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Beyond bilingualism: an additive trilingual equity agenda for Indigenous English education in Latin America

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English language education is expanding across Latin America, yet Indigenous populations continue to face systemic barriers in accessing quality instruction. This perspective examines the structural, cultural, and pedagogical challenges that shape Indigenous students' experiences and develops four through lines: the inadequacy of one size fits all teaching models that ignore multilingual realities; the fraught relationship between English and cultural identity when programs are not designed additively; emerging examples such as trilingual teacher preparation, intercultural universities, and technology assisted instruction that show context sensitive promise; and the policy implications of these patterns for sustainable scale. We argue that effective English instruction does not have to undermine Indigenous identity. We propose an Additive Trilingual Equity Model that conditions English as a third language on institutional guarantees for Indigenous language literacy and academic Spanish, and we introduce practical criteria for judging whether programs are scalable and sustainable in Indigenous settings. Applying this lens to widely cited initiatives such as Plan Ceibal, English Opens Doors, and Naatik, we distinguish between access gains and transferability, and we stress the need for independent long term evaluation. The article concludes with a regionally grounded research and policy agenda and three falsifiable predictions about the conditions under which English learning can rise without eroding Indigenous languages. The analysis reframes success from adding English to securing multilingual learning conditions that endure, offering a path to protect linguistic rights while expanding access to global language skills.

KEYWORDS

intercultural universities, intercultural bilingual education, translanguaging, teacher preparation, technology-assisted instruction, Plan Ceibal, English Opens Doors

Introduction

Indigenous people in Latin America, numbering approximately 42 million across the region (World Bank, 2015), have historically faced educational inequities. These communities span hundreds of ethnicities. Education indicators reveal significant gaps; for example, only 21% of Indigenous young adults complete secondary school in Panama, versus 61% of their non-Indigenous peers (UNESCO, 2020). In parts of Mexico, as little as 5% of rural Indigenous youth finish their secondary education (Sanchez, 2024). Such disparities are rooted in factors, such as poverty, geographic isolation, and linguistic barriers. Indigenous students often attend

under-resourced schools with inadequately trained teachers and curricula that do not reflect their cultural backgrounds (Ames, 2023). In this context, the push for English language education as a tool of economic and social mobility has gained momentum in Latin America. English proficiency is increasingly valued as a gateway to better jobs and higher education, part of a global trend viewing English as a “lingua franca” for international opportunities. However, the implementation of English education in Indigenous communities raises questions. How can English be taught effectively in remote areas, where basic educational infrastructure is lacking? How can new language learning be balanced by the preservation of Indigenous languages and identities? We advance this perspective by introducing an Additive Trilingual Equity Model (ATEM) that conditions English as L3 on institutional guarantees for Indigenous-language literacy and academic Spanish, and by proposing criteria for scalability and sustainability tailored to Indigenous communities. We align these proposals with recent regional evidence and apply them to well-known initiatives (Plan Ceibal, English Opens Doors, Na’atik) to assess not only what works, but what transfers and under which conditions.

In this line, the objective of this article is to analyze the challenges and opportunities of English education for Indigenous populations in Latin America by synthesizing evidence from policy reports, ethnographic studies, and classroom-based research. Our contribution lies in bringing together critiques of existing models, insights from Indigenous and community scholars, and illustrative case studies to argue that English education can only be effective if it is embedded in intercultural, additive, and culturally sustaining pedagogical frameworks. To support our arguments, we foreground peer-reviewed Latin American scholarship (2020–2025) alongside a limited set of institutional reports for program scope. We emphasize studies from Chile, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Uruguay on intercultural bilingual education, translanguaging, teacher preparation, and program evaluation, and we de-emphasize gray literature except where no academic equivalent exists. This approach ensures that recent Latin American voices are at the center of the analysis while maintaining a balanced view of program evidence. Case examples such as Plan Ceibal, English Opens Doors, and Na’atik (shown in next subsections) were chosen purposively because they are among the most frequently cited programs in the region’s English education landscape and illustrate diverse delivery models (state-led, hybrid, and community-based). While not exhaustive, this purposive sampling approach provides an overview of the approaches currently shaping Indigenous English education in Latin America.

