

The transfer of European intercultural discourse towards Latin American educational actors: a Mexican case study

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This paper analyses the way the discourse on interculturality and intercultural education, as coined and shaped by European anthropologists and pedagogues, is transferred from these academics to Latin American educational actors and institutions. My ethnographic data illustrates how this intercultural discourse is transferred through intellectual networks to different kinds of Mexican actors who are actively ‘translating’ this discourse into the post-*indigenismo* situation of ‘indigenous education’ and ethnic claims making in Mexico. I focus on the appropriation and re-interpretation of, as well as the resistance against, the European discourse of interculturality in two different institutions in Veracruz. Specifically, I compare the training of ‘intercultural and bilingual’ teachers through the state educational authorities and the notion of ‘intercultural education’, as applied within the so-called ‘Intercultural University of Veracruz’.

The transnational migration of the intercultural discourse

Over time, some concepts become incorporated into our daily lives, thus losing their innovative character. This incorporation generates new conceptual frameworks to explain better our changing reality. While the term ‘interculturality’ is not new, the ideological postures that frame it are. Its innumerable signifiers are generated from the context, culture, social class and traditions of knowledge from which it is constructed and enunciated. The way in which the discourse is signified in Europe and in Latin America differs. In the former it is mediated by the role of the immigrant, while in the latter the role of the indigenous actors is central to how it is understood. In both cases, the respective minorities are perceived as a ‘problem’ within society. Therefore numerous, nominally intercultural policies are developed in different areas to address this problem, particularly in education.

In the case of Europe, the notion of intercultural education was first used in the seventies (Lopez, 2009) and linked to schooling activities for migrant children. Some authors, however, have linked the emergence of intercultural education to the decade of the 1960s, when the European Council defined guidelines relating immigration with intercultural education proposals. In the eighties, these programmes were no longer considered exclusive to migrants and the concept of ‘intercultural education for all’ was coined (Ytarte, 2002). In the case of Latin America, however, the origin and management of the term is related to indigenous and/or social movements and with so-called intercultural bilingual projects in Peru and Ecuador, financed by the German development cooperation agency GTZ (López, 2009). Some authors suggest that in a simultaneous manner, in Europe and Latin America, the original term was adopted and disseminated by European and international financial organizations (Muñoz et. al., 2002).

It is probable, as López suggests, that organizations and agencies such as GTZ, UNESCO, UNICEF, OAS, ILO and the World Bank did not create the concept nor initiate the discourse of interculturalism. Nonetheless, they played a dominant role in its formalization, through activities and financing of educational programmes and projects. These activities built upon the pioneer work of Esteban Emilio Monsonyi and Omar González Nájuez, who already in 1970 had defined the concept of interculturalism linking it to the educational field (González Nájuez, 2001; López, 2009). These projects subsequently triggered the transition from bilingual education to intercultural education.

Throughout this article, I will analyze in general terms how the notion of intercultural discourse emerged and evolved in the Mexican context. I will utilise an analytical model for understanding discursive migration (Mateos Cortés, 2011) in order to compare case studies from the state of Veracruz. This enables conclusions on discourse transfers to be drawn from a critical anthropological perspective, that is, the viewpoint of an 'anthropology of the South' (Krotz, 1997),

***Indigenism* and intercultural discourse in Mexico**

In Mexico, the concept of interculturalism was officially adopted within the educational system in 1996 (Schmelkes, 2006b; López, 2009). Nevertheless, previous studies had applied this concept in the field of health and of applied anthropology, in the context of *indigenismo*, a government policy specifically formulated to 'integrate' the indigenous population. The National Indigenous Institute (INI) and the Department of Health had previously appropriated an intercultural focus: 'Back in 1940, after the First Inter American Indigenous Congress, intercultural initiatives were officially recognized and developed, in the field of health, within medical anthropology' (Lerín Piñón, 2004: 119). Afterwards, this field was seen to be influenced by the work of Aguirre Beltrán; his *indigenismo* thinking was strongly influenced by North American anthropologists such as Robert Redfield and George Foster, who favoured applied anthropology in intercultural situations. The latter developed the concept of 'conquest culture' (Foster, 1962), a proposal which can be understood as intercultural *avant la lettre*, which refers to asymmetrical, inter-group relations in the Latin American context as a product of the European conquest.

