Sociolinguistic challenges of trilingual indigenous students in higher education: a systematic review

Desafíos sociolingüísticos de estudiantes indígenas trilingües en la educación superior: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

This systematic review examines the sociolinguistic challenges faced by trilingual Indigenous students in higher education in Latin America from 2020 to 2024. The methodology used in this review was adapted from Kitchenham's Procedures for Performing Systematic Reviews (2004) and incorporated ideas from Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as outlined by (Urrútia & Bonfill, 2010). Twenty-five peer-reviewed articles were selected based on their focus on three main languages, namely, Spanish, English and Indigenous languages in higher education in Latin American countries. The results suggest the need to pay more attention to the region's underrepresented Indigenous languages, such as Bribris, Nasa, Misak, Guaymis, and others. Therefore, the review highlights the importance of developing academic programs with an intercultural perspective and implementing concrete language policies to ensure inclusion, equity and cultural preservation.
Keywords: Multilingualism, Amerindian language, university student, sociolinguistics

Resumen

El objetivo de esta revisión sistemática es analizar los desafíos sociolingüísticos de los estudiantes indígenas trilingües en la educación superior en América Latina de 2020 a 2024. La metodología utilizada en esta revisión fue adaptada de los Procedimientos para realizar revisiones sistemáticas de Kitchenham (2004) e ideas de elementos de informe preferidos para revisiones sistemáticas y metaanálisis conocida en inglés como PRISMA, descritos

por (Urrútia & Bonfill, 2010). Los veinticinco artículos seleccionados incluyen las tres lenguas principales, como español, inglés y lenguas indígenas en la educación superior en países latinoamericanos. Los resultados de esta revisión sugieren la necesidad de prestar más atención a las lenguas indígenas poco abordadas en estudios de la región, como los Bribris, Nasa, Misak, Guaymis entre otras. Por lo tanto, se requieren programas académicos con una perspectiva intercultural y promover políticas lingüísticas concretas para asegurar la inclusión, la equidad y la preservación cultural.

Palabras Clave: Multilingüismo, lengua amerindia, estudiante universitario, sociolingüística

Introduction

In recent years, studies have been conducted on sociolinguistic challenges and barriers most Indigenous students face in higher education, particularly in multilingual settings. In Latin America, ideologies of imperialism and colonialism have determined the level of hegemony of languages, Spanish or English (Ives, 2015). This linguistic status not only privileges dominant languages in academic and professional contexts but also contributes to excluding and marginalizing Indigenous languages, discouraging language use and preservation (Baker et al., 2024).

Trilingualism in Indigenous higher education emphasizes the possibility of incorporating Indigenous languages, Spanish and English while respecting students' cultural and academic needs (Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2022; Riquelme-Sanderson et al., 2024). Other approaches such as contextualized bilingual and trilingual education, intercultural pedagogies, and multilingualism, can preserve Indigenous languages while providing students with the communicative competencies required for academic and professional advancement. A study conducted in the Chimborazo region of Ecuador revealed that Kichwa-speaking students reported experiencing linguistic discrimination and cultural marginalization as university students (Armijos Monar et al., 2018). In this sense, the study shows the importance of examining students' perceptions of different languages shaped by beliefs and ideologies, which are crucial understanding the students' behavior.

Despite the growing number of studies on multilingualism, there remains a notable gap in studies that specifically explore the experiences and attitudes of trilingual Indigenous students towards Spanish, English, and minority languages. This gap limits our understanding of how sociolinguistic factors such as language prestige; identity negotiation and institutional policies affect students' academic integration and cultural self-perception. Furthermore, the underutilization of mixed-methods studies hinders the ability to integrate quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain holistic and comprehensive insights into the phenomenon (cf. e.g., Botha, 2011; Preece, 2020).

In light of the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of Indigenous students in higher education across Latin American countries, this systematic review examines recent scholarship published between 2020 and 2024. It aims to identify and synthesize the main sociolinguistic challenges encountered by trilingual Indigenous students in higher education in Latin America. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the linguistic inequalities that persist in academic settings and to inform future research, policy development, and pedagogical practice. Ultimately, this review offers a comprehensive analysis of how language hierarchies, identity negotiations and institutional dynamics shape the educational experiences of trilingual Indigenous students in Latin America.