Our stance is that English education can be additive rather than subtractive for Indigenous learners, but only when it is embedded in a trilingual design that secures Indigenous-language literacy and sustains academic Spanish. We describe this as an Additive Trilingual Equity Model (ATEM). This framework operationalizes Latin American debates on interculturality and decoloniality (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano and Ennis, 2000) into program design principles. It is supported by recent evidence: in Chile, analyses of Mapudungun revitalization and intercultural schooling reveal gaps between policy aims and classroom realities (Mansilla-Sepúlveda et al., 2025; Moya-Santigos and Quiroga-Curín, 2022); in Mexico, COVID-era studies show that instruction often excluded Indigenous languages, reinforcing structural inequities (Córdova-Hernández and Zamudio, 2022). We also draw on critiques of current intercultural bilingual education reforms in Peru that

document both resource shortages and digital opportunities for Indigenous learners (Liñán et al., 2023). By grounding our stance in this regional scholarship, we move beyond synthesis and propose a perspective with testable hypotheses for Latin America.

Critique of current models

The current models of English education in Indigenous regions of Latin America have shortcomings. In some countries such as Costa Rica, nearly all schools offer English. However, very few others do so in practice. For example, Costa Rica has English in 100% of secondary schools. In contrast, in Panama, as of the mid-2010s, only about 11% of public schools offered English classes. These were mostly outside the Indigenous regions (Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017). Qualified teacher shortages are equally problematic in rural Indigenous areas. For instance, in Peru, only 27% of secondary English teachers are officially licensed to teach the subject (Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017). Evidence from Mexico confirms that when Indigenous students were forced to rely on Spanish-only instruction during COVID-19, inequities in learning outcomes widened, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities (Córdova-Hernández and Zamudio, 2022).

Existing programs often use a one-size-fits-all approach, which fails to accommodate the bilingual context. Bilingual intercultural education (IBE) policies in countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Mexico promote teaching in Indigenous languages, alongside Spanish. However, these are typically bilingual programs (Indigenous language–Spanish) and rarely extend to a trilingual model that incorporates English as an additional language. Typically, English classes in Indigenous schools rely on rote grammar translation. They often ignore students’ mother tongues, which hinders their comprehension and engagement. Without culturally relevant materials, learners struggle to connect English with their daily lives. Consequently, their proficiency levels remained extremely low. Available studies and test results confirm that English proficiency outcomes in Indigenous schools are far below national averages. This illustrates a broader pattern of limited achievements. In other words, inputs have expanded faster than capacity: access has grown unevenly, while teacher pipelines, Indigenous-language guarantees, and governance continuity have not kept pace, which helps explain persistently low attainment even where coverage has improved.

Many Indigenous community schools lack consistent access to libraries, electricity, Internet, and appropriate English materials. For students not yet fully fluent in Spanish, English effectively functions as a third language, and this double language barrier compounds dropout risks. Frequent teacher turnover and weak infrastructure further undermine learning. In Peru’s Amazon region, for instance, only 5.6 percent of fourth grade students in bilingual Indigenous Spanish schools achieved expected academic competencies (Agencia Fides, 2024). Although this figure concerns general learning, it underscores the depth of the educational crisis; when basic literacy and numeracy are not secured, foreign language learning is unlikely to succeed.

The prevailing models for English instruction in Indigenous Latin America are characterized by uneven access, insufficiently trained teachers, culturally inappropriate pedagogy, and resource deficits. These problems can result in poor learning outcomes. Many Indigenous students fail to attain basic English proficiency (Baracheta,

2024). Critiques of current models highlight the urgent need for reform (Zsögön, 2025). English education for Indigenous populations cannot succeed unless it is integrated into broader improvements in educational equity. This includes investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and curriculum design, which acknowledges students' bilingual realities.

These structural barriers, uneven access, low-quality instruction, and disregard for linguistic realities, not only hinder English proficiency, but also raise important questions about the cultural implications of language policy. For Indigenous communities, language is not merely a medium of instruction, but a core dimension of identity and autonomy. As such, any attempt to expand English education must also contend with how it intersects cultural preservation, language hierarchies, and power relations. The next section explores these tensions by situating English learning within broader struggles regarding identity and linguistic rights.

