

## Interpreters of Indigenous Languages (IIL). Actors of Change in Health

**VICTORIA-JARDON ANA MARIA**

Foro Consultivo Científico y Tecnológico, A.C.

Email: [ajardon@hotmail.com](mailto:ajardon@hotmail.com).

Tel: 52-55-49823055, 52-1-55-5214-1495.

**MARQUEZ-ESQUIVEL, ERIKA YUTSEL.**

Graduate in Education for Health. Autonomous University of the State of Mexico.

**MANSILLA-OLIVARES, ARMANDO.**

Former General Director of the National Health Institutes of Mexico.

**FUENTES-GOMEZ, LUIS ARTURO.**

Under director of Training, INALI (National Institute of Indigenous Languages)

**CRUZ-AGUILAR, CELESTINA.**

General Hospital of Mexico, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**DE JESUS-GONZALEZ, ANA.**

Children Hospital of Mexico, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**DOMINGUEZ-BAUTISTA, ANGELINA.**

Nacional Institute of Cardiology, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**GARCIA-ALAVEZ, AMELIA.**

Hospital Juarez of Mexico, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**GUERRA-SANCHEZ, GREGORIO.**

Retired from Nacional Institute of Perinatology, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**LOPEZ-LOPEZ, JUVENTINO.**

Specialist graduate in Urology by Hospital Juarez of Mexico, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**MENDOZA-PEREZ, FLORENCIA.**

Children Hospital of Mexico, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**VALENCIA-ENRIQUEZ, LUZ MARIA.**

Nacional Institute of Perinatology, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

**VAZQUEZ-RAMOS, ALEXANDER.**

Nacional Institute of Cardiology, Indigenous Language Interpreter.

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### ***Abstract***

*This study was performed by interviews of the volunteer indigenous interpreters of the Comisión Coordinadora de Institutos Nacionales de Salud y Hospitales de Alta Especialidad (CCINSHAE) (National Commission of the National Institutes of Health and High Specialty Hospitals). The questionnaire analyzed the mechanisms used by the interpreters to learn both languages, the importance of being bilingual on their personal and working lives, and the motives they had to assist indigenous population. The vast majority of the interpreters were women in their forties; we also analyzed their experiences as interpreters while members of an indigenous community, and the engagement they had to support their usual activities together with their role as interpreters. 34% demonstrated a command of N̄hañhu (Otomi), 22% of Zapotec, and 11% of Totonac, Chinantec, Mixtec, and Mixe, six of the 68 languages of Mexico.*

**Key Words:** *Monolingual, indigenous, translation, language, Interpreters healthcare, Discrimination, Intercultural Situation.*

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### **Introduction**

In March 2011, the CCINSHAE initiated activities to support the Program for the Development of Indigenous Peoples. Five goals were established in order to provide a fair, equitable, and timely attention; fact that is reflected in the zero complaints for discrimination. Also, a census of interpreters in indigenous languages within the units was conducted, to get to know them better and invite them to participate. 14 volunteers in indigenous languages, workers of the CCINSHAE, were recruited to support the patients who do not speak Spanish and require the support of an interpreter. The census was updated and new volunteers were invited to participate.

This research aimed to the study the motivations and problems faced by interpreters in indigenous languages, seeking to improve the service that is provided facing the difficulty to communicate imposed by the barrier of a language other than Spanish.

This is the first group of workers and interpreters that due to their strong desire to serve and deep human commitment to Mexico, perform unselfishly this lofty work, to improve the technical activity of interpret, understand the concerns of the interpreters, as well as search for endorsement. They like to be of service to others and make us all proud.

We are trying to strengthen the line of work with the interpreters in indigenous languages. Since they are personnel they is participating by conviction and belief, aware that the health worker is at the service of society and is their duty to support at the maximum of their capacities, especially those people who are in a quandary. To translate languages is a great responsibility, because to express what someone else is feeling is not an easy task particularly when what is at stake, is health and life.

