

“I Learned That My Name Is Spelled Wrong”: Lessons from Mexico and Nepal on Teaching Literacy for Indigenous Language Reclamation

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Globally many minority and Indigenous communities are searching for ways to reclaim languages that have been marginalized by socioeconomic and political processes. These efforts often involve novel literacy practices. In this article, we draw from ethnographic data in Mexico and Nepal to ask, what are the opportunities and constraints of teaching writing in support of Indigenous language reclamation? Writing is simultaneously an attraction and a source of marginalization or discouragement for learners in both settings. Promoting and teaching writing creates opportunities such as raising the status, visibility, and longevity of Indigenous language education initiatives. Challenges include struggles for legitimacy among teachers and learners and the emergence of new hierarchies among dialects. We suggest that language reclamation efforts can benefit from making the most of the material and social nature of writing and from avoiding hard-line purism and a focus on form, while giving greater consideration to meaning and contexts for written expression.

Introduction

Written language is powerful. Text is the primary means through which literacy and knowledge is performed and measured in school and many professional domains. All learners may experience insecurities and struggle with writing, but for marginalized and endangered language communities, writing often involves additional political and ideological difficulties. Many Indigenous communities globally are seeking ways to promote and pass on languages threatened by language shift (Hinton 2013). We refer to these efforts as *language revitalization*, increasing language use and numbers of speakers, and as *language reclamation*, shifting power balances and ideologies in favor

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of Indigenous self-determination (Leonard 2017). (Hereafter we use LR to refer to these intertwined objectives.)

Educational programs that seek to reclaim social prestige and revitalize language use find it nearly impossible to avoid written language; even when the pedagogical focus is on oral language, the prevalence of writing in learners' lives makes writing ideologically and pedagogically significant. In LR projects, writing is simultaneously a resource for speakers and learners of endangered languages, and a potential source of delegitimation. We bring attention to the special challenges related to writing in LR settings, and highlight how education programs can foster literacy in support of LR aims. The article contributes to calls for examination of writing using a social practice lens (Brandt and Clinton 2002; Lillis and McKinney 2013) through a comparative analysis of two contexts that, while divergent in some ways, demonstrate the common challenges faced by LR projects as they engage with writing.

We draw from ethnographic data on the teaching of Dhimal, spoken primarily in eastern Nepal, and Isthmus Zapotec, spoken in southern Oaxaca, Mexico, to ask, what are the opportunities and challenges of teaching writing in support of endangered language revitalization and reclamation? While both languages have been marginalized in favor of national languages (Nepali and Spanish), they are officially recognized by national governments and can be included in school curricula. Given the emphasis on writing in schooling, questions about how to teach written Dhimal and Isthmus Zapotec are a central focus and challenge for educators in both places. Our analysis illuminates that writing is simultaneously an attraction and a source of marginalization or discouragement for learners in these settings. On the positive side, promoting and teaching writing creates opportunities including raising the status, visibility, and longevity of Indigenous language education initiatives. Challenges include struggles for legitimacy among teachers and learners and the emergence of new hierarchies among dialects. Through comparing these contexts, we argue that it is necessary to develop critical and creative ways that teachers and learners may approach literacy in LR settings to minimize potential drawbacks and enhance opportunities.

Literacy, Writing, and Indigenous Languages

Literacy is often associated with writing and reading specifically; however, text-based literacy is just one form of meaning-making and is inevitably characterized by context-specific practices and significance (Street 1984; Menezes de Souza 2002). While many have shifted from thinking about *literacy* to *literacies*, Debenport and Webster (2019) push scholars to think "beyond multiplicity to question what writing is and can be" (390) in different sociocultural contexts. The dominance of alphabetic literacy over other forms of meaning-making has been critiqued in the context of Indigenous education in particular.

López Gopar (2007) analyzes the layers of meaning present in Indigenous Triqui textile production in Mexico, where the significance of patterns and colors are legible to community members. While the ability to read these meanings is part of Triqui literacy, it is not valued in the education system, where alphabetic literacy dominates. López Gopar demonstrates how alphabetic literacy has marginalized or erased other abilities. The same is true in relation to Maya language in southeastern Mexico, where the multiliteracies of Maya speakers have often been overlooked (Worley and Palacios 2019). Indigenous language teachers may be susceptible to reproducing the text-centric practices they experienced in school, despite aiming to provide culturally responsive pedagogy (García and Velasco 2012). Thus, despite decades of scholarly advocacy for “ideological” understandings of literacy and the development of “multiliteracies” through which learners engage critically with diverse linguistic and cultural communication (e.g., Cazden et al. 1996), students continue to be evaluated on a narrow conception of literacy as speedy reading and standardized writing (Hernandez-Zamora 2010; Dowd and Bartlett 2019).

Still, writing is a desired and even cherished aim for many. The high status of writing in society, and especially in schooling, can provide benefits for Indigenous writers. Logistical and political benefits of writing include wider information sharing and democratization of knowledge. The power to access and interpret information gained from text can make writing and reading “a liberating, revolutionary activity” (Weth and Juffermans 2018, 2). Critical pedagogy pioneer Paulo Freire argued that “alphabetization” is an important step toward developing critical awareness and political engagement (Freire 1970). Considering the prestige and transformative power associated with literacy, it is not surprising that writing is often viewed as a cornerstone of efforts to raise the status of a minoritized group (Fishman 1991). From a pedagogical perspective, literacy is likewise encouraged as a central educational goal. In their examination of Indigenous language education across the Americas, Francis and Reyhner (2002) assert that “a strong literacy component, involving sustained indigenous literacy development, should be an integral part of any additive bilingual program” (131).