By contrast, the notion of 'the intercultural' appeared in a more applied sense within the same institution, INI, which under its director Aguirre Beltrán defined models of 'intercultural regions' as 'regions of refuge' (Aguirre Beltrán, 1984). These are inter-ethnic regions in which distinct human groups, specifically indigenous and non-indigenous, mestizo populations, interact and coexist. Interculturalism during this period was developed specifically to describe the moment of contact between mestizo and indigenous peoples.

With the passing of time, the term has acquired an innovative character: 'In diverse areas of Latin America the category of interculturalism has been defined, adopted and reconfigured, in the search for a solution to the educational crisis that has enveloped the continent' (López, 2009: 28). The contextual framework outlined below shows the ongoing exportation and importation of meanings related to the term, not only by organizations, but also by those who participate in a more direct way in the construction of this discourse. Various institutions, organizations, multilateral agencies, intellectual networks, formal educational systems, and indigenous or state

initiatives have given the concept an increased presence in the political, cultural, economic, legal and educational arena. The research which is analyzed here demonstrates, at a micro level, how the notion and the discourse on 'the intercultural' have been adopted and disseminated. This research is developed from an anthropological perspective within an ethnographic methodology. The study starts from the supposition that notions of interculturalism do not emerge from nowhere, but respond to processes that shape the subjects and contexts where they are generated. This study focuses on actors from the state of Veracruz, a coastal region of 'entrance' and 'passage' which has always been actively involved in processes of migration of people, objects and ideas as well as the related phenomenon of cultural hybridization (Flores Martos, 2004).

The metamorphosis of the intercultural discourse

Discourse structures reality because as human beings we form part of a 'discursive community' in which we are conversant, and despite our differences we can communicate with 'others'. Such metamorphosis does not inhibit communication or action, because by 'saying things we are doing things' and we make commitments. Hence, why does the concept of interculturality change its meaning in accordance with the individual's horizon of comprehension? How does the complex process of exercising an intercultural discourse generate transformations and diverse responses on a cultural or social level within a group? The metamorphosis of the discourse refers to a change in the meaning of words and a way of adapting them to a new context, through a dynamic, historic and open process.

The comprehension of a discourse implies the analysis of the socio-cultural conditions and roles in which they are generated, because those transmitting the discourse may assign different meanings to the terms used. Hence, addressing interculturality must involve a reflexive and critical analysis because it is a term that is constructed historically and contextually (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004). Interculturality is a concept used in educational programmes, practices and policies, and its polysemic nature has resulted in its use as a 'fashionable catch-all term for political discourse' (Cavalcanti-Schiel, 2007). In this way, 'the polysemic nature of interculturality is installed, which is constituted in a field of political powers, within which the different actors - as strategic allies or as opposing main actors - find themselves constructing their meanings and practices' (Coronado Malagón, 2006:215).

Accordingly, my study of the discursive processes the actors articulate on intercultural education starts with an analysis that permits the collection, classification and comprehension of both the divergences and convergences on the issue. This is attained by creating dialogue between both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the term; a dialogue between both dimensions enables the discovery of an underlying discursive 'grammar' (Dietz, 2007, 2009).

The challenge for intercultural studies consists in the continuous confusion between what the term 'intercultural education' means from a meta-empirical perspective, on the one hand, and what institutions and actors call 'intercultural', on the other. It represents a continuous exchange of meanings because the discourse participants are constantly modifying levels of comprehension: 'Hence, the interests and objectives related to the meaning that interculturality acquires in education are not only different, but contradictory and conflicting' (Coronado Malagón, 2006:215). This generates

‘cultural collisions’ because the traditional indigenismo ideology behind intercultural education is now exposed to another, Anglo-American or European ideology, that is more focused on migrant or other minority populations.

My analysis is based on interpretative-qualitative research, mainly using ethnographic methods (Hammersley & Atkison, 2001), which is particularly apt for registering, describing and reconstructing from an *emic* point of view, discourses of different actors. The theoretical perspective adopted to study the migratory discursive patterns combines concepts from theories on migration (Arango, 2003), transnational theory (Charle, Schriever and Wagner, 2006) and network analysis (Lomnitz, 1994). Furthermore, I employ some categories implicit to the process of knowledge transfer (Charle, Schriever and Wagner, 2006) to understand the way in which different meanings of interculturality are transported. In the following, I develop the categories that help to clarify the process of ‘meaning transfer’ among the actors studied.