### **Literature Review**

Actions in the field of Linguistics and interpretation of indigenous languages in health services are few, they seek to articulate this practice between society and institutions like the Department of Health, so it becomes recognized professionally, in accordance with the political Constitution of the United States of Mexico and within the framework of the General Law of Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (DOF, 2010), "Article 7. *Indigenous languages are valid, the same as Spanish, for any public matter or procedure as well as to gain full access to any process, services, and public information...*" to make it a reality, that all indigenous speakers can freely express him/herself in their own language with no obstacles, particularly in the case of health.

Language is a human characteristic, understood as the symbolization that occurs in the thinking process and is expressed in the form of words and voice and it becomes language when written. So those of us who speak Spanish, who are monolingual in Spanish, we do not understand the Chinantec, Zapotec, Otomi, Totonac or Mixe, but what happens in the human soul of the speakers of any language is similar.

Each language has a system to express what happens and the interpreter identifies how to name these conditions and how best to translate them. So despite the fact that we have a soul and a thought that feel pain, sadness, love, and other similar feelings, regardless of the language in which they are expressed, the interpreter represents the point of union with other human beings.

The ways of conceiving health or disease vary and the different societies determine the role of translator, since he/she moves not only in two languages, but in two cultures. The INALI is working with the different populations, to create language policies in line with the Constitution, which recognizes and validates diversity.

In the field of justice, there is already a degree of intercultural training for interpreters, with a requirement of 180 hours that affords certification by labor competence by the INALI. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, indigenous languages coexisted, the vehicular languages were the Mayan, Nahuatl and there were other non-dominant languages.

In Mexico, the interpreters were documented at the time of the conquest, the famous "*La Malinche*" who spoke Mayan, Nahuatl and later Spanish, she did not belong to the Aztec nation, she was sold by her parents to a chieftain of Tabasco and in 1519 gifted to Hernan Cortes along with other 20 slaves. She became his interpreter and his lover (Conner, 2003) (Biografiasyvidas, 2013) was instrumental during the conquest and boosted profound changes in culture and religion.

In colonial Mexico, Spanish was the dominant language; it coexisted with the indigenous languages that had ceased to be dominant. The priests labored to learn the indigenous languages in order to evangelize in their native languages and incorporated them into the Christian thought; it is clear there was destruction, burning of documents, people, disappearance of cultures, scary stories, but also in the process many priests observed the wonders of the indigenous civilization, joined it, they wanted to evangelize and were culturized.

Later, in the times of independent Mexico, it was decided that the education should be imparted in the "*national language*", Which? Spanish. It was assumed that a single language would be a factor of development and aggrandizement. The backwardness continued, the problem was based in other factors, not exclusively in the language.

Ironically, Maximilian who was the Emperor of Mexico, a product of the French invasion of Napoleon III, from 1864 to 1867, understood multiculturalism and issued several decrees in both Spanish and Nahuatl, until 1867 when he was deposed and executed (Biografiasyvidas, 2013).

Later the "coup de grace to the indigenous culture" was when Justo Sierra (1900) conceptualized that "*The poliglosia or linguistic plurality of our country is an obstacle to the spread of culture and the formation of the full awareness of the homeland...*" (Heath, 1986).

During the revolution (1910-1917), the official policy of a "national language" sought the unification of indigenous peoples, Jose Vasconcelos said "*...a cosmic race, a new unified race, the mestizo people for the salvation of humanity...*" On the one hand, admiration of the history and indigenous vestiges and on the other self-discrimination to the indigenous part. In the middle of the 20th century various movements emerged against this idea of unification which strangles the cultures.

In the twenties, the constitutional reform in 1992, proposed a multicultural nation. Its essence would be the recognition in conditions of equality before the State of all the indigenous peoples, their culture, language rights, resources, forms of social organization, customs and traditions.

In 1994 came the armed rising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) (Raiter A, Muñoz I, 1995) with the signing of the agreements of San Andres Larrainzar (Sámano R M A, Durand A C, Gómez G G, 2000) it was established the commitment to the linguistic rights of indigenous peoples, to achieve the same social value than Spanish and to prevent discrimination.