There are special challenges for teaching writing as a part of Indigenous language literacy in LR settings, however. One challenge is limited access and exposure; LR education opportunities often receive scarce resources compared to dominant language education (McCarty 2013). Additionally, learners are less likely to see the language written in public or online spaces, as the lower status of Indigenous languages often translates into their absence in the linguistic landscape. In the case of Cherokee literacy education in the United States, for example, the use of a unique syllabic writing system creates prestige for the language, but also requires extensive investment and pedagogical innovation in order to provide enough exposure for learners to acquire the

system and become biliterate in Cherokee and English (Peter and Hirata-Edds 2009). While there is increasing use of Indigenous languages in cyberspace, this is also a part of the linguistic landscape where Indigenous languages are less present, and where fewer materials are available to LR advocates (Coronel-Molina 2019).

Another challenge for LR contexts is linguistic, especially orthographic, standardization and the creation of written norms. Most nation-state education systems function with a standard language ideology whereby a standard is viewed as neutral, necessary, and superior to other varieties (Silverstein 1987). The writing systems of prominent European languages were standardized based on elite speech during the era of nation-state consolidation (Milroy 2001), creating a prescriptive orthography that then came to be promoted as neutral and universal (Gal 2006). The creation of standard language varieties enhances the power of those whose speech conforms and marginalizes other dialects and varieties, further disadvantaging users of nonstandard language. As Weth and Juffermans note, “It is in this way that writing can be tyrannical: It influences processes of language change and creates social distinctions between ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ speech, correct and incorrect forms, and ignorant and knowledgeable speakers and writers” (2018, 6).

Schools have been looked to as a key site for LR; thus, it is unsurprising that writing plays a central role in many reclamation projects, and that the pressure of standard ideologies has made an impact in many LR contexts. While language norms are expected in schooling, they pose a challenge in Indigenous communities with multiple spoken dialects and a history of diverse writing practices. In the context of Kichwa LR in Ecuador, Limerick (2018) demonstrates that while promoters of standardized writing systems appeal to scientific ideas of progress, orthographic conventions are tied to strong emotions and enmeshed in sociohistorical contexts of colonialism and oppression. A written standard is thus far from neutral. Some LR advocates use written norms to uphold an ideal of language purity, a goal that often leads to conflict around variation (Dorian 1994). In contrast, Jaffe (2003) examined efforts to use a polynomic or pluralist norm for Corsican in southern France and illustrated how the ideal of an inclusive norm was difficult to put into practice in classrooms. Language standards represent an unavoidable, and almost always challenging, aspect of LR literacy education.

The potential negative and positive impacts of writing, described above, are important considerations in LR initiatives. We recognize that writing constitutes a crucial resource for Indigenous language teachers and activists, but we wish to draw attention to *how* writing is taught and taken up in such initiatives. There is evidence from research in LR movements that minority literacy education can follow different sociopolitical paths than those chosen by national languages with exclusionary standards (Urla et al. 2017). Persistent concerns about writing among teachers and learners in both of our research settings led

us to look more closely at this issue independently, and eventually to consider issues surrounding literacy in LR collaboratively. Discussing the emergent importance of literacy in our disparate research sites led us to notice some striking similarities, and to undertake a more focused comparative analysis of this topic. In this article, we draw from the experience of two different communities in order to illustrate themes that may be shared across diverse Indigenous language education contexts. Through an analysis of Indigenous language education in Nepal and Mexico, we illustrate some ways that learners experience the teaching and learning of writing to be positive and some ways it comes at a cost. We conclude with lessons learned from educators and activists in these settings about how to reduce some of the costs. We hope that drawing out these common themes will be instructive for LR participants and researchers elsewhere.

Researching Language Reclamation and Literacy Education

Writing is a social practice comprising many linguistic and material elements. In order to study LR literacy as a social practice, we conduct ethnography of communication (Hymes 1968) in LR settings. Ethnographic research allows for insight into social practices, processes, and ideologies through a combination of participant observation, interviews, and document and image collection (Blommaert and Jie 2010). It is an effective approach to investigate language practices and the power dynamics surrounding language (Hornberger et al. 2018). Although the contextualized nature of ethnographic research does not allow for wide generalizations, by bringing together rich data from two different ethnographic studies this article offers insights that may be of relevance across LR contexts.