Materials and Methods

As mentioned in the Introduction, this study adopts a systematic review design, which involves a structured and transparent process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant literature. Key steps include establishing specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, such as the geographical location, language uses, and identified research methods. Following Kitchenham's (2004) procedures, this review also integrates empirical and theoretical perspectives to provide a holistic view regarding

trilingual students in higher education. The central research question guiding this systematic review is:

RQ: What are the sociolinguistic challenges of trilingual Indigenous students in higher education, as reported in studies conducted between 2020 and 2024 in Latin America?

The methodology used in this study combines Kitchenham's Procedures for Performing Systematic Reviews (2004) with ideas from the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), as outlined by Urrútia and Bonfill (2010). Both methods were chosen to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability throughout the review process. The dates of the article's publications were verified using Google Scholar as external evidence.

1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria preview the characteristics required and not required in this study. It is a selection of papers relevant to this study

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Latest publication (2020-2024)	Articles out of this time frame
Geographical location (Latin America countries with Indigenous population)	Articles from a different continent or region without Indigenous population
Trilingual / multilingual educational settings	Monolingual or Bilingual educational or non-educational settings
Focus on identity, language attitudes and Educational inequalities	Focusing on unrelated themes
English or Spanish publication	Other languages rather than English and Spanish

Source: own elaboration

2. Search procedure

Once we decide on the research objectives and inclusion and exclusion criteria, we design a search plan.

Create a search strategy criterion.

a. Keywords: sociolinguistics, language attitudes, Indigenous students, trilingualism
b. Semantic search questions using Boolean operators in a single-line search
c. Database selection: Google Scholar, Zotero, Eric, Elsevier, Academia, Web of Science (open access), Chatpdf (ethically used)
d. Inclusion and exclusion criteria considered (Table 1)
e. Preview the articles to follow the selection process.

3. Selection process

The selection process implied reading, screening, analyzing and refining the documents, which was oriented by prearranged inclusion and exclusion criteria. It was an opportunity to consider studies if they were (a) published between 2020-2024, (b) geographically located in Latin American countries, (c) developed in trilingual or multilingual environments, (d) focused on identity, language attitude, and educational inequalities and (e) English or Spanish publications. Exclusion criteria included those articles out of the time frame, different regions or continents with no Indigenous population, Monolingual or Bilingual educational or non-educational settings and those with unrelated topics and languages (Table 1).

Articles were extracted from online databases, including Google Scholar, Academia, and Web of Science (open access). The 349 articles were imported into Zotero, an open-access reference management tool for citation and referencing (*Zotero*, n.d.). Fifty were selected following the inclusion criteria (Table 1); however,

25 were eventually excluded, resulting in 25 qualified articles to examine in this study (Table 2).

Figure 1

Selection Process
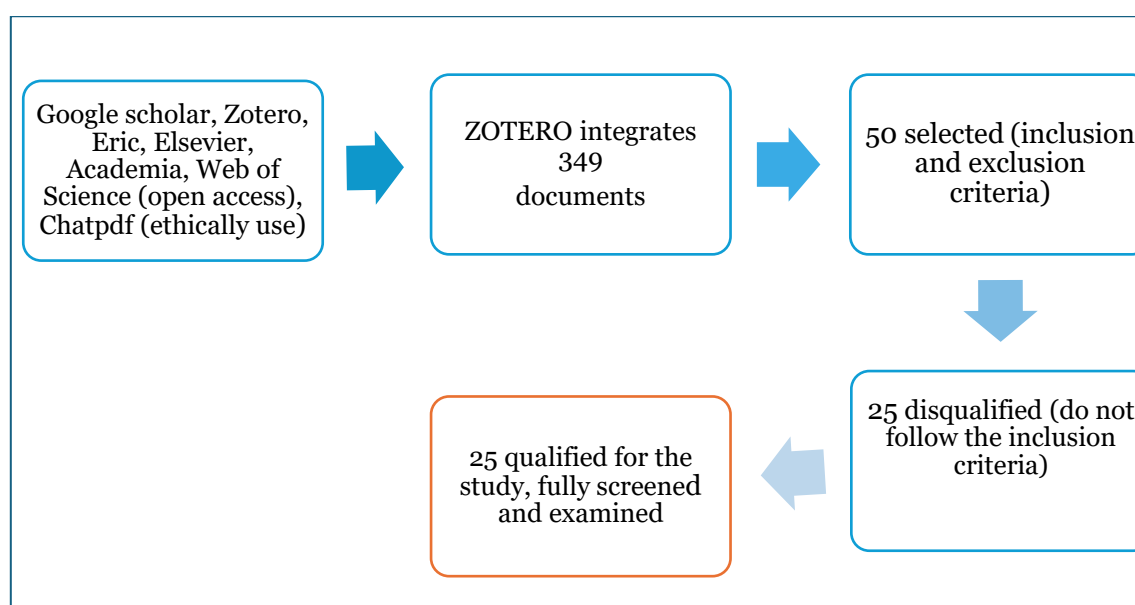
Source: own elaboration