The INALI recognizes the linguistic and cultural diversity of Mexico and has created a catalogue of national indigenous languages within 11 linguistic families, in addition to the Spanish language. These 11 families include 68 main indigenous languages of Mexico, and their 364 variants, as well as a few Guatemalan languages that are also considered languages of Mexico. The goal of the INALI is to work with interpreters to preserve indigenous cultures and support the development of indigenous peoples and to defense of their rights.

In health, we should assure the effective access to services, recognizing the linguistic and cultural diversity, with an extension of coverage that recognizes traditional medicine and provide comprehensive care. One of the objectives will be to reduce infant and maternal mortality that is statistically proven greater among the indigenous peoples. The question will be to find out what happens to our system that overall generates distance and does not benefit equally the entire population.

In the meanwhile, the work of the interpreter is vital and the ethics of the interpreters is essential. When a language is not understood, clearly specify "*excuse me, I don't understand this person, I cannot interpret him*", avoid overconfidence and those who sometimes in their desire to help, make an effort, which may be a risk, with all the ethics of labor competency. They must state clearly "*yes, I can interpret*" or "*I cannot interpret, I do not speak the same language or variant*".

## Questions of the Participants

### What is the difference between interpreter and translator?

Answer: Colloquially they are synonyms. In the Mexican Code of Criminal Procedures an interpreter or a translator are indistinct, as the figure who mediates communication between a speaker of Spanish and a speaker of an indigenous language. But technically the interpreter is the one who goes from one language to another delivering a message in oral form, and translator is the one who transfers a message in written form from one language to another.

### What is the difference between dialect and language?

Answer: Dialect is the variation within the groups of a spoken language, as in the case of Zapotec (CDI, 2012) there are different dialects in the Central Valleys, than those from the Coastal Plain; there is Mixe from low lands, and Mixe from high lands; there are also Totonac (CDI, 2012) of Puebla, Veracruz; there are Nhanhu (CDI, 2012) of different regions.

One must speak of language, and get out of the habit of using the word "dialect", that historically has carried a hidden part of discrimination implicit in it.

**The colleague and I speak Zapotec, but there are occasions in which we cannot understand each other, there are words and pronunciation that are not the same. He can understand what I say but often I cannot understand what he says, because I cannot guess the sounds that are missing in the language I speak. The colleague speaks different, very fast, so sometimes I do not understand her, for example for the number one she says "tubi" and I say "tobi".**

Answer: That is precisely what a dialect is. Variants between of same languages that have striking similarities, but also differences.

**I read Andres Henestrosa, the first Mexican and the only writer from Oaxaca to be accepted as a member of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, I understood that "language is when it's universally recognized", "dialect is local".**

Answer: This is the reality that has made dialect a language of lower category, in contempt or minimization of the indigenous languages. The term dialect exists and has the meaning of "variant of a language".

## Material and Method

We applied the interview to key informants organized as focus group (UNFPA, 2004), complemented with a research-oriented enclosure to analyze the themes identified by the key informants (Almedom AM, 2007).

A script for the interview was developed and reviewed by experts; the themes were about the way in which the interpreters in indigenous languages learned Spanish, their own language and the use of their language in an urban and indigenous context. Anecdotes of the informants were incorporated and it was implemented with focus group technique. The purpose was to analyze their motivations, feelings and aspirations.