Meaning transfers in process

I have adapted five heuristic categories that allow the visualization of the process that discourses on interculturality go through, to be later redefined and/or adapted to institutional or educational contexts. This aids explanation of why different forms of comprehending interculturality exist.

a) The initial cultural divergence

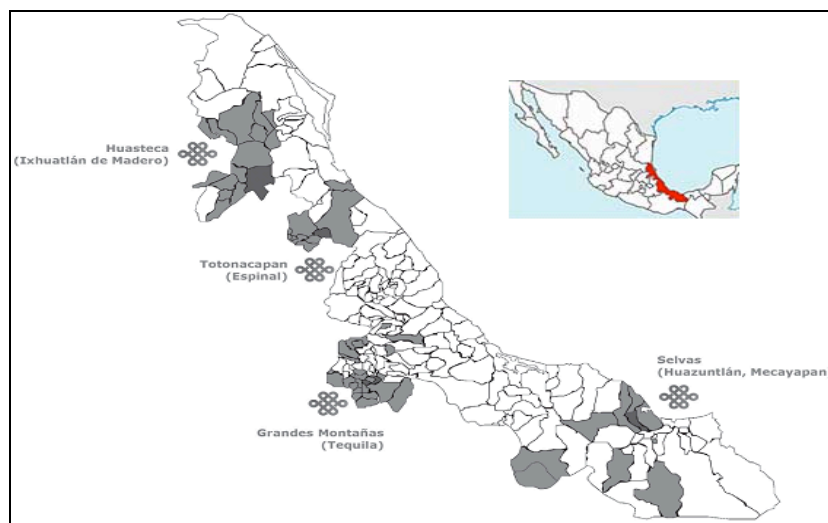
As in any type of transfer, there is both a dominant and dominated party in the transfer of knowledge and/or of ‘meaning’: one who possesses the knowledge and one who receives it, one who has the possibility or the authority to name things and one who becomes a receptor or spectator of these namings. In this dynamic process, the people involved constantly shift between the two roles: the receptor becomes the possessor and vice versa, generating what could be referred to as an ‘absence of a shared cultural tradition’ (Charle, Schriever and Wagner 2006: 176). As such, it constitutes a *cultural divergence*.

This *cultural divergence* can be viewed as being created by those aspects that separate the groups studied, such as the institutions they belong to, their educational itineraries and their approach to interculturality. I have detected that the diversity of opinions and meanings with respect to what is and is not ‘intercultural’ responds to political issues, but also to subjective aspects that are determined by each individual’s education. The *cultural divergence* category attempts to show the plural nature of the elements and the varying political, cultural and academic levels that lead to discursive differentiation among subjects who participate in the discourse on interculturality.

In my two case studies, one group belongs to the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI) and the other to the Veracruz State Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación en Veracruz*, SEV). The first is composed of instructors or trainers, persons with an established academic career and institutional status (referred to here as ‘ideologues’), course designers and classroom teachers at one of the four UVI centres ¹, located in the southern Veracruz region of *Selvas* (cf. map 1). The

¹ The UVI was created in November 2004, by an agreement between the Federal Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, SEP) and the *Universidad Veracruzana* (UV); it

second group is composed of so-called technical pedagogical consultants (ATPs), teacher trainers belonging to the Indigenous Education System, administrative staff from the Department of Indigenous Education, teachers from teacher training colleges, 'ideologues' and representatives of the SEV.



Map: The State of Veracruz and the regions covered by the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (adapted from Ávila Pardo & Mateos Cortés 2008:65)

As to the general characteristics of the groups, the first is dedicated to education, research and the promotion of intercultural education at higher education level, while the second promotes an education that aims for equality and the satisfaction of the basic learning needs of indigenous children by adopting a bilingual intercultural focus within the basic education (pre-school, primary and secondary) levels.

The educational backgrounds of the UVI staff are heterogeneous, including graduates in education, agriculture, veterinary science, communication, sociology, philosophy, linguistics and anthropology. They come from different specialities and also differ in their academic levels and degrees. Some are native speakers of indigenous languages, others are not; some live in urban and others in rural areas. The group belonging to the SEV, on the other hand, is composed of graduates in pre-school, primary and special education and social anthropology. In general, the members of both groups have entered the discourse and issues related to interculturality for academic, institutional, political or personal reasons. However, it must be noted that most entered the field accidentally, due to:

- changing disciplines or professional requirements, i.e. because their institution had adopted an intercultural focus and they had been given the task of adapting this focus to programmes and working with it;

has been the first and only institution to date within a program of intercultural universities initiated by the federal government that was created as part of an autonomous public university, and is organized in four regional centres: Huasteca, Totonacapan, Grandes Montañas and Selvas, located throughout the state of Veracruz in regions that are mainly characterized by high levels of marginalization among the mostly indigenous populations. Cf. <http://www.uv.mx/uvi/universidad/sedes.html> (accessed 07/03/2009)

- an interest in humanitarian issues;
- the perception that their original discipline did not focus on explaining aspects of their reality, while this new discipline does; or
- the circumstance that their career has led them to join an institution that works with an intercultural approach.

