# Indigenous Students Learning English in Higher Education: Challenges and Hopes

## Aprendizaje de inglés de los estudiantes indígenas en la educación superior. Desafíos y expectativas

## L'apprentissage de l'anglais au niveau universitaire chez des étudiants des minorités indigènes. Des enjeux et des atteintes

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### Abstract

The increasing enforcement of English language policies in higher education represents a significant challenge for indigenous students entering Colombian universities. Researchers in this study worked on a sociolinguistic profile of over 300 indigenous students at Universidad de Antioquia and, from a critical decolonial perspective, aimed to understand the multiple views and challenges these students face in relation to their identities, languages, academic literacies, and the most recent institutional language policy that requires them to learn English to earn their university degrees. Data collection methods included several institutional databases, a survey, interviews, and conversation circles. Results from this study suggest that more equitable pedagogical principles coupled with a more sensitive and effective appropriation and implementation of this type of reform in higher education institutions are both necessary. These measures would prevent that learning English for indigenous students becomes an obstacle to complete their tertiary education in conditions of justice, respect, and a real validation of their ancestral languages, cultures, and knowledge.

**Keywords:** language policies, indigenous students, English language learning, critical interculturality, decolonial theories

### Resumen

El creciente fortalecimiento de las políticas alrededor de la enseñanza del inglés en la educación superior representa un gran desafío para los estudiantes indígenas que ingresan a las universidades colombianas. Los investigadores de este estudio elaboraron en un perfil sociolingüístico de más de 300 estudiantes indígenas en la Universidad de Antioquia y, desde una perspectiva crítica decolonial, indagaron sobre las múltiples visiones y los retos que enfrentan estos estudiantes en relación con sus identidades, lenguas, literacidades académicas y la más reciente política institucional que les exige aprender inglés para graduarse de los diferentes programas de pregrado. La recolección de datos incluyó varias bases de datos institucionales, una encuesta, entrevistas y círculos de palabra. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que son necesarios tanto principios pedagógicos como decisiones institucionales más equitativas para lograr una apropiación y aplicación sensible y efectiva de este tipo de reformas en las instituciones de educación superior. Esto contribuiría a que el aprendizaje del inglés no se convierta en un obstáculo para que los estudiantes indígenas completen su educación superior



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This paper reports the findings of the study "English language learning as a potential factor for indigenous students' dropout under the new foreign language policy at Universidad de Antioquia (Medellín, Colombia)." This project was developed by members of the "Evaluation and Action Research Group in Foreign Languages" (GIAE), at the School of Languages, Universidad de Antioquia with funding from the Undergraduate Teaching Office and the Research Office at the same university. The study was also conducted in cooperation with "Corporación para el Fomento de la Educación Superior de Antioquia".

en condiciones de justicia, respeto y una validación real de sus lenguas, culturas y conocimientos ancestrales.

**Palabras clave:** políticas lingüísticas, indígenas estudiantes, aprendizaje de inglés, interculturalidad crítica, teorías decoloniales

## Résumé

L'application croissante des politiques linguistiques favorisant l'apprentissage de l'anglais dans l'éducation supérieure en Colombie représente un grand défi pour les étudiants indigènes admis dans ces institutions. Les chercheurs de cette étude ont élaboré un profil sociolinguistique de plus de 300 étudiants indigènes à l'Université d'Antioquia, selon un perspective critique de décolonialité, afin d'étudier leurs multiples visions et défis en rapport avec leurs identités, leurs langues, leurs compétences académiques, et avec la nouvelle politique linguistique institutionnelle qui leur exige d'apprendre l'anglais afin d'obtenir leur diplôme dans n'importe quel programme académique. En ce qui concerne les instruments de recherche, nous avons consulté des bases de données institutionnelles, nous avons fait une enquête, des entretiens et des « cercles de parole ». Les résultats de cette étude suggèrent que des principes pédagogiques plus inclusifs et des décisions institutionnelles plus équitables sont essentiels pour une appropriation et une mise en œuvre sensibles et efficaces de ce type de réforme dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Ces mesures contribueraient à la construction d'un pays plus pacifique et à éviter que l'apprentissage de l'anglais n'affecte l'obtention des diplômes chez les étudiants indigènes par manque de justice, d'équité, de respect et prise en compte de la valeur de leurs langues, de leurs cultures et savoirs ancestraux.

**Mots-clés:** politiques de langues étrangères, étudiants indigènes, apprentissage de l'anglais, interculturalité critique, théories décoloniales

## Introduction

In their attempt to respond to different agendas on education quality, financial support, internationalization, mobility, and academic recognition, education and higher education systems have been undergoing a series of transformations over recent decades. These reforms comprise the adoption of international standards and tests, a continuous comparison of education systems based on students' results on these standardized tests, a constricted control over educational institutions, and a greater emphasis on subjects such as math, reading, information and communication technologies, and now foreign languages, especially English (Aboites, 2010; OECD & The World Bank, 2012; OECD, 2016).

In this context, as part of their efforts to improve undergraduate students' proficiency in English and respond to these international demands, different universities in Colombia have started to formulate and implement new foreign language education policies for their academic programs. Such is the case for Universidad de Antioquia, the second largest public university in the country, which, according to the institution's website, accounts for thirty-six thousand students at the undergraduate level, and almost three thousand in graduate programs. At this institution, the new foreign language policy, established in 2014 and implemented since 2017, requires all undergraduate programs to redesign their curricula and incorporate five English courses as part of the mandatory credits for all students. As expressed in the new reform, by the end of these five courses, students are expected to be proficient at a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and thus be able to use the foreign language at an intermediate level. The new regulation has thus radically changed the current graduation requirements for all new undergraduate students, including indigenous students for whom Spanish may be their second, third, or even fourth language, and who were exempted from this English language requirement in the previous policy.

This initiative takes place in a complex context in which learning English has brought with it a series of personal, social, cultural, linguistic and educational implications for students in higher education, not only at Universidad de Antioquia, but also in Colombia. For instance, it is well known that the English proficiency level in the country has been ranked as one of the lowest in Latin America (Education First, 2017; Usma, Quinchía & Rodas, 2013), while English language learning has been associated with students' socioeconomic strata and access to education (Usma, 2015). Likewise, recent reports recognize the countless difficulties endured by students in the Colombian education system (OECD, 2016), and how these factors are observed as students from Universidad de Antioquia attempt to learn a foreign language at the undergraduate level (Quinchía, Muñoz, & Sierra, 2015). As we may infer, these difficulties may be exacerbated in the context of a new foreign language policy at Universidad de Antioquia now that indigenous students are required to take five English courses that might not correspond to their social, educational, cultural and linguistic needs and expectations.

Issues of inclusion in higher education, like those described at Universidad de Antioquia, have started to attract close attention in the literature and research in Latin America and Colombia (Alcántara & Navarrete, 2014; Castañeda, 2011; Chávez, 2008; Martínez, 2015; Mato, 2010, 2015; Santamaría, 2015; Sierra, 2004). In the case of indigenous students, some studies have reported on their challenges as they reach conventional universities in Colombia. From a study conducted in Antioquia and Chocó, Sierra (2004) described indigenous students' perspectives and needs regarding what they find in a conventional university. Castañeda (2011) analyzed public policy concerning indigenous students' access to higher education at Universidad Nacional. Martínez (2015) studied how twenty-four indigenous students from private and public universities in Bogotá viewed and experienced their educational process from elementary school to higher

education. Finally, Londoño (2017) reported on the tensions and difficulties that indigenous students experience in several universities located in the Southwest of Colombia.

In fact, several reports have concluded that despite the important efforts made in Colombia and other Latin American countries to ensure higher social mobility and equity through education, these attempts have been insufficient (Martínez, 2015; Mato, 2015). These initiatives are undermined by constant budget cuts affecting public universities' ability to meet the current access demands from students coming from low socio-economic strata (Caicedo & Castillo, 2008). Additionally, most universities in Latin America and Colombia have continuously adopted conventional educational models and perspectives that do not incorporate intercultural approaches and programs that aim to the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in their institutions (CEPAL, 2014). As a result, the forms of knowledge, learning styles, languages, worldviews, and histories of indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples continue to be excluded from higher education curricula (Mato, 2015). Finally, higher education in Colombia, under the pressures of globalization and internationalization, prioritizes efforts towards responding to international demands, making it even more difficult to focus on satisfying the needs of the culturally diverse student population they attend to (Caicedo & Castillo, 2008).