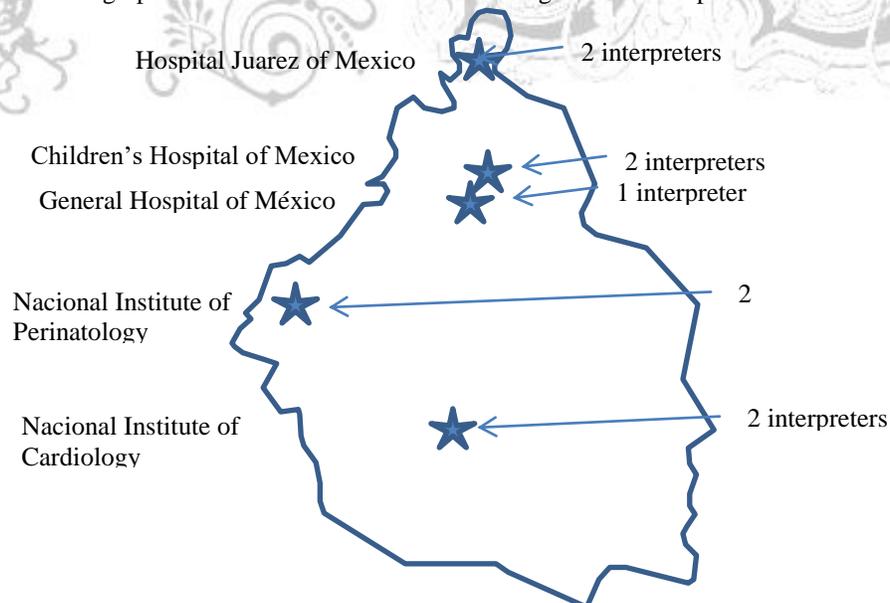
## Results

### General Data:

Age: The average was 39.5 years old, the youngest 27 and the oldest 60 years.

Gender: Females: 6 (67 %) and males: 3 (33 %)

Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of the Units of Origin of the Interpreters in Mexico City.



Source: Interpreters interviews

### Origin Units

The interpreters that attended the course, came from five of the 28 units: Children Hospital of Mexico (two interpreters, 22%), Hospital Juarez of Mexico (two, 22%), National Institute of Cardiology (two, 22%), National Institute of Perinatology (two, 22%) and the General Hospital of Mexico (one, 12%) (Figure 1).

### Participants

The interview was performed to nine of the 14 volunteers interpreters registered according to the updated census. They spoke six of the 68 national languages: 34% Otomi, 22% Zapotec, 11% Mixtec, 11% Mixe, 11% Totonac and 11% Chinantec.

### Origin of the speakers of those languages

The interpreters interviewed speak six of the 68 languages of Mexico. In the case of Otomi o Nhanhu language they represent three different regions and variants; similarly the two interpreters that speak Zapotec, from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Juchitan; of the other languages Totonac, Chinantec, Mixtec and Mixe, one interpreter of each one. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. National distribution of the indigenous languages spoken by the interpreters that were interviewed

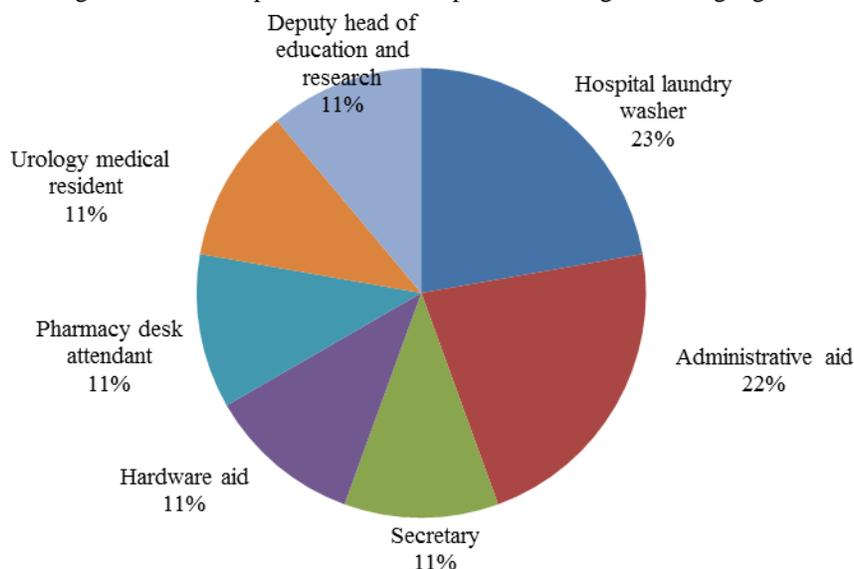


Source: Interpreters interviews

### Occupation

The occupations of the interpreters were: Hospital laundry washer (two, 22%), administrative aid (two, 22%), hardware aid (one, 11%), pharmacy desk attendant (one, 11%), Urology medical resident (one, 11%), secretary (11%), deputy head of education and research (one, 11%). (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The occupations of the interpreters in indigenous languages