Both authors are European-American applied linguists who have participated in Indigenous language education projects in a variety of contexts as researchers, students, and collaborators. As outsiders in the contexts we study, our findings are limited by our level of familiarity with the contexts, and the degree of collaboration and communication we established with insiders. We choose to use longitudinal ethnographic methods and an iterative analytic process, including input from participants and emergent themes, in order to balance out some of these limitations; nonetheless, our observations and conclusions remain inherently partial and influenced by our positionalities. De Korne was a participant observer in a variety of Isthmus Zapotec education initiatives for 21 months between 2013 and 2015 and conducted several months of follow-up visits in 2016, 2017 and 2018. She requested, and was granted, the role of student and observer in these education settings. She interviewed teachers, students, parents, writers, cultural activists, and linguists engaged in the teaching or promotion of Isthmus Zapotec (108 interviews)

(see also De Korne 2016, 2021). In this article, she draws on observations of Isthmus Zapotec classes conducted in university settings for (young) adult learners and classes conducted in a community literacy workshop for learners of all ages, as well as interviews with the teachers (6) and a selection of participants (36) in these programs. Weinberg was a participant observer in the Dhimal community for 13 months in 2015–16 and two months in 2014. While she has worked with nongovernmental organizations elsewhere in Nepal, in this context she was an observer. In this article, she draws on observations of Dhimal language classes in government primary schools and interactions in a multilingual, multiethnic community in the Dhimal homeland. In addition, she conducted 20 formal interviews with teachers, activists and bureaucrats; five focus groups with teachers, parents, and activists; and a survey of 85 households focused on education histories and linguistic repertoires (see also Weinberg 2018).

Taking an ethnographic approach to studying LR in these settings, our overarching aim was to understand the factors influencing LR, as well as to gain insight into the emic perspectives and experiences of participants. While neither of our studies originally focused on literacy or writing, we both came to notice that writing held a central role in these educational endeavors. Both settings are influenced by a policy environment that allows, and to some degree encourages, Indigenous language education, a change from a lengthy period during which official policies and practices suppressed the use of these languages. At the same time, neither context provides many resources to put these policies into practice. We both encountered teachers who were struggling to teach a language that had not previously been formally taught. We found the common challenges in the two contexts striking, even though there is a longer tradition of writing Isthmus Zapotec than of writing Dhimal, and decided to conduct a more focused comparative analysis in order to see what we could learn from considering these two contexts together. From our initial discussions, we noticed that writing was simultaneously a strong attraction or source of LR opportunity, and a difficulty, or source of LR challenges. In response to our shared question about the opportunities and challenges of writing in these contexts, we analyzed notes, documents, and interview transcripts to identify (1) ways in which writing was experienced positively or negatively and (2) practices that seemed to contribute to a more positive experience of writing. As in all analysis of ethnographic data, we sought patterns present in multiple instances and sources of data, triangulating our observations, interviews, and documents in order to capture emic insights (Emerson et al. 2011). Both authors engaged in informal conversations with key participants about our understandings of the context in order to gain their feedback and further insights. Comparing these two contexts allows us to discuss lessons learned from the teachers and learners in these settings, which may be of interest elsewhere. In the following section, we provide more context for

each case and then discuss our comparative analysis of challenges and opportunities of writing.

Literacy and Reclamation in Dhimial and Isthmus Zapotec Communities

For many Indigenous languages, the development and use of writing systems is intertwined with histories of colonialism, evangelism, and forced schooling. In the Dhimial community, early encounters with writing were largely in the form of land titles that dispossessed Dhimial people of their land (Rai 2013). Other early encounters with literacy occurred in Nepali-medium government schooling, established in the mid-twentieth century. Schools were the major vector for introducing the national Nepali language into this community. While today's middle-aged Dhimial people remember a time when their community spoke only Dhimial, most of their children are more comfortable speaking Nepali, and their grandchildren barely speak Dhimial. This all-too-common story of language shift is driven by socioeconomic, educational, and political factors. And yet, members of this Indigenous community have taken up writing as a resource in pursuing goals of protecting rights and knowledge. Recent Dhimial language activism has taken place against a political backdrop of restructuring the Nepali state into a federal system. In this context, some activists and educators view the visibility of their language as a means to emphasize Dhimials' status as the original inhabitants of a territory where they are now a small minority.

Writing in Dhimial is a relatively new phenomenon and is not part of most Dhimial speakers' lives. Dhimial, like all other Indigenous languages of Nepal, was until recently excluded from public life; before 1990, publishing in Indigenous languages of Nepal was a crime. Political changes since then have allowed for the emergence of a handful of stores with Dhimial names on their billboards, a Dhimial language page in the government newspaper as part of a rotation with other Indigenous languages, and Dhimial language textbooks that are used at two government schools. A few literacy materials and books of poetry have been self-published by authors or by NGOs.

Dhimial activists and teachers feel that there needs to be a written standard for Dhimial, as there is for Nepali or English. However, among people interested in writing Dhimial, there is disagreement not only over spelling conventions but also over which writing system to use. This debate centers on the relative advantages of Devanagari (the script used to write Nepali and Hindi, among other languages) as opposed to Roman characters, though there are other options. Activists have devised a novel writing system just for Dhimial, while others propose that there was a historical Dhimial writing system that is now lost but could be rediscovered with historical research. Devanagari is the most commonly used script for Dhimial today, largely due to Dhimial speakers' comfort with the Nepali writing system. Nevertheless, the graphemes of

Devanagari, primarily used for writing Indo-European languages like Hindi and Nepali, correspond poorly with the phonological inventory of Dhimal, a Tibeto-Burman language (Weinberg 2018). There is disagreement among activists and teachers over spelling conventions, especially in relation to the many lexical items derived from Nepali.