4. Quality assessment

An evaluation tool consisted of a set of four questions was elaborated to maintain the quality and relevance of the selected studies. These questions were designed to ensure that each article met the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to maintain the methodological integrity and consistency of the review process. Although 30 articles were initially considered, only those meeting all quality standards were included in the final analysis.

The criteria used for evaluating quality were as follows:

- o Does the article explicitly refer to Indigenous students toward languages?
- o Does the article focus on trilingual or multilingual environment?

o Does the study's topic address the challenges of Indigenous speakers in higher education?
o Does the study indicate the main research method?

Results

Table 2 shows the articles chosen according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Out of the 25, selected articles, five were published in 2020 during COVID-19, two in 2021, five in 2022, five in 2023, and eight in 2024. This systematic literature review indicates that Colombia leads in publishing articles related to language attitude, identity, and sociolinguistic issues, followed by Mexico in second place and Peru in third.

In the review of the 25 articles, 13 ethnic groups with their corresponding Indigenous languages were identified. We observed that Quechua, a broadly spoken Indigenous language, represents 13% of the total. The Zapoteco language follows closely at 12%, while the Bribris, Aymaras, Mayans, and Nahuas each account for 9%. The Misak, Malecus, Mixtecos, Nasas, and Purépecha groups represent 6%, and the Kichwa and Mapuche languages comprise 3% of the total (Figure 2). In terms of dominant languages, 14 articles were published in Spanish, while 11 were published in English. Furthermore, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru accounted for 72% of the publications in this field, while Costa Rica, Chile, and Ecuador comprised the remaining 28%.

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Figure 2

Ethnic groups and Indigenous languages
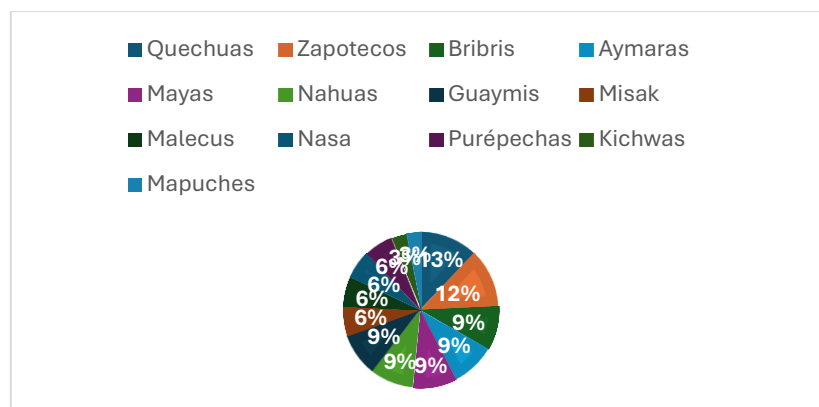
Source: own elaboration

Regarding research methods, 68% of the articles were qualitative studies, 24% mixed methods, and 8% adopted quantitative approaches. We observed a tendency to use more qualitative methods for the articles with a mixed method. Additionally, one of the studies was conducted using a longitudinal design.

The two major areas identified in this review were language attitudes, sociolinguistic context and identity. In this sense, 60% concentrated on language use and attitudes in higher education, while 40% was derived from sociolinguistic context and identity. Each area indicated keywords such as positive attitude, interlinguistic contact, dialects, opinions, foreign languages, and others in language use and attitude. Regarding sociolinguistic context, and identity, we found keywords such as identity, ideologies, cultural heritage, native language, hegemonic languages, marginalization, and others.