Some research in the field contributes to understanding the challenges that indigenous students face, as they are required to learn English in higher education. In this vein, Cuasialpud (2010) and Velandia (2007) have reported on the difficulties experienced by indigenous students as they learn English during their professional education and how their higher education programs and institutions may help to counteract these difficulties. More recently, Arismendi, Ramírez, and Arias (2016) and Arismendi (2016) presented indigenous students' representations of their mother tongues and the foreign languages they are learning, as well as the experiences and difficulties they experience in their learning processes at a public university. These studies certainly contribute to a body of knowledge on indigenous students' struggles to learn English and other foreign languages, and the conditions they face in different universities; moreover, they call attention to the need to deepen these analyses, especially in the context of current language policies and reforms associated with the internationalization of higher education in Colombia.

The study presented in this paper intends to contribute to the above-mentioned conversation by exploring how indigenous students at Universidad de Antioquia respond to a foreign language policy that may hinder their possibility to complete their studies, as well as the suggestions they propose to counteract these potential effects. To that end, the research team carried out a sociolinguistic diagnosis of this population, including basic demographic information, their peoples and native languages, and their views, strengths and needs in terms of their ancestral languages, Spanish and English. Additionally, the diagnosis included a collection of student opinions and perspectives concerning the new foreign language policy. In this manner, the study not only attempted to provide a better understanding of indigenous students' views and challenges at the university but also information that could be valuable to other institutions where similar policies are being considered. In the following sections, the theoretical bases of this study are presented as well as the research method used, the findings, and, finally, the discussion and recommendations.

## A Decolonial and Intercultural Perspective to Language and Learning

This study recognizes and defends Colombia as a multiethnic and multicultural country that must guarantee the equitable coexistence of different cultures, ethnic groups and languages within its national territory. Therefore, the research team shares the stance of the national Constitution

and the Colombian law in terms of recognizing, encouraging, protecting, preserving, and strengthening ethnic Colombian groups and their linguistic rights. Consequently, despite dealing with an international and quite often imperialistic and hegemonic language such as English (Phillipson, 1992, 2003, 2009; Ricento, 2000), our research team is committed to the defense of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity in Colombia and its promotion in the context of internationalization, especially now that current reforms seem to put it at risk.

Colombia represents one the most linguistically diverse country in the world. Its vast linguistic and cultural diversity is represented by about 65 indigenous languages, two creole languages, two varieties of Romani, and Colombian sign language, which also has two varieties (González, 2010). Likewise, Colombia is the second country in Latin America with the largest number of indigenous peoples, 92, who contribute to its cultural heritage with their own cosmogonies, values, traditions, and beliefs (Aristizábal, 2000). However, far from being a perfect landscape of diversity, these indigenous peoples are true survivors of a long history of violence, ethnocide, and annihilation that started in the times of colonization and has extended until today, characterized by displacement from their territories, political imposition, and cultural assimilation (Villa & Houghton, 2005, p. 16).

Based on the recognition of the current social, cultural, and political context in Colombia, it is crucial to revisit and reflect on the discourses and practices of the field of language education, especially when different ethnic, historically marginalized groups are involved. Thus this study was framed by a decolonial perspective on education, language, and culture. This tradition has been mainly developed by Latin-American and Caribbean intellectuals interested in studying and questioning dominant European and North American lines of thought that have set agendas, discourses, and practices for millions of people and communities imposing their world views, knowledge, and ways of doing, feeling, and being in the world as the only valid choices (Granados-Beltrán, 2016). Colonialism has certainly brought about manifold consequences to Latin America including social, economic, political, and cultural injustices that manifest in a myriad of ways. In this sense, and in order to understand the many implications of these processes of domination, it is essential to make a clear distinction between colonialism and coloniality. As stated by Restrepo and Rojas (2010):

> Colonialism refers to the process and apparatus for political and military domination spread for an effective job and land exploitation from the colonizer to the colonized. Coloniality refers to a historical phenomenon that extends itself to our present and refers to a pattern of power that operates through the naturalization of territorial, racial, cultural and epistemic hierarchies, enabling the re-production of relations of dominance. This pattern of power not only guarantees the exploitation of some human beings' capital by others on a global scale, but also the subalternization and obliteration of knowledge, experiences and ways of life of those who are dominated and exploited (as cited in Granados-Beltrán, 2016, p.15).



This decolonial perspective not only seeks to make these forms of domination visible, but also to recognize, strengthen, and disseminate the varied ways of understanding, feeling, and being in the world by those subordinated groups (Granados-Beltrán, 2016). Thus, as presented by Restrepo and Rojas (2010), decoloniality is defined as a process that attempts to subvert the pattern of colonial power, even when colonialism has been broken.

Considering this critical and decolonial perspective in the presence of historically excluded groups such as indigenous peoples, this study aims for a revision of the discourses and practices within the foreign language education field in Colombia. This work requires an ongoing quest for the integration of multiple ways of being in educational spaces, a careful observation of the way different groups of students and individuals participate in

English learning environments, an analysis of different students' and groups' responses to language policies and programs such as the one described here, and a reflection on the social, cultural, personal, and ideological dimensions that shape English language learning for different ethnic groups.

In this regard, the concept of critical interculturality adds to the discussion and offers important keys for new understandings of language education from this decolonial paradigm. As expressed by Tubino (2005), critical interculturality constitutes an ethical-political project that seeks to construct a democratic society based on diversity; it is a project for the construction of intercultural citizenships and multicultural democracies (p. 5). Critical interculturality differs from relational interculturality, which emphasizes an idealized interaction between groups with different cultural backgrounds. Instead, critical interculturality examines and questions power relations and the macro-micro structures that lead to the segregation of certain groups and the idealization of certain cultural patterns over others, leading to the positioning of some traditions, knowledge, discourses, and practices over others (Walsh, 2010, p. 77). Similarly, critical interculturality transcends functional interculturality—very common in different arenas in our country—in which dialogue and tolerance towards different groups is promoted, whereas the reasons for inequality among these groups are not questioned (Tubino, 2005).



A critical view of interculturality starts with a recognition that a real intercultural dialogue can only take place when basic conditions of equity are guaranteed; therefore, critical interculturality is understood in this study as a pedagogical tool that continuously questions racialization, subalternization, inferiorization, and its power patterns (Walsh, 2010, p. 92). This tool contributes to the visibilization of different ways of being, living, and knowing, and seeks the development, understandings, and conditions that not only articulate and discuss differences in a framework of legitimacy, dignity, equality, equity, and respect, but also—and at the same time—encourage the creation of "other" ways of thinking, being, existing, learning, teaching, dreaming, and living that cross borders (Walsh, 2009, p. 13). From this perspective, researchers in this team see languages as social processes, means of resistance and construction of identities, and—above all—ways to improve the dialogue between communities and cultures in order to solve relevant problems in their realities and strive for more equitable societies (García & García, 2014). We researchers consider the teaching and learning of any language as an ongoing, unfinished process in search of a better society in which difference is perceived and treated as enriching for the purpose of joint construction.

Additionally, in this study, the researchers recognize the complexities entailed in addressing students' individual and social identities. Individual identity is examined as a dynamic, shifting, and contradicting condition of humanity, that is, the way "people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 410). From a decolonial perspective, this notion of identity is enriched by the view of individual and social subjects as constituted by heterogeneous and discontinuous social subjects; they can only configure a set of features as a group or community (which may be called identity) when they have a common history of conflicts and share memories associated with that history, and therefore, they may develop a will to weave their individual, heterogeneous, and discontinuous experiences together (Quijano, 2014, p. 94). This identity can only become a unity in a specific situation, under specific circumstances, following a certain direction, to respond to concrete needs and in a temporary manner (Quijano, 2014). In this sense, and in the case of indigenous populations, identity does not represent the continuous, stable condition of an individual or a group; but a particular position adopted by them in interaction with others in a surrounding context (Gros, 2000). Identity

becomes, from this perspective, one possibility among many to establish relations with others; thus the individual is not defined by his or her belonging to a group, as it is him or her who provides meaning to that belonging (Ogien, 1987, as cited by Gros, 2000). Consequently, aspects concerning the identities of indigenous students should not only be studied from their temporary attachments to ethnic identities but also from the meanings they make of their individual experiences in concrete situations (Sierra, 2004).

This study also starts from the premise that teaching and learning a language must have the purpose of critically reading reality and acting to transform it (Freire, 1970, 1974; García & García, 2014). Likewise, the contexts where these educational processes take place represent ideological spaces that benefit certain ways of being and thinking over others and, therefore, must become spaces to question pre-established ways of thinking and acting in the world. In the academic realm, for instance, some literacy practices are valued while others are excluded. In this sense, questioning whose literacy practices are included and excluded gains relevance, especially when considering the teaching of foreign languages in a context where local languages are continuously threatened.