Source: Interpreters interviews

## Qualitative Development and Analysis

### Do you speak this language since you were a child? Is it your mother tongue?

All the participants stated that their main language is their mother tongue, and since their childhood they have combined it with Spanish.

### How did you learn Spanish?

*"When I was ready to enter the elementary school, my grandfather said "look, you've got to speak well "Castilian" (Spanish) because you're going to go to school". They (school) were very strict, we had to speak only in Spanish, we were forbidden to speak native languages, if they discovered us talking, we were punished".*

*"In my home my parents refused to teach me Zapotec, I learned it later because my grandparents did not speak Spanish".*

These remarks fully agree with the findings of several authors (Lastra, 1992), (Vitón, 1997), (Martínez CR, Rojas CA., 2006), (Dubeau, 2011), both in Mexico and other countries with indigenous communities in intercultural situation. The findings suggest that the need of indigenous peoples to immigrate to the cities to look for work makes many parents to consciously speak in Spanish to their children to facilitate their passage through school. Also, the need to acquire the dominant language makes it easy to learn Spanish, because the greater part of urban indigenous acknowledged that Spanish represents a greater benefit, at least in the city. They continue using their indigenous language, both when traveling to their communities as well as when addressed by a person from their ethnic group, because indigenous languages both in Mexico and other countries remain as a crucial factor of attachment to community and are intrinsic part of their identity.

### At any time, did your parents explain why they didn't want you to learn it?

*"No, but I guess, it was to prevent discrimination against us".*

*"When one leaves the place of origin, even if it is only to go from the village to the nearby city, they made him feel great and themselves they felt great, because that made them different from others, and therefore, they taught their children to speak Spanish so they would not be discriminated or maybe they themselves were ashamed of their language".*

Dubeau (2011) found that *"to be prone to be distinguished from the other"* is part of the motivation to continue learning Spanish for indigenous children.

### **How do you practice the language?**

*"I came to live in Mexico City when I was 3 years old, but in our home never stopped speaking Mixtec, actually at home I speak Mixtec with all my family".*

*"I start speak Chinantec as soon as I arrive to my community, with my parents, brothers and with the people of the village".*

*"Only when I go to my village and with my friends I speak Totonac".*

*"I constantly call my sister, my mom, my dad and we speak always in Zapotec. Sometimes at work my colleagues say, just kidding, <<"I am going to make the sign of the cross", "maybe she is insulting us">>, also when I meet Goyo, we greet each other in Zapotec, I am very proud".*

*"I speak Otomi, I practice it very frequently when I speak by phone with my aunts, my parents, my brothers and sisters that is why I been able to keep it alive"*

*"I also speak Otomi and I only use it when my mom is visiting me or when I go to my village".*

*"I speak it all the time, in my job I also use it when I am called for support and each week when I go to my village. To improve my writing I am taking an associate degree in my language".*

*"My dad educated us in Spanish; I had to learn my mother tongue to speak with my grandparents, since they do not speak Spanish. When I go to my village I can speak it, but in my house nobody else speaks it. In my job people ask me: "How do you say this or that? And I like to help people".*

*"I am from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and I have not forgotten it, additionally here I like to go to "Las Velas", parties of indigenous associations and there I can practice".*

### **In your work and social environment can you speak freely your language?**

*"Whenever I meet Goyo, we say hello in Zapotec and we always speak it".*

*"Only in the form of a joke, sometimes they tell us things, but it is not problem for me".*

*"When I arrived in my village I forget completely to speak in Spanish, at home I can always speak freely".*

### **Does your family speak their language?**

Currently, they speak it with their family, parents, brothers and friends in their "village" because it's their mother tongue, so to not forget it they transmitted in a non-systematic way to their children.