The case of Isthmus Zapotec highlights a different, yet in some ways parallel, trajectory of writing. Zapotec speakers developed pictographic and semi-phonetic writing from around 600 BCE and a hieroglyphic system from around 800 CE. Used only by elites, these writing systems were lost following the Spanish invasion of the region in the sixteenth century. Isthmus Zapotec, the variety specific to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, was written in the Roman alphabet by local elites using Spanish-influenced orthography from the late nineteenth century, with a surge of literary production in the 1920s and 1930s among young Istmeños who studied in Mexico City (Pérez Báez et al. 2015). As with Dhimal and many Indigenous communities, public schooling spread the national language, Spanish, beginning in the Isthmus in the 1920s. In 1956, several active Isthmus Zapotec writers initiated a roundtable to discuss a writing norm for the language. The result was the *alfabeto popular* (popular, or people's, alphabet), an orthographic norm that introduced graphemes for the consonants and vowels in Isthmus Zapotec that are not in Spanish and otherwise followed most of the orthographic conventions of Spanish. This system has now been adopted by most organizations and writers who write Isthmus Zapotec professionally. Most members of the speech community are aware that the system exists, but many have not had the opportunity to learn it and feel insecure about using it (De Korne 2017). Furthermore, there have been efforts spearheaded by an organization at the national level (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas) to revise this standard, and that process remains ongoing. While many people of older generations speak Zapotec among themselves, children and youth often have some comprehension of Zapotec but are increasingly speaking Spanish. Zapotec does appear in the linguistic landscape and social media of the community, often alongside Spanish, but many people say that they do not know how to write Zapotec and do not feel confident doing so.

Table 1 illustrates some of the differences and similarities that characterize these two cases; despite different language ecologies, political recognition in both contexts allows for increased Indigenous language teaching and teachers are actively engaged in developing LR education. Considering these two cases together allows us to analyze common challenges and opportunities. In the following section, we illustrate challenges, including how lack of exposure to Indigenous language writing leads to perceptions of difficulty compared to familiar dominant languages. The production of norms creates a distinction between correct and incorrect writing, where there may previously have been a range of spoken language without a clear hierarchical ordering. We then analyze opportunities, including the visibility of text as a

TABLE 1
LR LITERACY CONTEXTS COMPARED

	Isthmus Zapotec	Dhimal
Written standard	Proposed 1956; ongoing process to revise it.	Ongoing negotiations.
Writing practices (Indigenous language)	Elite writers are popular. A minority of schools teach Zapotec as a subject. Teachers are not confident with the written standard. Some people write based on Spanish literacy; very few use the standard.	Two schools teach up to grade 2. Most people have not encountered written Dhimal. Some people write based on Nepali and English literacy; many do not know that Dhimal can be written.
Surrounding language ecology	Spanish dominant. Decline in young people speaking Isthmus Zapotec. English increasingly taught in schools, other Indigenous and immigrant languages present. Roman script only.	Nepali dominant. Decline in young people speaking Dhimal. English is taught at all schools; other Indigenous and regional languages present; some returned international migrants know Arabic, Malay, and other languages. Devanagari and Roman scripts.
Political support	National recognition of Indigenous languages in 2003. Establishment of National Institute for Indigenous Languages in 2005.	National recognition of Indigenous languages in constitution of 1990; reaffirmed in constitutions of 2007 and 2015.
Concerns of LR teachers	Recruiting and encouraging learners; lack of access to classes; difficulty of representing all spoken dialects in writing.	Lack of materials; limited interest from most parents; disagreements about orthographic standardization.

source of pride and status; and personal and professional empowerment through the integration of writing into existing literacy practices.

Challenges of Writing for Language Reclamation

Language reclamation initiatives are often squeezed into the margins of formal education, work, and family life, and the two cases we examine here are no exception. Common challenges faced by the Zapotec and Dhimal language education programs include limited exposure to writing in these languages, making them seem difficult to learn. This difficulty was exacerbated in both cases by a focus on producing the proper forms of literacy, whether in terms of standardization or a focus on form over meaning in some language classes.

In the case of Isthmus Zapotec, the writing system was designed by Zapotec writers in collaboration with linguists, and follows several of the orthographic conventions of Spanish, allowing learners to build on literacy in Spanish. Even so, the aspects that differ from Spanish, including three kinds of vowels and three tones, prove a challenge. As an adult learner commented in an interview after attending a writing workshop that De Korne observed,

[Me dificulta] al escribir el tono. . . . Tengo que pensarlo primero para escribirlo y pues, digamos que pensándolo la idea ya se te está espumando en un instante, entonces yo trato de escribirlo de una manera rápida o como yo crea que va y ya en casa revisarlo si está bien y desde ahí ir corrigiendo errores.

[[It's difficult for me] to write the tone. . . . I have to think about it first in order to write it and well, let's say that in thinking about it the idea starts to evaporate on you in an instant, so I try to write it in a quick way or how I think it goes and then at home revise to see if it is good and from there correct errors.]

This learner is a confident speaker of the language, but is not accustomed to going from fluid speech (or thought) to writing. Additionally, the perspective that there is a correct and incorrect way to write parallels the standard norms learned in school. Learners are wary of errors, and the pressure to write “correctly” means that they may have a harder time with self-expression.