In this respect, our education system has revolved around the development of some types of literacies privileged by modern society that, in our institutional context, include, academic, math, and digital literacies, among others. In reaction to this, literacies in this study are examined as cultural and communication practices that belong to specific communities and are "inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups." (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013). From this angle, this study recognizes and highlights that indigenous communities have developed unique literacy practices that include singing, weaving, and dancing, and that conventional institutions have not integrated these practices in their "universal" ways of doing "higher education". The exploration of academic literacies, particularly during this study, is in tune with the view of academic literacies proposed by Lea and Street (2006) who consider the appropriation of specific literacy practices as bound to context and linked to issues of "power among people, institutions, and social identities" (p. 369). Math literacy is also known as numeracy and can be understood as the capacity to use different math skills in order to solve problems and make decisions in real life (Peters, Västfjäll, Slovic, Mertz, Mazzocco, & Dickert, 2006). In addition, digital literacies are examined as social practices, and they entail task completion not only by operating certain devices but also by establishing new relations with others and assuming particular social identities (Jones & Hafner, 2012). As researchers in the team have witnessed, the development of academic, math, and digital literacies has become an essential requirement for success in higher education; however, it requires further exploration from a more integrated, social, and critical perspective. In this vein, this study attempts to explore these views of interculturality and language education as linked to issues of power among languages, identities, and literacies, and thus contribute to the construction of foreign language teaching and learning processes that recognize and validate the multiethnic and multicultural nature of our country, while promoting the transformation of our educational practices and policies towards more fair and equitable opportunities for all educational communities.



## Research Methodology

In connection with these theoretical tenets of decoloniality and critical interculturality, an interpretive and intrinsic case study for the exploration of indigenous students' views of the new institutional foreign language policy at Universidad de Antioquia was proposed (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2011). From this perspective, this research was characterized by its situational and personal nature based on a continuous triangulation and detailed description of the topics addressed, which were studied in their contexts. The different stances and points of view of participants and researchers were valued,

while a multiplicity of voices, data, sources, and analytical perspectives were recognized and highlighted. Following Richards (2003), this study attempted to develop a description and analysis of the participants' views and experiences using rigorous narrative and descriptive processes.

This study was focused on the indigenous student population at Universidad de Antioquia pursuing their undergraduate studies across the Department of Antioquia. Data collected included documents, surveys, individual and group interviews, and conversation circles. It also included institutional documents describing the previous and current institutional language policies, as well as the policies regulating indigenous students' access to the institution. These documents provided first-hand information about institutional regulations, their rationale, their relations to broader institutional and national agendas, and their possible implications for different stakeholders.



Initial patterns and particularities observed in the documents served as a basis for some individual interviews with key actors inside the university, and then for the initial creation of a survey. This survey was divided into sections and included open and closed questions around students' demographic data; information and perceptions about students' ancestral languages, Spanish and foreign languages; and a section about the new institutional policy. The researchers carefully framed the different questions using a language that could capture rich information from participants, while avoiding any kind of inadequate language that could offend or alienate participants. The survey was carefully piloted before being sent to all indigenous students registered in the university databases. A total of 320 indigenous students completed the entire online survey, and most of them provided their institutional email, which allowed us to contact them for follow-up interviews and validation of findings.

These document analysis and surveys were complemented by the analysis of institutional databases, which provided official information about the number of students in the university, as well as demographic data such as ethnic groups, hometowns, undergraduate programs, gender, name and type and date of admission. Raw data were not disseminated out of the research team in order to keep confidentiality. The entire process was carried out with special permission from the university's central administration, which, in fact, not only provided the funds to carry out this study but also offered continuous support to the research team. After the data collection process, students were divided into several *conversation circles* or *círculos de palabra*, where students shared their ideas freely and expressed their opinions. Each was provided a consent form that included a permission to record, transcribe, analyze, and write about the ideas they expressed as part of the study. Members of the research team were extremely careful about maintaining confidentiality and respecting the participants.

These data were analyzed using a deductive inductive approach and technological tools such as NVivo 10, Excel, and Survey Monkey. In this manner, quantitative and qualitative data were mutually enriched as data analysis moved from initial patterns to general categories, analytic codes and emerging themes. These processes were complemented with memo writing, data summaries, and interpretations of findings. Findings were refined and validated in different meetings and events organized at the university and attended by participants in the study. Throughout the study, the research team was in contact with and received feedback and support from the University Indigenous Student Government (Cabildo Indígena Universitario), as well as from the Admissions Office and academic departments. The research team was also enriched by the continuous insights of three indigenous students who were members of the research team

Finally, it is important to mention that this study was carried out under the strictest standards of informed consent, respect, protection of

participants' identity and integrity, privacy and confidentiality in the management of information, always following the international standards of research ethics proposed by The American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011) and the Central Ethics Committee at Universidad de Antioquia. To ensure data were handled with privacy, they were protected with an access code that allowed only the research team to have access to the collected data and analyses.

## Findings

This research study explored the extent to which the new institutional foreign language policy could affect indigenous students' permanence and graduation at Universidad de Antioquia and suggested some strategies from a sociolinguistic, educational and critical intercultural perspective to avoid an increased dropout rate for this student population. Findings in this section start with a sociolinguistic profile of indigenous students at the university, and move into a description of the views and challenges they face regarding aspects such as their identities, native languages, Spanish, English, and other academic literacies. Finally, the researchers elaborate on a number of recommendations for the implementation of this new institutional English language policy at Universidad de Antioquia and what should be considered in higher education institutions in general.

### Indigenous Students at Universidad de Antioquia

A sociolinguistic profile of indigenous students registered in undergraduate programs was done based on an analysis of university databases in 2017 and a survey conducted with 320 indigenous students. The profile includes aspects such as demographic information, educational background, languages spoken, and languages of interest, among others. In this segment, some findings related to the students' ethnic groups, places of origin, and the university programs they are enrolled in will be presented.

The first salient aspect in this study was the number of students from indigenous communities at the University. The database analyses during the two semesters in 2017 showed that 3,537 out of 37,454 undergraduate students (Universidad de Antioquia, 2017) at the university belong to six ethnic groups. Twenty five percent (25%) of these students, that is, 875 students, were identified as indigenous; 41% were Mulatto; 33% belonged to African Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero groups, and 1% were Romani.

The second interesting general feature was that indigenous students at the university come from different regions of the country and represent a good sample of Colombia's national diversity. A relevant finding in this regard has to do with the large number of students coming from the departments of Nariño in the southwest (189 students) and Córdoba in the north (178 students), outnumbering students from the department of Antioquia (131 students) where the university is located. Additionally, 288 students come from departments such as Cauca, Caldas, Sucre and Putumayo, and there is one indigenous student from each of the following departments: Amazonas, Caquetá, and Guainía. These findings reflect the country's ethnic diversity and the relevance of analyzing the processes of access, permanence, and graduation for all ethnic communities coming into our universities.

The third aspect analyzed has to do with the indigenous peoples that indigenous students belong to.[1] Based on the databases, the research team could determine this information for 688 indigenous students. The indigenous peoples with the highest number of students were Zenu and Pastos, with 179 students each, followed by Embera-Chami

1 It is important to remark that in the university's databases as well as in the survey we conducted, there were some mismatches regarding the names given to indigenous peoples or communities by institutions (e.g., the Interior Ministry, the university, the Ministry of Culture) and the name each community or its members would give to themselves.



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with 102 students, and then Inga, Nasa, and Misak with much smaller numbers. Zenu students come from Sucre, Córdoba and Antioquia. In 2005, the Zenu community accounted for 233,052 members in the country, about 16.7% of the indigenous population. Although their language was thought to be lost, it is estimated that 13.4% of members still speak it (Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia - ONIC, n.d.). Pasto students mainly come from Nariño, and their language is considered extinct. In 2005, there were 129,801 members of this group, and they make up 9.3% of Colombia's indigenous population (ONIC, n.d.). The Embera-Chami community is also vibrant at the university. These students come from different departments including Antioquia, Cauca, Nariño, and Vaupés. The Embera-Chami people constitute just 2.1% of the indigenous population in Colombia with 29,094 members in 2005 (ONIC, n.d.). These findings bring to the forefront the importance of acknowledging, valuing, and strengthening the cosmogonies, life histories, priorities, needs, and ways of being, living, and doing of these indigenous students and Colombia as a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural nation. It can serve as a starting point to support the permanence and graduation of all students at the university level. Figure 1 shows the number of students coming from each of the different ancestral peoples of Colombia.