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Table 2

A general description of the twenty-five scientific articles included in the systematic revision, published between 2020-2024

Authors/year/country	Method	Population/context	Instruments	Relevant Findings
1.(Ochoa Yupanqui, 2020) Perú	Qualitative	Collaborators from two regions, Quechua speakers	Semi structured interview, used a tape recorder to record their opinions.	Positive attitude toward Spanish because of prestige at workplace.
2.(López Gil & Chamorro Mejía, 2020) Colombia	Qualitative	53 first semester student from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia	matched-guise and a questionnaire, instruments	Assessments of the dialects and opinion on the Bogota accent strongly associated with forms of academic orality.
3.(Haboud Bumachar et al., 2020) Ecuador	Qualitative	69 participants, from Parroquia La Esperanza Angochagual	Participant and non-participant observation, sociolinguistic interviews, observation guides	They learn Spanish and foreign languages instead of native ones.
4.(Enríquez & Ávila, 2020) México	Mixed	200 students' higher education medium level Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo University	Seven questions inquiring about Indigenous languages, beliefs and attitudes	Positive attitude toward Indigenous languages even though the Spanish hegemony and prestige.
5.(Heredia Arboleda et al., 2020) Ecuador	Qualitative	30 participants from different English levels of a Public University located in the highlands of Ecuador	Phenomenological interviews and questionnaires.	The absence of cognitive justice in English classes makes Indigenous students feel like folklore producers instead of engaged Ecuadorian citizens for an inclusive society.

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Authors/year/country	Method	Population/context	Instruments	Relevant Findings
6.(Klenner Loebel et al., 2021) Chile	Qualitative	16 Young Mapuches students seven males and nine females.	Semi structured interview	A positive attitude does not interfere with the Mapuche identity construction.
7.(Cruz Velasco, 2021) Mexico **Continuation**	Qualitative	speakers of native languages and Spanish, bilinguals in foreign languages, and educators.	review of literature and secondary data.	Cultural bias in language policies in favor of foreign languages
Authors/year/country	**Method**	**Population/context**	**Instruments**	**Relevant Findings**
8.(Mahecha Ovalle, 2022) Colombia	Mixed	Publications related to linguistic attitudes in Colombia between 1999-2021	- Atlas.ti software to organize and analyze qualitative data, following the PRISMA Declaration guidelines for systematic data review and extraction.	It recognizes the cultural identity of minority languages, as bilingualism processes should be directed toward populations with their languages.
9.(Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2022) Colombia	Mixed	125 undergraduate Indigenous students enrolled in 50 academic programs at Universidad del Valle.	sociolinguistic survey, field notes, interviews, and documents.	Indigenous students resist dominant narratives from hegemonic languages.
10.(Marín Esquivel, 2022a)Costa Rica	Quantitative	204 registered students in Science of Language and literature at UNC 2020.	A descriptive questionnaire of 24 closed questions using Google Forms	Most of the students perceived the indocostarican languages linked with cultural wisdom.
11.(Marín Esquivel, 2022b) Costa Rica	Quantitative	204 students who have attended a foreign or native language course in the last 6 years.	Likert and semantic differences	Instrumental motivation is associated with foreign languages while integrative motivation is related to native languages.
12.(Gutiérrez & Aguirre Ortega, 2022) Colombia	Qualitative	Low ethnic students' retention rate, in 2019 Embera, Senú,	Theme selection, free conversations, lessons implementation	Marginalization of spaces for Knowledge to Indigenous students and the need of

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Continuation...		Pastos, Coyaima-Natagaima and Kankuamo,		generating more culture sensitive themes in ELT.
13.(Álvarez Valencia & Valencia, 2023) Colombia	Qualitative	Indigenous students who have been historically marginalized in higher education	informal chats, surveys, and class activities classroom observations to inquire about students'	Indigenous students face financial and cultural barriers in higher education.
14.(Arán Sánchez et al., 2023) México	Qualitative	perceptions of six key informants,	in-depth interviews as part of the narrative and biographical method.	Students experience acculturation process that makes them abandon their native language in favor of the use of Spanish.