Hence, the category of *cultural divergence* visualises the context in which the subjects produce and reproduce discourse and demonstrates the elements that influence the process of transfer, such as social roles, cultural aspects, values and ideologies; all of which are elements that taken together compose the *internal cultural model* of the subjects in question.

b) The internal cultural model

The process of transfer involves a stage where we recognise what ‘belongs’ to us and what ‘does not belong’ to us. At this moment, reactions of resistance can serve to avoid the process of transfer, while reaffirming the implied actor’s own identity. This element that can articulate resistance constitutes the *internal cultural model*, which refers to the tradition of knowledge that guides the subject, the way of thinking the subject identifies with. In our analysis, this model is represented by those reflections that the subjects establish as a reference point for reproducing or explaining interculturality. For example, the indigenous issue in the Mexican context is a key reference point in the process of giving meaning to interculturality. The actors refer to aspects related to indigenous issues when they attempt to explain concepts such as language, ethnicity or folklore because the idea that interculturality is ‘exclusive to indigenous issues’ prevails among the actors.

c) The intermediaries

Within each group, the participants take on different roles. It is useful for our discussion to distinguish between those who *transmit* and those who *receive* discourse on interculturality. We need to distinguish those with the authority, power or expertise to define theories, philosophies and concepts relating to interculturality. On the other hand, there are participants who act as receivers, who adopt these theories, philosophies and concepts. The first group is constituted by intellectuals or ‘ideologues’ of interculturality – those who have an established academic career and play a central role in society or enjoy a certain level of institutional prestige. The second group consists of those who receive or adopt such theories – those who receive initial and/or continuous training courses related to interculturality. These individuals are, for example, teacher trainers, school teachers in primary education or UVI Selvas academics.

Intermediaries are individuals who are provided with knowledge and competences by the experts and then pass it on to the receivers. This refers to a key process of translation undertaken by the intermediaries. The ‘intermediaries play three characteristic roles: firstly, they import or export knowledge, notions and methods; secondly, they teach or transmit such knowledge, notions and methods [...] finally, they adopt notions and methods to the local culture to assure a productive and lasting implantation’ (Charle, Schriewer and Wagner 2006: 177). More specifically, intermediaries are those teacher trainers and/or educators who offer courses on

cultural diversity. They thus pass on theoretical and conceptual tools to those being introduced to interculturality. It is a role carried out by actors who form part of a very specific academic space, for instance those teaching in the Seminar on Multicultural Education in Veracruz (SEMV) - the academic unit inside the university which originally created the intercultural university². Those academics associated with the SEMV play a key role in transmitting the intercultural discourse in Veracruz because they serve as the liaison between European and Mexican intercultural discourse in order to effectively apply the variety of insights from intercultural education to a more specific context.

d) The linguistic screen

‘A crucial pre-condition [...] for successful transfer lies in the existence of an adequate vocabulary to transport concepts and new knowledge to a different cultural environment’ (Charle, Schriewer and Wagner 2006: 177). The absence of such a vocabulary makes the process of transfer difficult because transferred ideas, theories or concepts lack meaning in the context which ‘receives’ them. To this end, ‘the intermediaries [or translators] can find themselves obliged to invent new terms by combining other previously existing terms’ (Charle, Schriewer and Wagner 2006: 177), bringing about new meaning to the terms employed.

In my case studies conducted on the notion of interculturality, two dimensions of intercultural discourse have been identified: a political one and an academic one. The political dimension includes governmental institutions and NGOs, whereas the academic dimension includes teaching bodies, institutions and other educational actors. The political dimension is represented by the group of actors belonging to SEV, while the academic dimension by participants associated with the SEMV and the UVI Selvas. Both dimensions employ the notion of interculturality, but conceptualise this in different ways because the discourse takes on local characteristics.