The fourth component of the indigenous students' profile is related to the subject areas they are studying at the university (see Figure 2). The research team found that the area with the highest number of indigenous students was by far engineering with almost 200 students, followed by the social sciences (76), education (67), economics (56), medicine (52), pharmaceutics (47), and law (49). These findings reveal the variety of academic areas selected by indigenous students at the university, as well as the need to address such diversity through concrete proposals according to the complexities of each subject area.

### Views and Challenges Faced by Indigenous Students at the University

This study also allowed us to explore the views and experiences of indigenous students at Universidad de Antioquia regarding their identities, native languages, and views of Spanish, English, and the current institutional language policy.

#### *Indigenous students' identity at the university*

In this attempt to explore the sociolinguistic profile of the university's indigenous students, the research team necessarily dealt with students' identity, which was found to be related to the university's official classification as indigenous, students' self-identification, and students' identity in connection to their ancestral languages.

In the first place, it was found that students are officially classified as indigenous when they are admitted through the regular admission process or through a special quota program by which two indigenous students are admitted to each academic program every semester, as stated in the Academic Agreement 236 (Universidad de Antioquia, 2002). Students attending through the special quota program need to be endorsed by their officially recognized indigenous communities, identify themselves as indigenous, and complete a form with their hometown and community, which is then incorporated into the university databases. Indigenous students from all over the country compete for university admission through this special quota, and, once admitted, are automatically classified as indigenous by the university system.

However, it was found that, in certain cases, students using this mechanism were not necessarily indigenous by ethnic origin; they used the quota program by claiming to live in an indigenous territory or have a connection with an indigenous community or organization when, in fact, they are not affiliated with the indigenous community or organization that supported their application. As

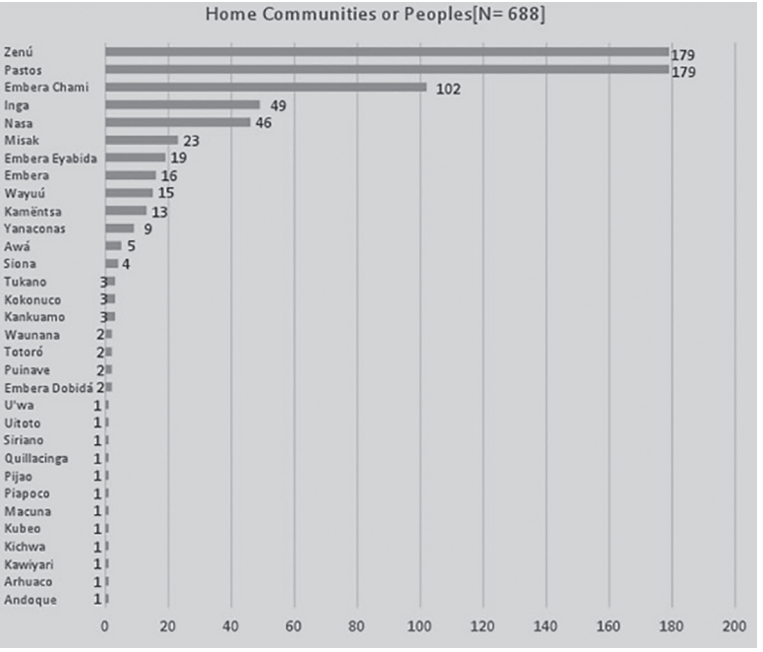


**Figure 1** Indigenous Students' Home Communities

stated by a student identified as indigenous in the databases, "I'm from an indigenous territory . . . I don't have indigenous roots, but as we live in that community we're identified as such"[2] (Interview, September 14, 2017). This problematic situation seems to be repeated in other public universities that require the endorsement of an indigenous community for students to access the institution (Castañeda, 2011). In contrast, as expressed by students in the conversation circles, and confirmed in the admission databases, 19% of the indigenous students in the university, that is 166 students, did not use the quota program and were admitted to the different university programs once they passed the admission exam and competed with all regular applicants from all over the country.

In the second place, data also showed that students coming from indigenous communities made different choices upon entering the university in terms of assuming an indigenous identity or not in different circumstances. Considering the 320 students surveyed who had been validated as indigenous according to the university's databases, data showed that 9% of them (30 students) claimed they did not identify themselves as indigenous. As researchers explored this finding in depth throughout the study, it was possible to pinpoint that discrimination has been present in different scenarios for most indigenous students and that it has a big impact on the identity they assume at the university. As expressed by some students:

> (...) where I studied in high school, I used to be made fun of because of my eyes, my hair, my skin color, even considering they [other students] were darker and even uglier than me [laughs]. . . . And with all that, being a child, if that happens to you as a child, you start to fear and you avoid stuff; you try not to be bothered, pointed at, so you feel embarrassed for that, because for being indigenous, people point at you, discriminate against you. (Conversation circle, 2017)

> For instance, when I came here, to the university, a classmate—who was from social sciences—asked me why we came here to take the spots away from people

2 Interview and survey data were collected in Spanish and translated by the research team.

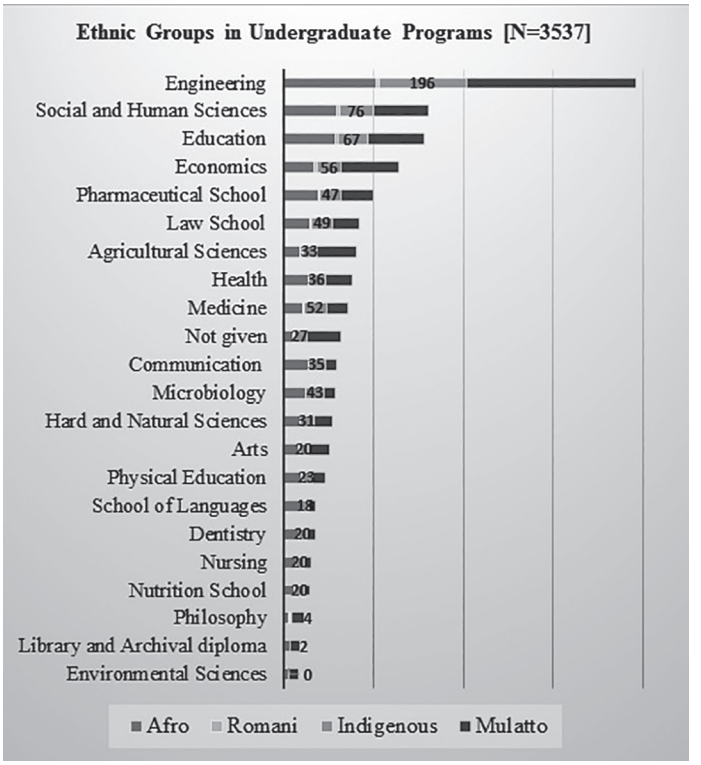


**Figure 2** Ethnic Groups in Undergraduate Programs



> from Antioquia. She said that we wanted everything for free and that we were lazy since we were always fighting for lands that we did not even work for. (Conversation circle, 2017)

As confirmed in these excerpts, some students have been underrepresented, discriminated against, or made fun of during everyday interactions with other people. This is also confirmed in other studies (Martínez, 2015), and this reality has been experienced by indigenous students at all educational levels and in nonacademic settings, which should require further attention in our educational system and universities. A clear example of this was found during a conversation circle held with some participants in this study:

> I studied at a school that wasn't indigenous, and there what they teach you about indigenous people is rather negative. I had several friends from the same community and they didn't say they were indigenous fearing they would be singled out. So, I think it has to do with education and with how the Colombian identity has been created, because we see indigenous people as separate from us; we're indifferent, as if they weren't like us and had nothing to do with us. So, I think it is a problem related to education. (Conversation circle, 2017)

> Even with teachers. I also took a subject—Colombian history—in which I had to experience a hard situation because in the papers we had to read indigenous people were portrayed as ignorant, lagged behind and were the ones opposing the development of the country. (Conversation circle, 2017)

As expressed by these students, such situations in which their indigenous identities have been excluded, portrayed as negative, and even ridiculed may have led them to hide their identities from other people in different scenarios. Despite these situations, 91% of the students who answered the survey stated they identified themselves as indigenous and felt proud of who they were and where they came from.

