

Language Revitalization in Guatemala: The Case of Itzaj

Pedro Mateo Pedro
University of Toronto

Introduction: This talk is about the revitalization of Itzaj, a collaborative project with the Comunidad Lingüística Itzaj of the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala. Itzaj is an endangered Mayan language; its transmission to other generations stopped in the early twentieth century (Bennett et al. 2015; Hofling 1991, 1996).

The focus of research has been on the documentation and grammatical analyses of the language (e.g., Hofling 1991, 1996), but more work is needed on its revitalization. Hofling (1996) reports some revitalization efforts for Itzaj. In 1991, the Proyecto del Rescate del Idioma Maya Itzaj—PRIMI (Itzaj Maya Language Rescue Project)—was established by a Guatemalan anthropologist and six Itzaj speakers. In 1992, the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG) showed interest in the revitalization of Itzaj. The Comunidad Lingüística Itzaj previously implemented an immersion and linguistic nest program for the revitalization of Itzaj, but with lack of teaching material and training.

Project: The project focuses on the training of Itzaj speakers in the application of a teaching method (Maxwell, García Ixmatá, López Ixcoy, Ajú Patal 2014; Maxwell 2019) and a pedagogical grammar (Maxwell & Little 2006) of the Oxlajuj Aj immersion program. This program has been applied to teach Mayan languages e.g., Kaqchikel, to non-Mayan speakers from different universities of the world (Maxwell 2012). Participants in the program have become fluent speakers of Mayan languages. The program has been applied in two elementary schools and one high school in Kaqchikel communities in Guatemala (Heaton and Xoyón 2016; Maxwell, García Ixmatá, López Ixcoy, and Ajú Patal 2014) and in field schools in Guatemala (Polinsky 2019).

However, this program has not been applied to language revitalization. So, one of the goals of the project consists in evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching method and the pedagogical grammar of the Oxlajuj Aj immersion program for the revitalization of Itzaj. We are currently working with receptive speakers of Itzaj—speakers who may be able to understand the language but are not able to speak it (Flores Farfán and Olko 2021)—to evaluate the teaching method and the grammar model of the Oxlajuj Aj program.

Conclusion: In this collaborative effort we hope to contribute to the revitalization of Itzaj by training Itzaj speakers on the application of the Oxlajuj Aj immersion program and in developing an Itzaj pedagogical grammar.

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