In the majority of their homes the children only understand the language; they do not speak it or write it. Again, this agrees with the findings of the authors cited.

*"My whole family speaks the language; I am from the Sierra Juarez in Oaxaca".*

*"In my house everybody understand it, my children even ask me for food in our language or when they answer the phone"*

*"I speak it with my friends in the village, I rarely speak it with my parents embarrassed and we also use it when we don't want anybody to understand us".*

*"The same, my children understand it"*

*"I had not realized that my daughters understand perfectly all I'm saying, until one day I was speaking Zapotec with my sister, telling her a funny thing about my daughter: - "¡Oh mama, don't say those things"*

*Then my sister told her*

*- "Really, chamaca (little girl) you understand what we were saying?"*

*- "Yes, I understand it all"*

*My sister tested her,*

*- "To see if you really speak it, I am going to speak to your mom only in Zapotec and we will see if you really know it".*

*"My daughter translated everything".*

### **Does speaking this language give you a personal satisfaction?**

*"We're really proud. We are recognized in our work for knowing how to speak our language. I have left my daily duties because they needed an interpreter".*

*"To speak Zapotec has opened many doors for me and to be here was not difficult, in the Institute of Perinatology I found patients that require of this assistance, not long ago in December there was a case".*

*"I also try to recover my traditions, my daughter made her 15th birthday party back in our village and a Guelaguetza' with all the traditions. She read her message in Zapotec. Then began the gossip <<How could that be! Better them that come from outside! It gave us such a sense of pride, my other daughter is also preparing for her party; as well it will be a Guelaguetza".*

### **What was your reaction when you sign up to the call for interpreters?**

*"Because on several occasions I have been removed from the operating room to translate and is nice to help and see that someone recognizes you. I was so excited because I saw that this was serious".*

*"I have been working for 27 years in the Hospital Juarez; I have interpreted for four people, two from Guerrero, one from Oaxaca and one from Puebla. It was difficult, because they spoke many variants of the Mixteco. At the beginning all the data that they provided was missed because the doctors did not understand; all of these patients were in transit. A very painful case of a girl who arrived to have a delivery; when she was back in her room, she left the baby's bassinet in the corner, as far away from her bed as possible. She did not want it, but I understood; she had been raped, she did not accept her pregnancy and had not received any aid or therapy".*

*"Some of my coworkers told me, I called and they told me about the call for interpreters"*

*"To be an interpreter and participate in this group, it makes me feel even more proud of my culture and the history of my race, ancestors and Gods".*

The interpreters express openly the adaptation of their language to new words in our current context. The zapotecs call this adaptation "zapotequization", to describe new words and adapt to the situation.

*"For example I can't say computer, or blender, the closest could be "the appliance that grinds", but if I look for a way to accommodate and to give a sense of what I need to describe so it can be understood; in the monetary aspect is the same, the numbers only go up to one hundred and I have to look for ways of how to explain".*

*"My zapotec is very Hispanicized", once a paisano (a person from the same community) arrived in Mexico City, one day he called his family and told them "I am forgetting Zapotec and I cannot understand Spanish very well, his family told him, <<better come back soon, before you go mute.>> (laughter)".*

"I thought it was very interesting and that is why I did it"

"She told me, and that is why I joined".

*"I thought the call was interesting; to see from the six thousand and then some people that work in my hospital, how many speak it, yesterday the head of human resources told me I am the only representative. It is a great commitment; I speak Otomi that is why I am participating in the Otomi certification in Hidalgo. Perhaps there are others who do not admit speaking it because of shame".*

**How did you feel when you received the recognition for your role as interpreter of indigenous languages, issued by the CCINSHAE?**

*"I thought that this was only a requirement of the Hospital for certification, now I understand the true importance it deserves to face the conditions of health that are suffered by my people, but when I was called by the Head of Human Resources I felt like a queen. Forgive me for doubting".*

*"I was laughing, because a colleague told me yesterday, <<Tell me the color of your ranch, so that tomorrow you go dressed like that>> (using the typical dress of the region)".*

**What other thing(s) beyond discrimination are the reasons why people stop speaking their native languages?**

Something that leads them to stop speaking their language is the condition of marginalization and manipulation, and the educational system that has contributed to reduce the speaking of their native languages.