> When I came here they [people from her community] told me not to lose who I was, my blood, and I always carry this with me; so I'm very proud of it [her community] and I like it this way even if people look at me

> in a bad way. I'm proud of being an indigenous Nasa-Paéz (Interview, October 6th, 2017)

In the third place, indigenous students' views of their native languages showed a strong connection to their social identity as indigenous. As mentioned in the previous section, a total of 50 students have an indigenous language as their first language. When asked to define what their mother tongue meant to them, these students showed a holistic and transcending view; they tended to associate their indigenous languages with their ancestors, nature, their families, their own spirit, and culture. As some of them mentioned:

> "It represents the guiding thread of my culture and its preservation; it's the womb that conveys our cultural, family, and individual knowledge."
>
> "It means the revival of my ancestors' history and the possibility of strengthening my culture from the context in which I currently live."
>
> "We identify with our language as a community. Our language is our inner workings; it unites us as a team. It is the way to preserve our roots."
>
> "It makes up part of my identity. It is something I cherish because it is the essence of my culture."
>
> "It is identity, strength and the resistance of our ancestors."
>
> (Indigenous students, survey, 2017)

This unique connection between students' indigenous languages and their spirituality, culture, and identity has been corroborated in other studies (Arismendi, 2016; Arismendi et al., 2016; Martínez, 2015; Sierra, 2004). Interestingly, the link between students' indigenous languages and their identities and cultures was not emphasized as much by students whose first language was Spanish. In this case, students tended to define their mother tongue as a means to communicate with others and as a language inherited from their parents and spoken from the moment you are born. However, as stated by Arismendi et al. (2016) as well, there seems to be a strong feeling of loss for some of those indigenous students whose communities do not have an ancestral language anymore, as this student states:

> Unfortunately, Pastos are weak in their mother tongue because they just have a few words left. However, that little left means a community's own language, where I have my roots and can communicate with my nature and my people. (Indigenous student, survey, 2017)

Findings related to students' identities gave us some ideas about the discontinuities and instability of their affiliation to an indigenous identity. Students seem to assume different positions in relation to their identities and their belonging or not to an indigenous group based on the conditions of particular circumstances surrounding an interaction (for instance, when applying for the university, when answering the survey, in specific school environments, and in other daily life situations). However, their sense of belonging to an ethnic group or a specific indigenous community seems to be reinforced through their indigenous native language, which they associate with their history, ancestors, culture, and even the future of their peoples.



### *Indigenous students' native languages at risk*

In order to explore some aspects of the sociolinguistic profile of indigenous students, it was necessary to go beyond the institutional databases and resort to designing our own survey and implementing a series of conversation circles with participants. Findings showed that according to 320 indigenous students surveyed, they speak 22 indigenous languages, which is very significant considering that around 65 languages are spoken in our country. However, only 16% of these students had those languages as their mother tongue and 84% spoke Spanish as their first language. The indigenous language with the most speakers at the university is Embera (17 speakers), followed by Namrik (7 speakers), Inga and Nasayuwe (with 5 speakers each), Kamentsa (2 speakers), and several languages spoken by just one of the surveyed students: Awa,

Cubeo, Macuna, Misak, Paez, Pasto, Uitoto, Wanana, and Ye´Pá Mah´Sá.

Similarly, data showed that just 2% of students come from communities where several indigenous languages are spoken; another 2% come from communities with one native language; 32% of them come from groups that alternate Spanish together with a native language; and a large percentage of students (64%) come from territories where only Spanish is spoken. This finding is related to the fact that more than 50% of the university's indigenous population belong to Pasto and Zenú peoples. The former have lost their languages whereas the latter have very few speakers of their native language (13.4%). Peoples like the Embera, Nasa and Wayuu still have their indigenous languages, but these groups are smaller than Pasto and Zenu. According to Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, DANE's 2005 census, the Embera people had 37,327 members, the Nasa community had 186,178, and the Wayuu were at 270,413. There is no record of how many members from those groups speak their native languages (González, 2010).

This research study may also show that native languages in different indigenous territories have progressively lost ground in the face of an increasing use of Spanish. The use of local languages, for instance, has been limited to certain personal and family situations such as conversations with grandparents, traditional songs and some celebrations or rituals, whereas in interactions at school, governmental institutions, commerce or work, Spanish has become the main language used. Figure 3 shows the languages that students use in different spaces and activities.

Students also confirmed this worrying decrease in the use of their native languages during the conversation circles. Some of them talked about the limited spaces where they could use their languages even inside their communities. Others mentioned they did not speak the language of their community, and there were some students who referred to the difficulties they had using their languages at the university.

> Embera is spoken in my community, but every time it is less spoken. I've heard it when I attend community meetings; that's when you can see more people speaking the language. Few leaders can speak it; most people have lost it.

> [At the university] Spanish has been used more. Most people you spend time with speak Spanish, so you



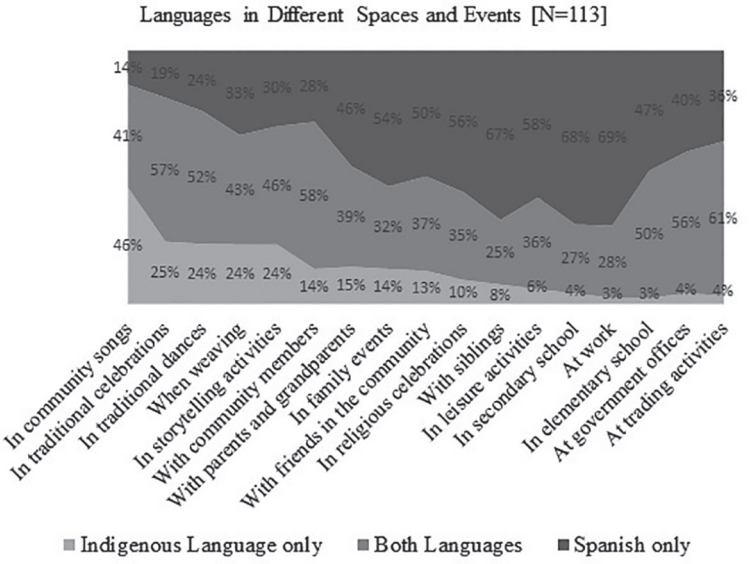


**Figure 3** Use of Spanish and Indigenous Languages in Different Contexts

> have to cope with this communication environment to interact with them. For instance, the only way to speak your language is with someone who speaks it, too, otherwise you speak Spanish.
>
> Here at the University, I do not know Embera students from my community, just her. She kind of speaks my language. Hers is a bit different, but I can understand some words.
>
> (Indigenous students, conversation circles, 2017)

It seems that this panorama has worsened considering that Sierra (2004) had reported on the menace Spanish has meant for indigenous languages, even in their own territories. This living threat to the future survival of indigenous languages becomes stronger bearing in mind that a language can only become meaningful when it is used in an active social context, that is to say, in a living culture (Sierra, 2004, p. 190). In this sense, as long as Spanish is prioritized and, in the case of our university, English also becomes an academic demand, indigenous languages will face even harsher conditions for survival.

Another important finding indicates that in addition to the fact that two thirds of indigenous students at the university have lost their ancestral languages, very few students whose communities still have an indigenous language can use it to effectively communicate with people in their territories. Figure 4 shows students' perceived level of performance in using their indigenous language in different situations.