Authors/year/country	Method	Population/context	Instruments	Relevant Findings
15.(Aranibar Ramos et al., 2023) Perú	Mixed	Google users	Google Trends to analyze and compare search volumes longitudinally.	The linguistic diversity in Peru varies by region and language, with Quechua being the most searched Indigenous language and linguistic discrimination.
16.(Zavala, 2023a) Peru	Qualitative	838 students enrolled in different Quechua courses.	Conducted participant observation in Quechua courses along with interviews and documentary data.	There is a need for young Quechua learners to maintain cultural heritage and build a multicultural identity at the same time.
17.(Cortes & Terán, 2023) Colombia	Qualitative	39 students concerning minority languages.	structured survey and documentary analysis.	Determine the impact of these ideologies and the difference between those who have had contact with these languages and those who haven't.

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Authors/year/country	Method	Population/context	Instruments	Relevant Findings
18.(Ramírez López, 2024) Mexico	Qualitative	5 English teachers in the context of the Yucatan Peninsula.	Interviews and discourse analysis	ELF paradigm visible and research route articulated with intercultural education in the Mexican context.
...al., 2024) Costa Rica [Continuation...]	Qualitative	6 Bribris participants linked to Pueblos y Territorios Indígenas de la Universidad de Costa Rica, y el Movimiento Indígena Interuniversitario	The phenomenological method in the research design, analysis of the data collected. In-depth interviews and focus groups, as information collection techniques.	The sociocultural influence the permanency of Bribris students in higher education in Costa Rica highlighting the cultural identity and community support.
20 (Olaya Mesa, 2024) Colombia	Qualitative	Research reports conducted between 2014 and 2023 from databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest, EBSCO host, and Google Scholar	Selecting analysis units, coding data, and categorization	There is a need for professionals to engage internationally highlighting the importance of transforming the cultural environment of universities.
Authors/year/country	**Method**	**Population/context**	**Instruments**	**Relevant Findings**
21. (Sanabria et al., 2024) Peru	Mixed	128 students in higher education	qualitative-ethnographic methodology and quantitative methodology, as well as with the interview, participant observation and performance techniques,	Student prefer to speak in Spanish and not in Quechua or Aymara influenced by sociocultural factors present in the university.
22.(Riquelme-Sanderson et al., 2024) Chile	Qualitative	Indigenous communities: Mapuche	Critical ethnographic methodology focused in the literature review	The teaching of English can be considered a valuable tool for revitalizing in Chile.
23. (Sartorello et al., 2024) Mexico	Qualitative	11 Indigenous students, 7 women and four men, Indigenous	semi-structured interviews	Indigenous students have shown remarkable resilience. Students have formed support networks

		languages: Totonaku, Popoluca, Ch'ol, Tzotzil Náhuatl, Ñuu savi, Zapoteco	open thematic maps, recording and transcription of responses.	and developed strategies to adapt to an academic environment that often does not recognize their cultural and linguistic diversity.
24.(Concepción Valverde, 2024) Mexico	Qualitative	Indigenous students from Maya and Zoque ethnic groups	Interviews, conversations and life narratives	Multiple barriers are identified, including cultural, community, family, and economic factors affecting their decision to study and educational experience.
25.(Pérez-Castro, 2024) Mexico	Mixed	25 Indigenous students at UNAN. 16 women and 9 men	In-depth interviews in a sample of Indigenous students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico	Indigenous students face significant language, academic and social barrier in the university.

Source: own elaboration

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Conclusion

The discussion section is organized into three major themes arising from the literature. These themes show the complex environment where trilingual Indigenous students move in a Westernized university context in Latin American countries. The themes are related to (1) Language hegemony and ideology, (2) Cultural Identity, and (3) Educational Inequalities. This thematic structure provides a coherent framework for Indigenous sociolinguistic and sociocultural landscapes to be perceived in higher education in most Latin American countries.

Based on the data gathered here, it is interesting that most of the articles under analysis--particularly, 25-- were published between 2020 and 2024, during or shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2). This temporal clustering of articles could reflect an increased academic interest in language attitudes, identity, and sociolinguistic issues in Latin America, even though a complete bibliometric analysis was not conducted.

Theme One: Language hegemony and ideology

Language hegemony occurs when one language becomes instrumental for the speaker who needs to survive and belong to the dominant society (Ives, 2015). Ochoa Yupanqui, (2020) and .Enríquez and Ávila (2020) share a similar view regarding language hegemony. These scholars argue that the prestige linked to Spanish reinforces its power in the workplace and academic settings. Despite this, Enríquez and Ávila (2020) observe that Indigenous students maintain a positive attitude toward their native languages despite the Spanish dominance in their social and academic life, forcing them to adapt to the dominant system and institutional norms.