By using the category of *linguistic screen* it is possible to demonstrate the diverse meanings that subjects assign to interculturality in each of the two aforementioned dimensions and the meanings projected from them by individuals or collective groups. The linguistic screen in the political dimension is constructed from an indigenismo paradigm. Here, interculturality addresses the continued promotion of ‘the Spanish language and instrumental literacy’ (instructor, 2006)³. Intercultural discourse in this space tends to represent a ‘folkloristic view of culture, generates stereotypes and emphasizes differences’ (instructor, 2006). Consequently, intercultural discourse relating to this aspect has essentialist tendencies, because it equates cultural diversity with ethnic groups or indigenous languages. Some educational actors perceive intercultural discourse as ‘fashionable’, because it represents a discourse that ‘promotes pedagogical innovation’ (teacher trainer, 2007) and because it ‘questions the role of the teacher and student, fostering the community participation in the education of individuals’ (SEV representative, 2007). In the educational field,

² This seminar, founded in 1996, was created as a space for reflection, education, research and promotion in this field of multi and intercultural education, where a bridge between the indigenismo discourse and the intercultural discourse has been achieved. Cf. www.uv.mx/uvi/ (accessed 19/02/2009).

³ The following quotes are taken from my ethnographic fieldwork.

interculturality can represent a 'compensatory focus that essentially continues to seek the assimilation of the indigenous members of society into national culture' (teacher trainer, 2007).

The academic dimension, on the other hand, avoids a 'paternalistic' and 'ethnocidal' indigenous focus (E-ideologue, 2007), and promotes the recognition of the plurality and heterogeneity of both indigenous and non-indigenous identities. Here, the notion of the intercultural covers a multiple, interdisciplinarily constructed discourse that is defined as a cross-cutting, mainstreaming pedagogical strategy. Its constructivist and contextualized orientation is 'related to alternative pedagogical practices and strategies' (Salvador, 2003) and promotes the ability to reciprocally recognise the diversity that exists with an emphasis on hybrid and interactive aspects.

The linguistic screen thus allows visualizing both dimensions and demonstrates that the notion of interculturality can be distinguished as one that has been constructed or redefined according to the interests of the actors. Furthermore, it is worth noting that interculturality is a category that owes its existence to a web of relations, whether indigenous or not, that was constructed by 'white people' (Cavalcanti-Schiel, 2007) to explain or integrate 'the indigenous' (ATP trainer, 2006). In the same manner, the linguistic screen of certain subjects and/or groups leads to their own identification of interculturality with the empowerment of minorities and/or with indigenous pride, while in other cases it is associated with 'intercultural education for all' (Schmelkes, 2003).

e) The fields of transfer

In order to carry out the process of transfer, a common language and some type of a connection between the concepts and the realities of reception must exist. Furthermore, a space must exist in which these exchanges can occur, where an internal application of the new external discourse can occur, i.e. a field where the transference takes place. According to my analysis, these spaces are the practical applications that subjects carry out with the external discourse they have adapted, translated or redefined to fit their contexts, i.e. the practice carried out with the linguistic screens. The project of the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* is an example of the aforementioned process; it is a demonstration of how the subjects and the discourse on interculturality are related to create certain spaces for the translation of knowledge. The creation of the UVI involved the convergence of a diversity of linguistic screens; however, once these screens were instituted, they fused to form an internal cultural model and also to generate another linguistic screen, i.e. a new notion of interculturality.

The need for a cosmopolitan and provincializing view on interculturality

A meta-discursive structure, such as the one developed in this study, may appear to be of solely intra academic relevance. However, going beyond the academic context, this study relates to a much wider project that is both intellectual and political in its aims (Lins Ribeiro & Escobar, 2006): it anthropologically resituates the knowledge and skills that are in movement, contributing thus to the provincializing of western discourses, connecting them with other areas of knowledge which need to be

cosmopolitanized from below. This avoids falling into a ‘metropolitan provincialism’ (Chakrabarty, 2000), a dimension which continues to be deeply rooted in the academy. Consequently, a world anthropology would successfully situate knowledge in space and time and engage in an ongoing dialogue with the actors being studied, using a doubly reflexive ethnographic approach (Dietz, 2009). The result would be a multiplicity of ‘anthropologies of the world/in the world’, such as those proposed and defended by Krotz (1997) as ‘anthropologies from the south’. This type of social science is situated and relational, reflexive and conscious, and thus contributes to eroding artificial disciplinary frontiers such as those canons of knowledge which are obliquely defined as ‘normal or unique’.