The experience of difficulty due to lack of use was also evident in the Dhimāl community. As one teacher participating in the creation of a Dhimāl textbook commented in an interview, “*lekhnā gāhro cha, bāni na bhaera*” (it's hard to write [in Dhimāl], because it's not a habit). Other teachers involved in the drafting of the textbook joked about how hard it was to read Dhimāl, despite it being their own mother tongue. This contradiction was disheartening, especially for older teachers and activists who spoke Dhimāl at home before they learned Nepali in school and expected writing in Dhimāl to come easily. A particular challenge was that the sound system of Dhimāl does not map easily onto the Devanagari writing system, and new Dhimāl authors were unsure of how to spell. The novel challenge of reading in Dhimāl could also be used to discredit younger speakers: on one occasion, Weinberg observed a woman in her twenties stumbling over visually unfamiliar words while trying to read aloud a text written in Dhimāl. Her family—both the older, confident Dhimāl speakers and her younger brothers who acknowledged that they were less fluent in Dhimāl than their older sister—teased her for not knowing her own language. Difficulties in reading, which were faced by even the most confident speakers when encountering their language in an unfamiliar modality, allowed for questioning speakers' competence, especially younger speakers, a dynamic that can undermine LR efforts.

Developing and teaching standardized forms was important to teachers and activists involved in writing Dhimāl. One of the most prolific Dhimāl authors described choosing what would become the written standard:

*kahilekāhi bolnelāi hāmi writtenmā lyāeko chaina. jastai writtenmā purba ra . . .
western dhimalko writtenmā rakchhaū, easternkomā speaking matrai cha.*

[Once in a while we haven't used something that is in spoken Dhimāl in writing. Like in writing . . . we put Western Dhimāl in writing, Eastern is just in speaking.]

When asked by Weinberg, “*Kina lekhdaina?*” (Why not write it?), the author replied,

*mixed bolchan, alikati, utāko rājbangsi influence, aru influence cha, hamro etāko
cahī alikati population ṭhulo cha, western dhimalkomā, etākaī bhāshā bolchau . . .
asti orthographyko consensusmā pani, hāmi westernko cahī written mā lekhaū,
easternko cahī bracketmā rakhaū bhane, bracketmā, tyasto sallā cha.*

[They speak a little mixed, it's influenced by Rajbangsi [a neighboring language], there are other influences. Our population here [in the west] is a little larger, we speak the language from here . . . the other day the consensus at the orthography workshop too, let's write Western and put the Eastern in brackets, that was the advice.]

This author described making decisions about the written standard. He and others who attended the orthography workshop had no doubt that they needed to choose one form to become the standard. The decision of what would become the written form was based on factors such as what was perceived as more purely Dhimel, as opposed to borrowings, and what was more commonly used.

The pressure to use standardized forms was also influential in the community-based and university-based Isthmus Zapotec classes that De Korne observed. The presence of several mutually comprehensible spoken dialects emerged as a challenge as educational initiatives often included participants from different towns. In a beginning level class taught by a team of teachers representing two different dialects, one of the teachers recounted that they initially tried to teach both dialects but eventually found it too difficult:

Era muy difícil ya de por sí enseñar un idioma, y enseñar las dos variantes era aún más complicado y pues sí, cuando enseñamos esas cosas, no pues “así se dice aquí,” “así se dice en San Blas,” “así se dice en Juchitán,” “así se dice en Unión,” pues era como meterles muchísima información y pues ellos no, no iban a poder entenderlo. No iban a—no les iba a gustar porque no, no iban a tener una, una variante en sí de cuál aprender.

[It was really difficult already to teach a language, and to teach the two variants was even more complicated and well yes, when we taught those things, no well “this is how it is said here,” “this is how it is said in San Blas,” “this is how it is said in Juchitán,” “this is how it is said in Unión.” Well it was like giving them [students] tons of information and well they not, were not going to understand it. They were not—they were not going to like it because they were not going to have a, a variant itself to learn from.]

The teacher went on to recount that after a choice was made to teach only one variety, at the end of the semester some students gave feedback that they would have preferred the other variety, or both. The teachers felt unable to please all the students in the class. While some students may indeed desire to have one variety, as is common in foreign language teaching, in LR contexts some learners may appreciate an approach that leaves room for the varieties they hear among their family and on the street. The gains in simplicity from choosing one variety come with potentially steep costs in omitting the knowledge and experience learners bring to the classroom. This is the case in any language education setting; however, in our observations it is especially significant in LR pedagogy that aims to support previously marginalized voices.

The emphasis on learning to write a standardized form may lead to the development of new hierarchies of correctness. A heritage learner of Isthmus Zapotec who traveled an hour from another town to take the university class commented that the variety was different from what little she had learned from her grandmother. She told De Korne in an interview that she had encouraged her grandmother to consider learning to write Zapotec, but since her grandmother found writing Spanish difficult she did not want to try Zapotec. The granddaughter argued that Zapotec would be easier, since it was an easier language for her grandmother in general, but she was not interested. She went on to explain that she had realized during the class that no one in her family knew how to write Zapotec:

Por ejemplo, mi nombre, la idea es que es en zapotec, pero está mal escrito y me di cuenta de eso la clase pasada. El mío se escribe con “h” y este . . . y no lleva la “d,” apenas descubrí como se escribe correctamente mi nombre, sí. Y es por lo mismo que ellos no saben escribirlo bien.

[For example, my name, the idea is that it is in Zapotec, but it is written wrong and I realized that in the last class [i.e., I learned that my name is spelled wrong]. Mine is written with “h” and um . . . and doesn’t have the “d,” I just discovered how to write my name correctly, yes. And it is for the same [reason] that they [my family] don’t know how to write it [Zapotec] well.]