These results show a huge linguistic loss due to the growing dominance of Spanish, even within

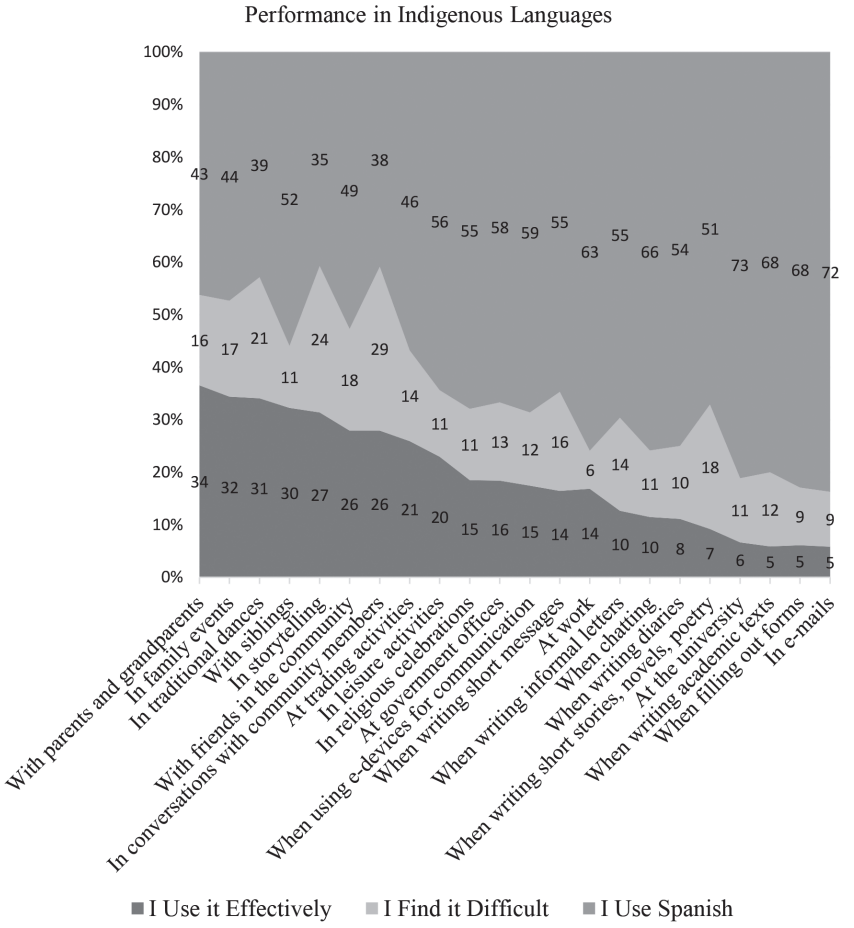


**Figure 4** Students' Perceived Performance in Using Their Indigenous Language

intimate, religious, and daily activities in indigenous communities. It seems that, as part of the reduced group of speakers of indigenous languages in our country, these university students who still speak a native language have increasingly fewer opportunities to use them and to strengthen their knowledge of them. Such a loss also affects the two thirds of indigenous students at the university who do not speak a native language that connects them to their cosmogonies, ancient knowledge, life stories and different ways to represent others and themselves. Nevertheless, some findings also indicated that something can be done. Indigenous students at the university showed great interest in learning their native languages. Eighty-six percent (86%) of surveyed students said they were interested in learning or strengthening their knowledge of the languages of their communities, while 64% said they were interested in learning an indigenous language from a different community. This willingness showed us that there is still some hope.



*Other literacies*

Researchers found that in terms of literacies, some indigenous students have faced many challenges once they have entered the different university programs. Some of these challenges are related to their academic literacies in Spanish, math literacies for those students enrolled in the hard sciences, and their level of familiarity with digital literacies necessary to navigate school matters.

Regarding academic literacies, data analysis indicated that indigenous students participating in this study could communicate in Spanish for diverse activities such as conversations with friends, use of social networks, or writing short messages; however, they found it difficult to do academic tasks such as reading research reports, giving academic presentations or understanding lectures by their professors as shown in Figure 5.

These findings were corroborated by students during the conversation circles held throughout the study.

> I studied in a school where Spanish was always spoken, but things are different at the university. Even to answer questions, your writing is bad. My first essays were wrong. Even now I still speak Spanish incorrectly, and I have two problems: one with writing and the other one with Spanish because it is difficult. (Conversation circle, 2017).

These students' difficulties using Spanish for academic purposes bring attention to the need to offer alternatives or programs that aim at enhancing their knowledge and use of this language. Actions should be taken in order to ensure that linguistic difficulties for indigenous students whose first or second language is Spanish do not affect their university permanence and

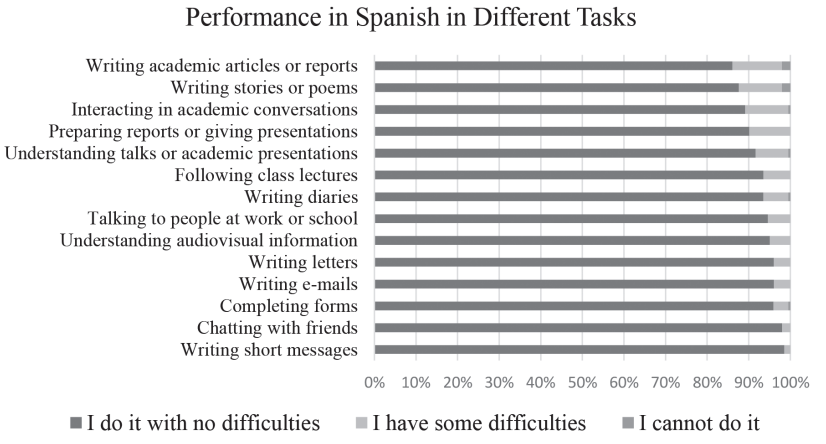


**Figure 5** Students' Perceived Performance in Spanish in different tasks

graduation rates. These actions, however, cannot be limited to Spanish enhancement, but must involve other literacies as well.

Regarding math literacies, it was possible to identify that indigenous students registered in areas such as engineering, where math skills are essential, found themselves struggling to cope with core math subjects. In their opinion, their knowledge in math was significantly low compared to that of their classmates coming from different contexts and schooling backgrounds.

> For instance, in a school like the one where I studied, we devoted a lot less time to math [...] social sciences, language, and Spanish. We studied agriculture, indigenous culture, projects and all that. So, people who studied in regular schools have probably devoted more time to those subjects and that is why they know more. (Conversation circle, 2017)

As for digital literacies, students also mentioned difficulties related to their lack of familiarity with technology. As these students pointed out, tasks like creating an e-mail account and password to be able to fulfill registration processes at the university posed a challenge for them. This is not surprising bearing in mind that in many geographical locations in Colombia there is very limited access to technological resources, including the Internet.

> It affects you a lot because, for instance, when I entered the university I hadn't had contact with technology, and right away I had to create a username, and I was like, "How can I do that?" One of my classmates had to do it for me because I didn't know how. I didn't know anything about technology, or a cellphone or anything like that. So, one way or another, I had to learn to use it to be able to survive. (Conversation circle, 2017)

Considering all these difficulties, it is evident that education at large has failed to provide every student, including indigenous ones, with adequate academic, math, and digital literacy development instruction that allows them to succeed in higher education. It also bears mentioning that other literacy practices that students may have developed in their native communities have turned out not to be relevant at school. Thus, when these students reach the university, they struggle to cope with academic content and to handle different literacy practices, demonstrating that there is a strong need to offer students from different ethnic groups a high quality education before they reach the university; such is the debt the state has with these populations (Mendoza, 2010).

### English and the new language policy at the university

A very relevant finding in the present study has to do with indigenous students' positive attitude towards the new language policy that introduces five levels of English as part of all academic programs in the university. However, students also manifested that their proficiency level in English is rather low and have experienced a variety of difficulties in their previous studies of this language.



In terms of their perceived English language level, data analysis revealed that indigenous students reported having difficulties in the use of English for personal and academic purposes, and that these difficulties were stronger than those related to the use of Spanish. As presented in Figure 6, most indigenous students reported difficulties with reading and writing in English at the university, with oral and written comprehension, and even with using English for social activities such as writing short messages or writing emails. Contrary to what occurred with Spanish, the majority of students reported difficulties in all types of tasks, not just academic. These findings confirm results from previous national studies on the low level of English of higher education students in Colombia (Quinchía et al., 2015; Usma et al., 2013). In addition, these findings reinforce previous studies that describe the inadequate learning conditions students face in their elementary and secondary education and how this affects indigenous students as they reach higher education (Arismendi, 2016; Cuasialpud, 2010; Velandia, 2007).

In terms of indigenous students' perceptions about English and the new institutional policy, findings were illuminating. Contrary to what might have been expected, 79% of participants who provided data on this topic (241 indigenous students) expressed positive opinions about learning English; they described English with words such as *relevant*, *necessary*, and *important*, among others. Within this group of students, Spanish is the first language for 67.9% (208 students), and only 10.7% (33 students) have an indigenous language as their mother tongue. Interestingly, from all of the participants in this study, just 50 students speak an indigenous language as their first language, which means that the majority of students whose mother tongue is an indigenous language have a positive view towards English.

Similarly, data analysis revealed that 79% of students surveyed showed a positive response in relation to the university's language policy. Within this group, 10% of students support the policy under certain conditions or gave suggestions such as having special courses for beginners, implementing a differentiated methodology, and offering a wide range of class schedules. All the suggestions made by indigenous students in this study will be presented in the last section of this article.

