices associated with stimulating orality and understanding of cultural values. The stories are teachings, they tell the history of the territories, the life of the ancestors, and the function of nature.

*“From the culture, grandparents are who teach, more than the parents. The grandparents are always present, through games, epew (stories), through *piam* (fables), children are taught how to grow and how to be a person”.* (Caregiver, Cholchol).

Mapuche singing is also used to stimulate speech. In the dialogical and rhythmic, children observe gesticulation, intonation, articulation of sounds, and idioms of the culture.

*“For example, if I sing her/him *ülkantun* (Mapuche singing) she/he learns it very easily, more than if I teach her/him phrases. The *ülkantun* is very, very important. I hope that from a very young age we’ll start doing the *ülkantun*, every day... While we cook, while we change diapers, while we’re bathing her/him...”* (Caregiver, Saavedra).

4. The ease and difficulties of teaching *Mapudungun*

The loss of the ancestral language is recognized as one of the main difficulties in teaching it to children. Earlier generations (grandparents and great-grandparents) lived through war, persecution, and reduction, where the *Mapuche* was stigmatized as delayed¹³. This historical experience has been passively passed on to those who are now forming a fourth or fifth family generation.

*“There’s a loss of language...of *chezungun* (...) there’s like a generation that doesn’t know how to speak and even less can teach (...) I suffered a lot of discrimination in school due to not knowing Spanish, the teachers (...) the children laughed”.* (Agent, Ercilla).

*“Our people ended up with very low self-esteem and it’s present in all the *Mapuche* people, you’re part of a people that was submitted. But the youngsters don’t believe that”.* (Caretaker, Curarrehue).

Not all those interviewed had had a concrete experience of *Mapudungun* in their early childhood, which has made it difficult to teach it to the younger generation.

“I think there’s no one to teach them, they know the basics only, there’s no one to speak to them all in the native language. I ask the teacher how to say bull, pig, rooster, but there’re things they don’t know, they don’t know everything”. (Caregiver, Curarrehue)

“I was discriminated in school for not knowing how to speak Chilean, hence I didn’t teach my children. Now I’m getting it back, I’m teaching them because there have been changes too”. (Agent, Ercilla).

A facilitating element in the teaching of *Mapudungun* is that the children live in an extended family.

*“The big family (...) all sitting at the table (...) or visiting the relatives who live here, there the children get around (...) they’re already talking to them and they’re recognizing their family and how to say things in *Mapuche*”.* (Mother, Cholchol).

In some territories, young parents with high formal education, as well as social leaders, have emphasized the *Mapuche* identity of their children since birth, performing some ceremonies before birth, selecting *Mapuche* names for their children, and teaching them words and songs in *Mapudungun*.

*“I name my daughters in *Mapudungun* because I wasn’t named like that. My name is (...), my parents didn’t teach*

*me *Mapudungun*, I don’t know why I went to a Catholic school so I don’t want to repeat the same thing with my daughters, I want them to feel proud of being *Mapuche*, to learn their language”* (Mother, Ercilla).

“At home, we have music and instruments, so that she can hear how we speak, I teach her some words too, like ko, or kofke, like this.” (Agent, Boroa).

*“I explain to her/him that she/he has a *Mapuche* name and what it means, that she/he doesn’t have to be ashamed of it”* (Caregiver, Cholchol).

In recent years, there has been greater interest in teaching the language because the State has generated a policy of intercultural education in territories with a high concentration of indigenous people.

*“We must rescue the good. Now there are teachers who teach children the *Mapuchedungun*. They’re practicing it, they’re *ñañas* (women) from the community, they give them their *Mapuche* food, they teach them *Mapuche*. That’s been recovering”.* (Counselor, Saavedra)

*“Here in the daycare center, we teach them everything *Mapuche*, it’s intercultural and we try to make them bilingual even though the Ministry doesn’t say it has to be done, just teach them the language, but we practice all the culture, the food, the singing, the dancing, that way they learn to speak our language”.* (Teacher, Ercilla).

Discussion

The transfer and acquisition of the indigenous language by children is a major concern for the *Mapuche* people. For the interviewees, the acquisition of language and the act of speaking, either babbling or relating facts through language, is more than a skill or the demonstration of an advance in their children’s psychomotor development. It represents the preservation of the *Mapuche* identity. This is because there are multiple processes of invasion and colonization in the collective memory of society that have tried to integrate the *Mapuche* people into Chilean society, ignoring their history, territorial origin, and their contribution to the process of miscegenation in our society. The stories also stress processes of articulation, recovery, or vindication of the indigenous language in state policies that attempt to revitalize culture in those territories with a high concentration of indigenous population.

There are several intracultural ways to keep the language in the family such as tales, advice, stories, or songs in *Mapudungun* and that contribute to the acquisition of the *Mapuche* language and cultural values.

Children greet in *Mapudungun*, understand orders, and recognize cultural protocols. In general, they do not demonstrate to the outsider their bilingualism, however, as researchers, we observe the presence of a cultural code based on the language that children imitate and understand. The language is still alive, in small details and in forms of intra-family communication.

Language acquisition as an infant's psychomotor and cognitive ability does not have the intellectual relevance that is attributed to it in our society. Children will talk when necessary because talking is functional, it is to communicate something relevant. Otherwise, it is better and more valuable to observe the surrounding events and to remain silent. In this context, we refer to the work of Bárbara Rogoff who points out that active observation and imitation play a fundamental role in the learning of indigenous children, more than making explicit what is learned¹⁴. Likewise, Arriaga, Ortega, Meza, et al. indicate that observation and imitation should be considered as part of the behavior system that generates concrete experiences through the senses and that is transformed into real learning¹⁵. Very much in line with the words of the caregivers about learning through action and sensation, Pichon-Rivière shows that feeling, thinking, and doing allow for learning as a process of organizing and interpreting what is observed¹⁶.

Conversations with families and teachers tell us that language acquisition is more than just saying, naming, or identify things, that the child will speak when he or she wants to communicate something important, and that this skill also depends on each child, his or her personal history or lineage. Communicating through oral-ity is a cultural value of the person (being *Mapuche*), which is in continuous development, is achieved over time, and is not just a cognitive skill¹⁷.

The acquisition, use, and stimulation of *Mapudungun* in children can be considered an important element of cultural resistance for the *Mapuche* people. It is the symbolic entity that preserves identity and the possibility of lasting through generations.

Future studies will clarify critical issues that were noted in this work but that due to the adherence to the objectives could not be deepened, among these, the phenomenon of transgenerationality of cultural changes in the teaching of the indigenous language in its cognitive, symbolic, and pragmatic aspects.

Ethical Responsibilities

Human Beings and animals protection: Disclosure the authors state that the procedures were followed according to the Declaration of Helsinki and the World Medical Association regarding human experimentation developed for the medical community.

Data confidentiality: The authors state that they have followed the protocols of their Center and Local regulations on the publication of patient data.

Rights to privacy and informed consent: The authors have obtained the informed consent of the patients and/or subjects referred to in the article. This document is in the possession of the correspondence author.

Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the present study.

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