*"Yes, they are very easily manipulated as with the elections, <<look, mark this little flag and I give you 25 pesos>>".*

*"There should be Spanish interpreters to avoid these delays, since the support of the Federal Government does not provide coverage to the entire population".*

*"Forgive me if I contradict you, but I think that it is also them (the indigenous), who are governed by their traditions and customs, and sometimes do not allow development, probably they think that the aid is given to grab control of their village".*

*"Yes, a simple example, back in my village, I once offered my seat to a lady in the bus, and she was offended".*

*"Is not easy for them to accept gifts, often they think that there is a hidden motive or a desire to harm them. For example, the milk powder that is sent in the food provisions, sometimes because of the humidity by the time it reaches them it has formed little balls and people think they want to poison them".*

*"I think it is because they need to go ahead and forge their way, which is why it is no longer taught to their children".*

### **How to reduce the discrimination and to ensure the rights?**

All the interpreters with insistence detailed a loss of values and education, especially of the youth faced with the recognition of indigenous peoples.

*"I worked at the Pedagogical University and the students of bachelor's degree in indigenous education, all were indigenous and they were very rude, acting very defensive".*

*"On one occasion we went to Chapultepec Park with my mom, she still dresses with their "enaguas"<sup>iiii</sup>, and walking behind us to avoid an accident, stepping on her skirt. A few guys were there watching us and said <<stop the museum piece that has escaped>>, we defended her and told them "you are uneducated, you don't know that she is a proud Tehuana woman of the state of Oaxaca.>> We forced them to apologize in that instant".*

*"I think that is very important the education that as parents we provide for our children, which, by the way, young people are the most uneducated".*

*"We must use the networks of communication within hospitals and start adding everyone to begin to inform them all of our culture".*

*"To educate.... In our case we have to teach our children at home to speak our language and recognize our culture".*

### **Conclusions**

The activity of the interpreter has a high humanistic meaning, each one recount experiences that have left indelible marks, to help patients and how to receive a simple "thank you" fills them with pride. The findings of this study show that the mother tongue of interpreters is the indigenous and the main reason why they learned how to speak Spanish was because of the educational context and the need to incorporate themselves into the labor force; it was also identified how each one has achieved the rescue of their own language, to have learned the language of their parents occasionally from their grandparents and to continue to speak it.

Indigenous languages are in serious danger of disappearing derived from causes such as migration and their own low self esteem, as well as the stigma and marginalization with which speakers of indigenous languages are pejoratively treated.

Among the possible solutions in order to preserve and disseminate the indigenous languages, will require a serious and multidisciplinary work, that will also require to educate and train indigenous peoples themselves to strengthen their pride in being members of minorities and proud to speak other languages, in this case autochthonous. Request the support of institutions to achieve certification in their own languages. On the other hand, educate and inform the society about the cultural diversity that strengthens Mexico culture and traditions, recognizing that language is part of the cultural heritage; in the case of the parents to educate in an atmosphere of values, pride and recognition of multiculturalism as a society and country.

- (i) Popular Zapotec song performed by *Luz Maria Valencia Enriquez* during the training session.
- (ii) Zapotec word that means offering or present, mutual exchange of gifts and services. These relationships create a network of cooperation between families, individuals, villages and townships. (ViveOaxaca, 2013)
- (iii) The “enagua” (underskirt). The typical dress of a Tehuana, has the upper called huipil and the skirt at the bottom, under the skirt the “enagua”, made of organza flounce protrudes about 20 cm of the skirt. (México-Lindo, 2011), (Vázquez, 2012)

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