The positive view regarding English and the university's language policy contrasts with students' negative experiences as English language learners. As expressed by 62% of the students, they have experienced many difficulties in the process of learning English, including grammar-based methods, teacher-centered classes, irrelevant content, and low use of English in class, among many other issues.

When analyzing this positive view of English and the new language policy more deeply, there were different findings that called our attention. First, 194 students (69%) had a positive view of the language policy at the university, and 162 students also had a positive opinion about English. Second, a promising image of English prevails in students regardless of participants' mother tongue. Third, many of these students are enrolled in very different academic programs and not necessarily in programs that have a high demand for English. Fourth, the fact that most students not only evaluated their previous English learning experiences as difficult or bad but also said their performance was low when using English for different purposes did not seem to affect their optimistic position about this language and the university language policy. What seems to stand strongly behind this view is the personal, academic and professional benefits that students expect to get through learning



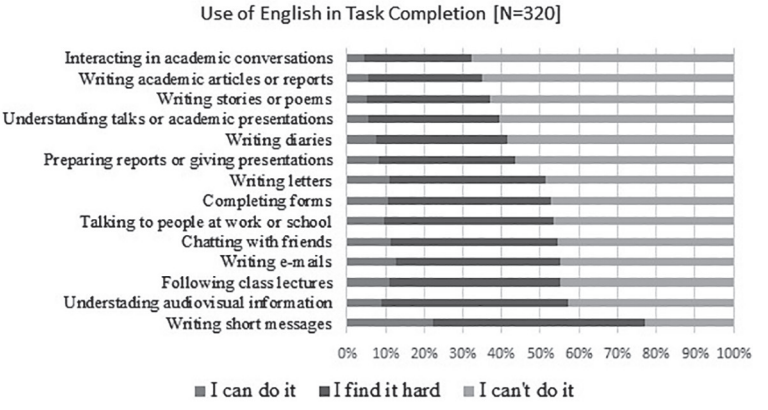


**Figure 6** Students' Perceived Performance in English Use for Task Completion

English. Some of the advantages they identified included future success at work, academic growth, higher professional and academic competitiveness at an international level, and access to global communication. As these students asserted:

> Learning English is...
>
> important, since it is a global language.
>
> important for our professional development, since it is an essential requirement by all kinds of companies and for people who want to travel abroad.
>
> important for becoming more competitive at a professional level.
>
> About having English in their program curricula...
>
> It is necessary because information and communication today are in this essential language.
>
> It would be better; indigenous students tend to have a lower level in this language, since they have not been taught English from the beginning at school.
>
> It seems like a good requirement to me because the university intends to offer students access to international contexts and cultural exchange, so students can go anywhere with no difficulties.
>
> (Indigenous students, survey, 2017)

As observed in the previous quotes, when students refer to the reasons for learning English and to the policy, they use words and concepts that are commonly found in the media, such as *global language*, *opportunities*, *competitiveness*, *access*, *growth*, *mobility*, and *internationalization*. The question remains as to what extent these views reflect the assimilation of hegemonic discourses about English or the real academic and future professional needs of students. This analysis calls the attention on the relation between the appropriation of these language ideologies and the status or relevance conferred to certain languages, which is also reflected in the high demand for English language instruction in academic settings. In this regard one student stated,

> Why learning English and not Kamëntsá? Well, because English is a universal language, and most knowledge and information are communicated in English. Your possibilities are more limited if you do not speak English than if you do not speak Kamëntsa. If I can't speak Kamëntsa, I can't communicate at her indigenous reservation [pointing at one of the participants], but if I can't speak English, I can't communicate with the world. (Indigenous student, conversation circle, 2017).

In contrast, the data showed that 18% of surveyed students had a negative opinion about English. These students are also enrolled in different undergraduate programs, from which teaching and engineering stand out. Most students in this group also evaluated their previous experience in learning English as difficult or bad and their proficiency in English as low. Data analysis showed three main reasons for the students' negative view of English: first, their perception of English as a difficult language to learn in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar; second, their lack of previous knowledge of this language due to poor teaching processes in elementary and secondary school; and third, their lack of motivation to learn this language. The following excerpts exemplify these views.



> Learning English is...
>
> important because English is widely used today, but frustrating because when you do not understand, you feel like the stupidest person.
>
> hard because it has not been easy for me to understand English
>
> difficult because English teaching in secondary school was rather bad
>
> (Indigenous student, survey, 2017)
>
> Many of us had not studied English until now. And here at the university, things are like, "Get real, this is the university." They think you've learned some English at school, but you haven't, and then you are excluded because of that. It's really hard for you because they're not patient enough. It seems they think "if you're here, you should cope".
>
> (Indigenous student, conversation circle, 2017)

Finally, researchers found that 3% of participants, that is 10 students in the study, manifested a resistance towards English. These students are enrolled

in programs such as political sciences, teaching, journalism, environmental services management, health services management, and social work. Four of these students speak an indigenous language as their first language, and six of them speak Spanish. These students also expressed that they had low performance in English, while 5 of these students reported difficulties when learning English in their previous education. The analysis of this group's position towards English featured several relevant aspects. First, the four students whose first language was indigenous prioritize the need to strengthen their native languages over English. Likewise, the six students whose first language is Spanish refer emphatically to the need to recognize indigenous languages, and they heavily criticize the imposition of English. As they clearly stated in the surveys:

> Learning English is...
>
> losing my indigenous language and traditions because I would be becoming Western and that would change my way of thinking as an indigenous person. To us, our language is everything, and it is part of our daily life; it is not a pastime activity.
>
> a challenge because I do not like it. My own language is more important to me.
>
> unnecessary because I have a lot to learn about the native languages of my country. We have to give meaning to what is ours, not to what is imposed on us.
>
> an imposition and the extinction of the native languages of our indigenous people because learning English is mandatory in academia.
>
> (Indigenous students, survey, 2017)



Adding to these views, it is interesting to examine the views of students who expressed negative opinions about the new foreign language institutional policy. As reported in the survey, 19% of participants in this study (60 students) did not agree with it and provided different arguments against it, including linguistic, cultural, political, social, and educational issues. Most of these students also had a negative experience when learning English. They claimed that the language policy should not be mandatory and criticized it for not acknowledging their indigenous cosmogonies, languages, and cultures. The following are examples of what they expressed regarding the new language policy:

> This policy does not respond to the needs of indigenous students because they are imposing a foreign language, and that makes them forget their own language. What indigenous communities are trying to do, on the contrary, is strengthen local languages so they do not disappear.
>
> I think it would be like forcing students to detach from their traditions to cope with someone else's. It is like asking a child to leave their mother.
>
> (Indigenous students, survey, 2017)
>
> This policy demands something that is indirectly excluding us. As an indigenous student, I have to study five courses to be accepted in a capitalist society. They don't bear in mind that we are indigenous; we have our language and we speak Spanish. Since this policy is mandatory, many indigenous fellows have engaged in it and have placed English over their own language and identity.
>
> I think it's not good to impose a language on students. If you study a language, it should be your own choice, because you like it. Sometimes even if the course is well taught, you won't learn if you don't like it.
>
> (Conversation circles, 2017)

This group of students with a resistant attitude towards English and with a negative perception of the university language policy clearly shows a different political position to that of most participants in this study. They acknowledge their cultural identity as linked to their native languages; they emphasize the urgency to revitalize their indigenous languages and give them a place in Colombian society. They also reject the processes of colonization and linguistic imperialism that for centuries have taken place in Colombia, negatively affecting indigenous communities, their languages, and their cultures. Interestingly, this group of students does not refer to English as a tool for success, instead making a direct connection among language, culture, power, and coloniality, while

they also resist the tendency to give a higher status to foreign languages than to their own. As presented by Castañeda (2011), this stance is shared by indigenous students at Universidad Nacional, which also requires undergraduate students to take English courses in order to graduate.

## Discussion

This study has explored the introduction of a new foreign language education policy in a public university in Colombia, and how indigenous students perceive this reform. Additionally, and for the first time in the country, this investigation has carried out a sociolinguistic profile with the active participation of 320 indigenous students in this institution, coming from all regions of Colombia, representing 32 indigenous peoples, and speaking 22 indigenous languages. They all have manifested their views about their ancestral languages, Spanish, and English language teaching and learning in the context of the internationalization of higher education. They have shared their experiences and views about their struggles concerning different academic literacies, linguistic loss in their territories, how Spanish has become the mother tongue for the majority of them, and how complex matters such indigenous students' identity is affected by these phenomena. Additionally, and even when most students manifest their positive perception of English and English language learning as part of the new policy, they have provided critical insights on how current educational models mainly respond to transnational ways of managing higher education that do not necessarily respond to a plurilingual, multiethnic and quite diverse country such as Colombia. They have allowed us to gain some understanding of their frustration when they have been positioned as aliens in their own territory, and how these highly excluding policies, discourses and practices necessarily affect their possibilities to succeed in higher education.

