



Language as Social Resistance: Learning from and Supporting

Mam Migrants in Oregon

Presenter: Alexis Han, Global Studies Department
Mentors: Professor Derrick Hindery



Introduction

As a growing community in Oregon, Mam migrants are underserved and isolated because many are of undocumented status and have limited English and Spanish speaking ability. Informed by my internship with the Integrated Health Team of the Refugee Resettlement Coalition of Lane County, this research project presents how to best support Mam migrants and sheds light on how Mam migrants use their language as resilience.

Research Question

How do Guatemalan Mam migrants residing in Oregon use their native language as a form of resilience?

Methods

Along with secondary source analysis, I conducted qualitative research through interviews with individuals who are involved in providing interpretation services for the Mam community: two Mam interpreters, the Program Manager for Language Services at PeaceHealth, and the program manager for the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon (CIIO). Through these interviews, I learned about the importance of language and interpretation in serving the needs of the Mam people and how community members use language as a means of maintaining cultural strength.

Results

Many social and legal institutions lack the proper knowledge and/or funding to provide culturally sensitive resources in the Mam language. This makes it difficult or even impossible for Mam migrants to obtain the support and care they need.

From the classroom to the courtroom, proper interpretation plays an essential role in the resiliency and safety of Mam migrants. Both of the interpreters I interviewed noted that they were motivated to become interpreters after seeing their family members or fellow Mam migrants struggle with the language barrier.

Language is widely considered to be the single most important symbol of Mayan identity. **Colonization, systemic racism, and the many other social, cultural, and political threats to the Mam language are essentially a threat to the culture and livelihoods of the Mam people.**

In response to this need for cultural resiliency, the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon (CIIO) trains interpreters of indigenous languages from Latin America to address barriers to legal and social services for indigenous language speakers in Oregon. The importance of CIIO and programs like it are well-summarized through what the program manager said in our interview, **“language is a part of their resilience.”**

For example, healthcare workers at PeaceHealth hospital in Eugene, OR, often work with a Spanish interpreter to communicate with a client’s family member who can speak Spanish. This method threatens the accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and confidentiality of healthcare for the client.

Conclusions

Mam migrants in Oregon use their language as a form of resilience through the help of community networks that offer language services and support. Specifically, the Mam language is used as a means of:

Cultural
Longevity

Social
Support

Communal
Education

To support Guatemalan Mam migrants’ resistance and livelihoods, social institutions, government agencies, and community organizations alike in Oregon must prioritize services that will sustain the Mam language and culture. Embracing multilingualism/multiculturalism and investing in indigenous language interpretation can create more social, legal, and communal support for Mam migrants to help them maintain their native language and their cultural identity.

Acknowledgements and Outcomes

In addition to this research, I created a repository of resources for the Refugee Resettlement Coalition of Lane County that includes intercultural health tools, interpreters, organizations, and other professionals working to support the legal and social needs of Mam migrants in Oregon. Thank you to the RRCLC for my wonderful internship opportunity and for cultivating my academic research experience.