In the interview, we discussed that writing norms are political, and that her family had every right to choose to represent the sounds of the words as they preferred, so she should not see this as a deficit. She agreed, and noted that she has seen multiple spellings for her name.

Some Dhimal speakers had a similar experience when they encountered written Dhimal. During the process of writing a Dhimal language textbook, the book’s editors solicited writing from the wider community. Weinberg observed several drafts of one lesson in particular, including the original draft written by a schoolteacher, a revised form changed by the book’s highly educated, city-based editors, and subsequent revisions until it appeared in the government-published textbook. The editors, working under an ideology of linguistic purity, adapted the original poem by removing common words derived from English and Nepali and replacing them with more purely Dhimal forms, as shown in table 2.

In this example, the editors replaced a simple line that used the informal English borrowing “ok, bye” with a much more complex final two lines. The poem’s author was not surprised that the editors replaced the English, which he thought would attract students’ interest, but he also had a harder time reading the formal and somewhat archaic language suggested by the editors. In another line, the editors replaced the common word *kalam*, borrowed into Dhimal from Nepali, with *phultij*. On reading these edits, the original author did not recognize the word, though his wife remembered it as a word for “quill

TABLE 2
EXCERPT FROM DRAFTS OF A DHIMAL LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK

Original Draft	Revised Draft
<i>te dotəŋ kelaɪ</i>	<i>te dotəŋ kera jharəŋ chatəŋ</i>
Saying “alright”	saying “alright” we all take an oath
<i>oke bai donare.</i>	<i>junni bheŋetəŋ katha dhirəŋ donhahi</i>
we say, “ ok, bye. ”	“see you tomorrow to learn,” we say.

pen” that she heard as a child. By drawing on a more archaic lexicon and grammar, the arbiters of what would become the written Dhimal standard demonstrated that they saw everyday spoken language as impure and improper. The process of developing a text thus created a new hierarchy of correctness in Dhimal.

These readers’ and writers’ experiences illustrate the double-edged sword of alphabetic literacy for endangered language learners and even teachers. On the one hand, gaining new insight into one’s heritage language can be a positive experience, as discussed below. On the other hand, learning a purportedly correct way of writing that you and your family do not know and that your own name does not reflect might not serve goals of strengthening intergenerational transmission and community cohesion. A focus on “correct” writing, rather than meaning-making or personal expression, may also deter people like the Dhimal author and the Zapotec student’s grandmother. The tendency to standardize and limit naturally occurring variation (and thus exclude or marginalize some members of the speech community) and the tendency to focus on form and accuracy over contextualized meaning-making are significant constraints on LR goals. If a writing norm that alienates some learners is imposed, or if learning the writing system leaves learners feeling unsuccessful, teaching writing may have the opposite effect than LR planners aim for.

Opportunities of Writing for Language Reclamation

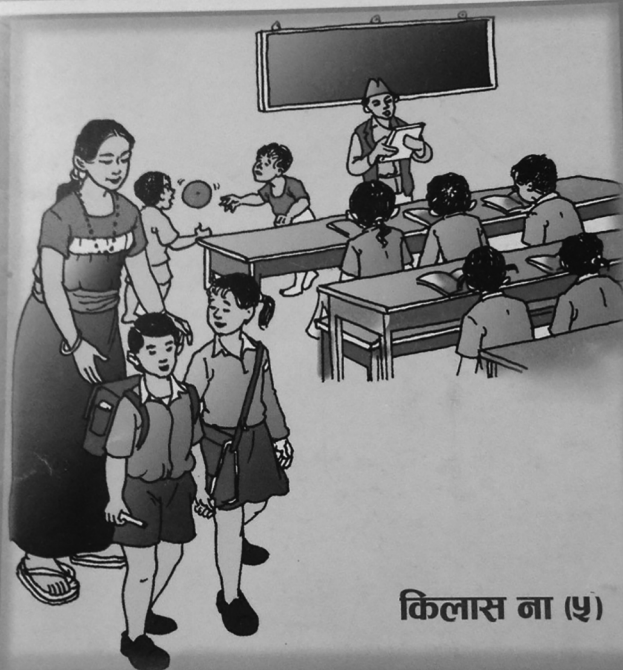
From another angle, teaching writing creates opportunities that include raising status and visibility of Indigenous language education initiatives. By its very nature writing is visible, drawing attention to LR efforts. The prestige of written language can boost pride, while the production of written materials can foster interaction in and about the language.

The visibility of Dhimal language textbooks (fig. 1) boosted the prestige of the language. As a socially and economically marginalized group, many Dhimal speakers described feeling ashamed of speaking their language. Neighbors from other caste and ethnic backgrounds called the Dhimal community “backward.” The head teacher of a school with a significant Dhimal student body, for example, complained that the Dhimal students at his school were the weakest students, with the lowest attendance rates. The existence of books written in Dhimal could thus serve as a boost to the prestige of the language



केवा लहे

धिमाल भासाको किताप



किलास ना (५)

FIG. 1.—Cover of class 5 Dhimāl language textbook

and, by extension, the community. Weinberg observed this effect during a day she spent photocopying a draft textbook at a print shop. Dhimal speakers who stopped by were often surprised to learn that there were books in their language. They were pleased to hear that it was being taught as a subject at a nearby school, even when they were critical of orthographic choices made by the book's editors. Members of other ethnic and caste groups were also surprised, and seemingly impressed, to learn that Dhimal could be written. These encounters with written Dhimal countered the popular image of Dhimals as illiterate and uneducated.