Cultural identity and language learning

Language learning in Indigenous contexts is intertwined with cultural identity and linguistic rights. Classroom discourse is a social action that constructs and negotiates identities and hierarchies (Wortham, 2008). Post-colonial scholarship shows that English circulates as symbolic capital shaped by colonial power structures, enabling mobility and reproduction of inequity (Pennycook, 2002; Phillipson, 1992). Indigenous learners thus speak with Bakhtin's "double voice," using English for opportunity while safeguarding ancestral languages as collective memory (Bakhtin, 2010). An additive bilingual stance—echoing linguistic anthropologists' concern for the "total linguistic fact" and for ideologies that value multiple repertoires—layers English onto first-language foundations, treating it as an extension rather than a replacement (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for culturally sustaining a pedagogy that affirms identity while maximizing the pragmatic value of English. Building on this theoretical lens, the following discussion turns to how these dynamics unfold in Latin American Indigenous communities, where the push for English education intersects with fear of linguistic erosion and cultural loss.

Indigenous communities often view language as inseparable from their heritage; therefore, the introduction of English, a global language associated with colonial history, can prompt fear of cultural and linguistic erosion. Many Indigenous languages in Latin America are endangered; community leaders worry that emphasizing English (in addition to Spanish) will further marginalize native tongues among youth. English is seen as a double-edged sword; it can offer access to global opportunities, but might diminish the use of ancestral languages if not implemented carefully. Parents and elders in some communities worry that schooling that prioritizes Spanish and English will lead children to devalue their native languages. From a post-colonial perspective, this dynamic reflects not just linguistic displacement but a continuation of hierarchical language policies that have historically privileged colonial languages over Indigenous languages. In addition to post-colonial perspectives, decolonial theory developed by Latin American scholars (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano and Ennis, 2000) highlights the persistence of 'coloniality' in knowledge and language systems, a framework particularly relevant in Indigenous contexts where English education risks reproducing colonial

hierarchies unless grounded in intercultural and community-based approaches. Studies in Chile show that Mapuche language revitalization faces constant tension between intercultural rhetoric and school structures that prioritize Spanish and English. These tensions highlight the limits of policy frameworks that do not adequately integrate Indigenous epistemologies (Mansilla-Sepúlveda et al., 2025; Moya-Santiago and Quiroga-Curín, 2022). In Peru, intercultural bilingual education reforms demonstrate that while progress has been made in integrating Indigenous languages, implementation continues to be constrained by teacher shortages and uneven digital access (Liñán et al., 2023).

Moreover, the loss of Indigenous languages often entails the loss of epistemologies embedded in those languages: ways of seeing, relating to the land, and transmitting intergenerational knowledge. Ethnographic studies reinforce these concerns. Trapnell (2003), drawing on teacher-training experiences in the Peruvian Amazon, shows that intercultural bilingual education succeeds only when it incorporates local cultural values and Indigenous pedagogical practices. Hornberger and Coronel-Molina (2004) similarly analyze Quechua language revitalization in the Andes, demonstrating how classroom practices and language policies intersect in shaping students' linguistic identities. Indigenous scholars and educators have emphasized similar points. López (2010) argues that bilingual education in Latin America must be grounded in Indigenous epistemologies to succeed. Romero (2015), in his ethnographic study of K'ichee' communities, shows how language variation and accent act as ethnic markers deeply tied to cultural identity. Romero (2012) also examines Q'eqchi' Maya language standardization, migration, and power, highlighting how policies imposed from outside communities can disrupt local linguistic practices. Similarly, Busquets (2009) emphasizes the importance of community co-designed intercultural education in Mexico, while García and Lin (2017) advance translanguaging as a framework that legitimizes Indigenous multilingual repertoires. Together, these contributions show that Indigenous and community-aligned scholars have articulated frameworks that resonate strongly with culturally sustaining pedagogy. Beyond theoretical insights, empirical evidence also supports these concerns. Large-scale studies confirm that language shifts occur rapidly among younger generations when schooling does not support Indigenous languages (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017).