On the other hand, Sanabria et al., (2024) in Peru and Arán Sánchez et al. (2023) in Mexico, their Indigenous students prefer the use of Spanish in their daily interactions due to the acculturation pressure which makes Indigenous students abandon their native languages. In this sense, hegemonic languages and marginalization highlight the tensions, which refer to the conflicts and challenges between preserving Indigenous languages and influencing dominant languages.

Theme Two: Cultural Identity

Cultural identity has shaped the way Indigenous students interact and move in a multilingual academic and social environment in Latin American countries (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Most Indigenous students perceive languages as a tool of communication but also as a way to share their cultural values, integrity, and practices (Schwartz et al., 2008). In this line of thought, Marin Esquivel (2022) and Enríquez & Ávila (2020) point out that Indigenous speakers see their native languages as a tool for preserving their culture, traditions and norms, not only in their communities but also in external settings.

Notably, Mexico and Peru have contributed to the investigation to understand language attitudes and identity in multilingual contexts (Ochoa Yupanqui, 2020; Enríquez & Ávila, 2020). This regional distribution highlights specific national efforts to address linguistic and cultural diversity, though it also points towards uneven research coverage across Latin America. On the contrary, Klenner Loebel et al.(2021) observed, in the case of Mapuche in Chile, how a positive attitude toward a dominant language does not affect the identity construction of speakers. These contrasting positions reflect a wide ideological struggle most of Indigenous students face against identity and hegemony.

Theme Three: Educational Inequalities

Education can open and transform people´s lives. However, Indigenous students often face economic, social, and educational barriers that hinder their academic development. In the past, educational inequality was viewed as a form of precarity (Aiston & Walraven, 2024); today, it is recognized as a form of injustice and unequal rights concerning resources and access to educational opportunities.

In this sense, Cruz Velasco (2021) and Concepción Valverde (2024) argue that language policies favor dominant languages, Spanish and English, overlooking Indigenous languages even in contexts where these languages are legally protected due to socio-cultural pressures. For instance, when

Indigenous students encounter limited proficiency in academic Spanish or English compared to monolingual or bilingual peers when doing any class activity, it creates a learning gap (Sartorello et al., 2024; Perez-Castro, 2024). Likewise, the absence of language policies invites stakeholders to revise the local norms in most regional universities. Even though direct evidence of institutional revisions of language policies for Indigenous students remains insufficient. Consequently, Sartorello et al. (2024) highlight the urgent need to create academic spaces in the curriculum, including linguistic and cultural elements focused on Indigenous students' needs.

On the other hand, the extensive use of qualitative methods (68%) indicates a strong tendency to explore the complex aspects of language attitudes and sociolinguistic issues. Most ethnolinguistic researchers highlight more on the subject's perceptions and behaviors rather than relying on statistical information. However, there is a limited use of mixed and quantitative methods (32 %). This low representation of quantitative methods suggests an opportunity to reinforce methodological diversity in research.

This review has summarized recent scholarship on the sociolinguistic challenges facing trilingual Indigenous students in Latin America between 2020 and 2024. The evidence suggests that institutional language policies possibly derived minimal support to Indigenous languages in academic settings (Cruz Velasco, 2021;Heredia Arboleda et al., 2020). It is evidenced by how Indigenous students strive to be recognized and visible in hegemonic narratives and discourses within the academic system (Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2022).

Regarding cultural identity, this review reveals the struggles Indigenous students have to preserve their language and cultural identity by accommodating themselves to navigate the Westernized academic field (Zavala, 2023). It finally points towards persistent inequalities encountered in the educational system in Latin American countries, where multiple language barriers and sociocultural factors   affect Indigenous students' success in higher education (Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2022). Even with these challenges, most Indigenous students have shown persistence and strategic adaptability by constructing networks to make adaptation to be functional in higher education(Sartorello et al., 2024).

This review had some limitations. The author acknowledges that a verification of the published date is needed. These articles' publications were verified using Google Scholar as the main database. The articles published more than five years ago and those from non-Latin American countries were excluded, which may limit the inclusion of potentially relevant studies outside this criterion. Moreover, the focus on trilingual and multilingual issues, particularly Indigenous languages, diminishes findings and may reduce the possibility of adapting them to broader sociolinguistic contexts.

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