My research has aimed to contribute to this paradigmatic turn, which is not limited to anthropology, but instead challenges the whole range of the social sciences through a detailed analysis of the transnational migration of global intercultural discourse from the perspective of the local and regional actors that participate in this discursive migration. Drawing on a series of proposed analytical categories, this study has identified and reconstructed the trajectory of intercultural discourse that evolved in different contexts, partially Latin American, but more specifically European, until it becomes ‘grounded’ in the educational actors studied here (Mateos Cortés, 2011). The diagram below provides a simplified two-dimensional description of the extremely complex, multidimensional and multi-actor confluences and influences involved in this process.



**Figure: Discursive confluences and influences on interculturality
(Mateos Cortés, 2011)**

The multi-actor vision sketched in this diagram shows how this analysis of migrating discourses relates to the paradigmatic turn from the south, in anthropological and social sciences; it visualizes the empirical processes of discursive translation from the local perspective. The ‘translatability’ of the migrating discourse is not reducible to naturalistic ideas such as those proposed by Sperber (2002, 2005). Sperber develops an ‘epidemiology of representations’ (2002: 92, 2005: 58) which he uses to analyse how cultural representations migrate from one context to another and how they are

disseminated, in a causal relationship, which can be empirically studied. Clearly, by choosing distributional epidemiological models, Sperber's analytical framework is based on the natural sciences. In this sense, I agree with Díaz de Rada's (2010) criticism of the underlying correlational logic of Sperberian attempts to substitute an interpretative analysis for another, supposedly, causal relationship. Representations such as those analyzed in this study in relation to intercultural discourse are not reducible to causalities, but rather, in the words of Díaz de Rada, reflect conventions, referential word meanings that are only interpretable in terms of their specific contexts. They cannot therefore be reduced to aggregations of elements such as those that might be part of a pseudo-scientific 'viral epidemiology' of discourse migrations or transfers (Díaz de Rada, 2010).

Migrating knowledges, discourses that are transferred in space and time, therefore are not analyzable in terms of their content, as this would result in the substantialisation and essentialisation of their characteristics. Instead, it is necessary to study and compare the processes of intercultural mediation and translation that occur within their fields of transfer (Charle, Schriewer and Wagner, 2006). The dimensions of mediation and transfer distance us even more from the epidemiological approach and bring us closer to what Santos (2005, 2006) defined as an 'ecology of knowledge':

'This ecology provides a departure point to assert that the important thing is not to see how knowledge represents what is real, but rather to know what specific knowledge produces which reality, how it intervenes in what is real. We are seeking a pragmatic conception of knowledge' (Santos, 2006: 26-27).

Accordingly, the study of discourse as migrating knowledge requires a dimension that is relational, not substantial, that is contextual and pragmatic, not *a priori* given, in relation to both discourses and the protagonists who transmit the discourses. As our examples from Mexico illustrate, the migration of the interculturality discourse triggers a huge variety of responses by local and regional educational actors. These processes of transfer and translation, but also of resistance, reappropriation and resignification prove the dynamic, creative and hybrid nature of contemporary knowledge exchanges between the global 'North' and the global 'South'.

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List of Acronyms

ATP	<i>Asesor Técnico Pedagógico</i> (technical pedagogical consultant)
CGEIyB	<i>Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe</i> (General Coordination for Intercultural and Bilingual Education)
DGEI	<i>Dirección General de Educación Indígena</i> (Directorate General for Indigenous Education)
GTZ	<i>Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit</i> (German technical cooperation)
IIE	<i>Instituto de Investigaciones en Educación</i> (Educational Research Institute, Veracruzana University)
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INI	<i>Instituto Nacional Indigenista</i> (National Indigenist Institute)
LdEI	<i>Laboratorio de Estudios Interculturales</i> (Laboratory for Intercultural Research), University of Granada
OAS	Organisation of American States
SEMV	<i>Seminario de Educación Multicultural en Veracruz</i> (Seminar of Multicultural Education in Veracruz, Veracruzana University)
SEP	<i>Secretaría de Educación Pública</i> (Federal Ministry of Education)
SEV	<i>Secretaría de Educación de Veracruz</i> (State Ministry of Education)
UNED	<i>Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia</i> (National Distance Education University, Madrid)
UNESCO	United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund
UV	<i>Universidad Veracruzana</i>
UVI	<i>Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural</i>