At the same time, many Indigenous students have a strong desire to learn English, viewing it as a tool for economic mobility and community development (Ames, 2023). The challenge is to balance these aspirations with the preservation of cultural identity by using an additive bilingual approach. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes that incorporating Indigenous knowledge and using students' first languages in instruction can make English learning an asset rather than a threat. Building on Ladson-Billings (1995) foundational theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasizes validating students' cultural identities while promoting academic success, later scholars have advanced the notion of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris and Alim, 2017).

This framework goes further by arguing that education should not only acknowledge but also actively sustain and revitalize students' linguistic and cultural practices. Applying these perspectives to Indigenous English education in Latin America highlights the importance of positioning English not as a replacement but as an

additional resource within a multilingual repertoire. Case studies in bilingual teacher preparation in Mexico and intercultural schools in Bolivia illustrate how lessons that integrate local narratives and Indigenous epistemologies embody these principles, showing that culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies can be successfully enacted in practice.

To further situate these practices within the broader field of bilingual education, it is important to trace the theoretical origins of additive bilingualism. The concept of additive bilingualism itself originates in [Lambert's \(1975\)](#) foundational work, which distinguished between additive bilingualism (where learning a second language enriches without displacing the first) and subtractive bilingualism (where the second language undermines the first). This framework provides the foundation for subsequent scholarship. [Cummins \(2001\)](#), for example, proposed the interdependence hypothesis which suggests that proficiency and literacy in the first language (L1) provide a transferable cognitive foundation that supports the acquisition of additional languages.

Building on these foundations, more recent bilingual education research has expanded the lens beyond a static view of two languages. [García and Lin \(2017\)](#) and [García \(2011\)](#) work on translanguaging reframes bilingualism as the flexible and dynamic use of an integrated linguistic repertoire, rather than two compartmentalized systems. [Hornberger's \(2003\)](#) continua of biliteracy model likewise emphasizes how literacy development occurs across multiple, intersecting dimensions of language use. Finally, [Cenoz and Gorter \(2017\)](#) advance the idea of sustainable translanguaging, which stresses the need to support minority and Indigenous languages while promoting multilingualism. These perspectives enrich and extend the additive bilingualism framework by underscoring that Indigenous students' repertoires are not only additive but also fluid, context-dependent, and deeply tied to identity. This has particular salience in Indigenous contexts, where bilingual education (Indigenous language–Spanish) is already common and English is often introduced as a third language (L3), learned after a local Indigenous language (L1) and Spanish (L2). Second Language Acquisition research shows that learners with strong L1 literacy are more likely to develop metalinguistic awareness, which enhances their ability to learn subsequent languages ([Bialystok, 2001](#)). For example, lessons that involve translating Indigenous oral narratives into English may not only build L3 vocabulary, but also deepen cross-linguistic awareness and foster motivation by affirming cultural identity. Thus, reinforcing L1 and L2 literacy is not only beneficial for identity preservation, but also functionally supports English acquisition.

Respecting a cultural identity in English education means adopting an additive and inclusive approach. The goal should be multilingualism, which reinforces the students' sense of self. Preserving Indigenous languages and promoting English need not be mutually exclusive. Evidence suggests that bilingualism and heritage language maintenance can coexist with successful foreign language learning, provided the educational approach is thoughtfully designed. While English is often promoted as a tool for advancement, its expansion can also reproduce the structural hierarchies rooted in colonial language ideologies. Without sustained investment in Indigenous language education and meaningful community involvement, English programs risk accelerating language shifts, displacing local knowledge systems, or reinforcing the marginalization of non-dominant linguistic identities. These unintended consequences underscore the importance of designing English education initiatives

that do not merely accommodate, but actively center, on Indigenous linguistic and cultural priorities. Having outlined the cultural and cognitive stakes, we now turn to practical implementations that exemplify these principles.

Success stories

Despite the challenges outlined, there are emerging success stories and innovative pathways to English education for Indigenous Latin American populations. These examples demonstrate that with appropriate strategies, Indigenous students can gain English skills without sacrificing their cultural identity. In what follows, we review several notable initiatives, discuss their outcomes, and highlight concrete evidence of impact.