The heritage and prestige of Isthmus Zapotec literacy also made writing a source of positive identification and pride, with public poetry readings by admired local writers occurring several times a year. Although there was little Zapotec literacy instruction in public schools, learners of all ages could attend occasional workshops run by civil society and local government organizations. Both younger learners who were not confident speaking and speakers who had never learned to write found the prospect of writing Zapotec appealing. A mother in her thirties attended a free 2-week literacy workshop offered in a cultural center and commented in an interview:

Me gustaría escribir algo en mí zapoteco, porque es mi lengua—porque no? Escribir, y saber, y hablarlo; hasta cantar en zapoteco . . . es bonito. Se inspira uno cuando ya sabe escribir, ya se, ya tiene buena escritura en zapoteco, te vas haciendo te va motivando, te va dando ideas, y puedes hacer muchas cosas.

[I would like to write something in my Zapotec, because it is my language—why not? Write, and know, and speak it; even sing in Zapotec . . . it's lovely. One gets inspired when one already knows how to write, now one knows, now one writes well in Zapotec, you're making, you're getting motivated, you're getting ideas, and you can do many things.]

When asked by De Korne “¿Entonces, al final de las dos semanas tuviste como más motivación para escribir o—?” (So at the end of the two weeks you had like more motivation to write or—?), the mother replied:

Sí, al termino del curso, sí, me motivo mucho.

[Yes, at the end of the course, yes, I was very motivated.]

She discussed how she was not allowed to speak Isthmus Zapotec when she attended school, and had never had an opportunity to learn the popular alphabet before. Although she noted that it was not easy, she felt she had learned a lot and could put her knowledge to use, writing to relatives outside the region and writing song lyrics. Integrating writing into her existing literacy practices of personal communication and music enhanced her appreciation of this new facet of literacy.

One goal of LR is not just to bring back a language but to bring it forward into new contexts (Hornberger and King 1996). Writing provides one way to

bring languages into new contexts that are relevant today. A trainee teacher in his twenties who also participated in the 2-week Zapotec workshop told a story from a few years previous that illustrated the potential positive opportunity of writing Zapotec as a form of communication among community members:

Mi tío me dijo: ¿sabes zapoteco? Y yo lo que conteste sí, y me dijo ¿sabes escribirlo? Pero yo le dije que no sé, pero tengo idea de cómo van las palabras y ya me dijo «Escribeme algo», y ya le escribí. Creo que le escribí este, “hijo mío te extraño mucho y te quiero mucho, soy tu papá que te mando un abrazo” y no sé qué y yo más o menos le escribí en zapoteco y era para que se lo enviara a su hijo que no estaba en su casa. Me usó como pretexto para hacer una carta en zapoteco y pues esa fue la primera vez . . . que escribí en zapoteco.

[My uncle said to me: “Do you know Zapotec?” And I answered that yes, and he said to me “Do you know how to write it?” But I told him that I don’t know, but I have an idea of how the words go and then he said “Write something for me,” and then I wrote it. I think I wrote, um, “My son, I miss you a lot and I love you a lot, I am your father that sends you a hug” and I don’t know what, and I more or less wrote that for him in Zapotec, and it was so that it would be sent to his son who wasn’t [living] in his house. He used me as an excuse to make a letter in Zapotec and well that was the first time . . . that I wrote in Zapotec.]

In stable, tight-knit communities, a written norm for communication may not feel like a pressing need. Many communities whose languages are endangered are also experiencing destabilizing economic processes, however, leading to migration and creating new diasporas. Written communication can hold new relevance in such times of flux, offering a bond over long distances. As the young teacher went on to discuss, he gained a good understanding of the popular alphabet from participating in the literacy workshop and was beginning to write rap lyrics and letters to his girlfriend in Zapotec (a more romantic language than Spanish, in his view).

For Dhimal language advocates, writing was a crucial step for introducing the language into schools. In the Nepali schools and communities where Weinberg conducted research, textbooks were seen as synonymous with curriculum. Thus, while there was time in the school schedule allotted for a local subject, for teaching locally relevant technical knowledge such as agriculture, cultural information, or an Indigenous language, the absence of textbooks for local subjects meant that the slot was often filled with decidedly nonlocal subjects. The easy availability of textbooks for teaching subjects like General Knowledge or English Grammar made it particularly tempting for schools to teach those subjects in the time allocated to a local subject (Weinberg 2020). While policies supporting teaching Indigenous languages had existed since 1990, schools only began to teach Dhimal after a Dhimal language textbook was published. Thus, the importance of writing was not only for communication, but also for opening an implementational space (Hornberger 2002) for the Dhimal language at school.

For both Dhimial and Zapotec educators and LR supporters, opportunities for LR have been enhanced when writing is taught and used as part of broader community literacy practices, including personal, political, and artistic expression. The visible, often tangible nature of written communication helps combat the marginalization and quasi-invisibility of many Indigenous languages in public spaces such as schools.