As described in this report, many indigenous students position themselves as indigenous in order to access the quota program established by the institutional regulations. This program has allowed many of them to reach higher education and have the opportunity to temporarily move from their territories and become professionals, while being exposed to a number of new experiences that will hopefully have a positive impact on them, their lands, and their peoples. Certainly, without these special programs, the possibility for indigenous students to access higher education would be even more limited, especially considering the highly competitive nature of university admission exams. However, there is still a lot to be done in order to really ensure a more equitable society in which indigenous and other marginalized groups can truly achieve social mobility through education (Mato, 2015; Martínez, 2015).

The indigenous students' stories during this study have also confirmed the dynamic nature of indigenous student identity and how students make sense of it in historical, contextual, social, and personal situations, moments, and events (Gros, 2000; Sierra, 2004). Upon entering the university, indigenous students participating in this study have found that their ancestral knowledge, languages, cosmogonies, and ways of life are not recognized, valued, or even included in higher education culture and structures. Indigenous student identities, languages, and knowledge(s) will continue to be affected and undervalued, even by some students from indigenous communities themselves, if they continue to observe that this institutional language policy requires English, while their own ancestral languages disappear. They will hardly identify as indigenous if faculty and curricula depict them as underdeveloped, ignorant, or just rebel groups, while indigenous languages are presented as useless and detached from an instrumental and economic view in national programs such as *Colombia Bilingüe* (Usma, 2015). Students will hardly identify as indigenous if they continue to perceive that epistemic breaks that recognize other ways of being, learning, acting, and feeling in the world are not even considered in university curricula (CEPAL, 2014). Hiding their indigenous identities will

remain as a self-protection and survival strategy for some indigenous students, while higher education institutions maintain rigid, monolingual, monocultural structures. These students' experiences allowed us to confirm that affirmative policies that open possibilities for indigenous students to access higher education are just a starting point in providing more balanced opportunities to marginalized populations and in strengthening their identities.

Furthermore, the current institutional foreign language education policy, similar to many of those officially or unofficially implemented in most universities in Colombia, might contribute to reinforcing this obscure panorama if conventional discourses and strategies continue to be adopted. As students stated, it is urgent to explore other possibilities to understand language, culture, education, and university settings. It is essential to learn that a linear connection between language and culture should not be embraced, especially in the ELT field in our country in which language means target language and English, while culture means good manners and mainstream culture, not diversity, interculturality, uncertainty, social transformation, and open-mindedness. Students in this study echo other voices calling for alternative ways of looking at language, curriculum, assessment, knowledge, and education in general. They call for classes where their identities are recognized, their personal histories valued, their learning styles promoted, and their traditions respected. They want to see English teachers making a connection with real life in Colombia, the deep, often invisibilized Colombia, and teachers who construct new curricula based on diversity, not simply imported principles. They want to see a purpose in what they do, and they want to see that studying English has a purpose, for them. As it was clearly stated in this paper, learning English in the current sociocultural and political context of Colombia becomes a point of struggle not only for indigenous students, but for anyone in the majority who does not fit into existing models.



## Recommendations

Findings from the present study were further developed into a series of recommendations that could be useful for Universidad de Antioquia and other higher education institutions in the country. First of all, it is paramount to recognize that higher education policies have clearly included in their agendas very creative strategies for internationalization. However, we strongly believe it is urgent that these policies also work towards the promotion, revitalization, and real inclusion of Colombian ancestral groups and their languages and cultures, as well as all minoritized groups in our society, to guarantee the construction of a truly better education with all of them. Nonetheless, considering the diversity found in indigenous students participating in this study, it is safe to assume that many of the findings and lessons learned are not limited to them, but can also apply to many of our students coming from social contexts where quality education is scarce and conventional views of language, teaching, and learning prevail.

In addition, and as a basis for this transformation, it is necessary to carefully revise the epistemological stance from which English teaching programs have been approached. This implies revising the content covered, methodologies used, and materials and assessment methods promoted in foreign language education in the national context in order to really find spaces for a balanced conversation, not only among the cosmogonies, histories, knowledge, and ways of being of our indigenous students, but all ways of being that our students bring from all the groups they represent. Undertaking this new perspective would then lead to the exploration of new ways of understanding languages as an integral part of people who learn them and their surroundings, beyond the instrumentalist view of languages predominant in our teaching practices.

Concerning the teaching of English, indigenous students call for the recognition of their previous learning processes, as they come from rural or urban

contexts where English has either not been included in their school curricula at all, or it has scarcely been taught. Thus, students suggest the implementation of placement tests, specific English courses for indigenous students, and preparatory courses prior to the first level of English. In this manner, students who arrive at the university with an incipient knowledge of English will not feel left behind. As one of the students emphasized: "[we need] to be taught with love—[teachers] should learn about our social background [they should teach] without pushing and without pressure" (Indigenous students, survey, 2017).

This study also highlights the students' insistence that English should not be considered the only alternative to certify their knowledge of a second and in some cases a third language. In this respect, both in the survey and the conversation circles, indigenous students suggested making room for other languages—local and foreign—which would align to their personal, academic, and professional interests. This recommendation shows that students do not oppose the idea of learning other languages, but the imposition of English as their only option. Additionally, some students recommended not assigning academic credits to English courses in order to ensure that the requirement to learn this language does not become a reason for students to abandon the university or to be expelled from it. Moreover, 27% of students advocated for a way to teach English that does not position this language above the local ones, neglecting the relevance of indigenous languages. Instead, they suggest opening spaces in the classroom where diverse kinds of knowledge are included and where everyone learns from each other. In their opinion, this socialization may also lead to the deconstruction of negative imaginaries people have about indigenous communities. Finally, a smaller percentage of students, (2%), considered that teaching and strengthening Spanish to students whose mother tongue is an indigenous language is important. From their perspective, not having strong foundations in Spanish could mean having more difficulties in their learning of English.

These findings also shed some light not only on the challenges indigenous students face, but on those universities have at hand in their efforts to provide these students with improved possibilities to thrive throughout each academic program. Aside from providing indigenous students with support to enhance their knowledge and use of Spanish for academic purposes, it seems necessary to include additional components in orientation programs that address the specific needs of different student populations (e.g., digital literacies, math literacy, and pragmatic aspects of university life). Moreover, it would be essential that each academic program implements permanent strategies to support indigenous students in their enhancement of specific knowledge in core subjects, so they have a full spectrum of possibilities for overcoming what their previous academic backgrounds lacked, and graduate from the university.

Finally, we strongly believe that internationalization processes, an epistemic break, and the exploration of inclusive teaching practices should be accompanied by a recognition and revitalization of indigenous languages, knowledge, and cultures inside universities, and hopefully, throughout all levels of the education system. To that end, a group of faculty and students at Universidad de Antioquia has already started a program called *Cátedras UdeA Diversa,* which aims to strengthen the educational processes at the institution in order to respond to our society's challenges and crisis by integrating histories of ancestral peoples, territories, communities, and recent generations. This program offers seventeen different courses that include six ancestral languages, indigenous and afro-diasporic thinking, and peace building, among others (Universidad de Antioquia, 2018). These spaces, which are open to indigenous and nonindigenous students and university members interested in learning about the nation's languages, cultures, and knowledge, can surely make students from indigenous communities feel more valued and included in the institution, thus favoring their permanence at the university while promoting a deep transformation in higher education. A similar strategy has

been implemented at Universidad Nacional, where indigenous students from the PAES program *(Programa de Admisión Especial, Special Admission Program)* teach their languages to university community members as a space to exchange their cultural knowledge (Castañeda, 2011). Regarding higher education, it is paramount that universities open spaces where indigenous languages and cultures are not only lived and valued but really make a part of all aspects of university life: spaces where indigenous students can not only express but also strengthen their own identities, speak their languages, and share their knowledge and views of the world. This would undoubtedly keep students away from having to decide whether to hide who they are and merge into the new culture or just to return to their communities where discrimination might not be a part of daily life. With this research project, we hope to have provided some insights and reflections that will enable universities in Colombia to start or strengthen their efforts towards the construction of intercultural and more equitable models of education that genuinely welcome every member of our diverse, pluricultural society.



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