Discussion: Supporting Literacy for Language Reclamation

Literacy as part of LR projects is neither solely good nor bad, as illustrated by the comparison of LR projects in Mexico and Nepal. The challenge for LR practitioners and supporters, then, may be to recognize where the practices and ideologies surrounding writing are beneficial and where they may be harmful to a project's goals. Comparing these contexts has expanded our understandings of the role of literacy and writing in LR endeavors. In this section, we discuss some of the lessons we have learned from our observations and the experiences that LR participants shared with us. While we suggest that these issues may be relevant across contexts, we also emphasize that whether these recommendations are relevant for a specific LR context must ultimately be determined by the participants in that context.

Two shared challenges for writing in LR projects across these cases were the difficulty of encountering a familiar language in an unfamiliar modality and the creation of new hierarchies of correctness. Proficient speakers of Zapotec and Dhimial were surprised and discouraged when they found reading in their languages challenging. In both cases, while the Indigenous languages employed familiar writing systems, there were novel mappings of characters to sound, which made reading and writing particularly difficult. Even when an Indigenous language was a person's first spoken language, many encountered the written form only later in life. Considering the specific needs of such learners in designing curricula and texts may help to support their learning process and potential frustrations.

The second challenge is more ideological, with the assumption that there must be a single written standard and that deviations from the standard are incorrect. These elements of a monoglot standard language ideology (Silverstein 1987) are widespread, internalized through encounters standardized languages and standardizing institutions such as schools. Even in the case of Isthmus Zapotec, where teachers aimed to explicitly counter these standard language ideologies and teach multiple varieties, students were so accustomed to the mode of schooled literacy that they understood their language use in terms of right and wrong. Where learners come to believe that they speak or write "wrong," this can have deleterious consequences for an LR project. Successful LR programs may benefit from exploring ways to counteract deep-seated assumptions about correctness in language and literacy.

Ideologies about the high status of written language may benefit LR initiatives. In both cases described here, the written language boosted the prestige of marginalized languages. Raising prestige is an important tactic for LR, and the mere existence of written texts can be an important tool in achieving this aim. In addition, writing can serve to bring languages forward into new domains and purposes, such as writing letters to distant community members, producing poetry and rap lyrics, or allowing a language into official spaces like schools. In LR projects that seek to illustrate the utility and significance of a language that has been devalued for generations, the usefulness of written language is an important support.

In conclusion, these case studies indicate that participants in LR education can benefit from being aware of and making the most of the material and social nature of writing. The family and neighbors of teachers who contributed to the Dhimal textbook were drawn into the work of writing the textbook, and enriching discussions ensued. A participant in the Isthmus Zapotec writing workshop related how one of his relatives noticed that he was writing Zapotec on social media and started asking about opportunities to attend workshops as well. Comparing the Dhimal and Zapotec cases, it is clear that the presence and circulation of Isthmus Zapotec writing since the early twentieth century has been important for Zapotec LR initiatives. Numerous writers have gained local and national renown for bilingual publications, contributing to the overall prestige of the language. The presence of a written norm since 1956 has also resulted in less tension around norms than is currently present in the Dhimal case and more of a focus on teaching and enabling people to write. However, debates over what is correct still surface regularly in Zapotec classrooms, leading to another crucial lesson.

Teachers of endangered languages may also benefit from avoiding hard-line purism and a focus on form, while giving greater consideration to meaning and contexts for written expression. It is not surprising that a teacher may struggle to gain confidence in teaching an endangered language if they are told that their language is incorrect or should not be written. Likewise, it may be discouraging for a heritage learner to be told that their own name is misspelled. Adopting a less purist approach to written norms may help empower multilingual writers, whether they be teachers or students. In some LR contexts, teachers have consciously chosen to accept variation in writing and even speaking (Faudree 2013; Weinberg and De Korne 2016), as illustrated above in the case of Zapotec teachers. This solution may not work in contexts where there are strong beliefs about correctness in written language, but may be a useful model for more LR programs. Comparing the Dhimal and Zapotec cases illustrates that it is not necessarily the presence of competing scripts (as in the Dhimal case) that leads to tensions; even small differences within one script may become sources of debate. In the Isthmus Zapotec case, only the Roman script is used; however, different diacritics and vowel representations

are still viewed as problematic by some teachers and learners who prefer one dialect over another. This highlights the importance of ongoing reflection and attention on the part of teachers and LR advocates to consider the contexts and purposes of writing, and to avoid excluding emerging writers through form-focused choices.

While these recommendations are applicable to literacy education in other contexts, we argue that the characteristics and goals of LR pedagogy make them especially important in these contexts. At the core of these challenges and opportunities is the curricularization (Valdés 2017) of Indigenous languages, that is, the treatment of Indigenous languages as an academic subject. Teaching Indigenous languages in schools or out-of-school workshops may be important for the purposes of revitalization, providing a context for language learning that otherwise would not occur. There is also the opportunity to raise the status of devalued languages by putting them on the same level as other subjects and giving them the trappings—for example, textbooks—of more powerful languages. At the same time, leaders of Indigenous language initiatives must be aware of the issues that tag along with schooling approaches, such as a focus on form and decontextualized knowledge and the imposition of norms. Our cases, as well as others, show that drawing lines between correct and incorrect use of Indigenous languages may further discourage learners (Meek 2010; Whaley 2011) and even give proficient speakers who are new writers a sense that they are using their language incorrectly. We believe that it is in the interest of LR practitioners to avoid the challenges and constraints of writing as far as possible, while promoting writing as part of existing (multi)literacies that may enhance the personal and political opportunities of Indigenous language speakers.

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