One pioneering program is Uruguay's Plan Ceibal en Inglés, which leverages technology to overcome the shortage of English teachers in remote areas. Since 2014, Plan Ceibal has used videoconferencing and digital platforms to connect urban English teachers (and even overseas teachers) with students in rural classrooms in Uruguay. This program has now reached approximately 80,000 children in over 550 primary schools, including those serving rural and Indigenous communities ([British Council, 2019](#)). Thousands of English lessons were delivered remotely every week through interactive video sessions. Evaluations indicate that students taught by remote instructors perform English assessments as well as in-person teachers ([British Council, 2019](#)). However, while these results are encouraging, the assessments are based on national-level adaptive tests and do not track students' proficiency beyond primary school. The program's long-term sustainability has not yet been independently evaluated. While short-term assessments are promising, they remain descriptive evidence pending peer-reviewed, longitudinal research. Applying our criteria, Plan Ceibal shows strong access and infrastructure gains, but independent, peer-reviewed evidence on long-term outcomes, especially for Indigenous-serving schools and post-primary proficiency, remains limited. Until such evidence exists, its transferability to Indigenous contexts should be treated as promising but not proven.

Furthermore, Uruguay reported that through a combination of in-person and virtual instruction, about 95% of students in 4th to 6th grades in urban public schools receive English classes, and coverage in rural schools has expanded dramatically ([Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017](#)). Ceibal's success illustrates how political will and innovation can close the access gaps. Key factors include strong government support, public-private partnerships for technology, and ongoing monitoring to ensure the quality of instruction. While Plan Ceibal is often described as innovative, peer-reviewed studies specifically assessing its outcomes for Indigenous learners are scarce. By contrast, research in Chile underscores that without stronger curricular support for Mapudungun, national programs such as English Opens Doors risk deepening cultural and linguistic inequities ([Moya-Santiaños and Quiroga-Curín, 2022](#)).

Another success story is Chile's "English Opens Doors" (Inglés Abre Puertas) program, a nationwide initiative launched in 2004. While not exclusively targeting Indigenous students, it has significantly improved English teaching in rural and disadvantaged schools, many of which serve the Indigenous populations. This program introduced measures, such as sending volunteer English teachers to under-resourced schools, providing intensive English immersion camps for

students, and offering training and scholarships to local English teachers. By 2019, Chile achieved a “moderate” proficiency ranking on the EF English Proficiency Index, one of the highest in Latin America (EF Education First, 2020). However, public evaluations rarely disaggregate sustained outcomes for Indigenous and rural populations, and evidence on post-secondary English use remains sparse; as with Ceibal, transferability depends on guarantees for Indigenous language development and teacher stability, not on English inputs alone. English Opens Doors is credited with sustaining political attention to English education beyond short-term government cycles, which is a critical factor in its continuity and success (Matear, 2008). Although national testing and EF index rankings have shown steady progress, public evaluations have not disaggregated long-term impacts for Indigenous or rural populations, and follow-up studies on post-secondary English use remain limited.

Beyond national programs, community-based and intercultural initiatives have also had an impact. For example, in southern Mexico, the NGO-run Na'atik Language and Culture Institute provides subsidized English classes to Maya youth by integrating the local culture into lessons. The program serves approximately 217 students annually, primarily from low-income rural families, and includes instruction in Yucatec Maya (L1), Spanish (L2), and English (L3), positioning the program as explicitly trilingual rather than bilingual. Although smaller in scale than national programs, Na'atik reported promising outcomes—over 70% of students improved at least one proficiency level after 1 year, with 80% retained for two or more years, and 98% of scholarship students completing secondary education (Instituto de Lenguas y Culturas Na'atik, 2025). These figures come from internal reporting and therefore should be treated as indicative rather than conclusive. Complementary classroom evidence (Sumida Huaman and Valdiviezo, 2014) reinforces the value of culturally rooted pedagogy. Similarly, the Na'atik community-based model reflects elements of culturally sustaining pedagogy by positioning English learning as complementary to, rather than replacing, Yucatec Maya. However, these outcomes are based on internal progress measures rather than standardized national or international tests, and no external evaluation or long-term tracking has been conducted to verify the durability of students' English proficiency. As internal reporting, these results are informative but provisional; independent follow up is needed to assess durability of proficiency and broader academic spillovers.

Intercultural higher education is an emerging research field. Mexico has established a network of intercultural universities since 2003 to serve Indigenous students by incorporating English alongside Indigenous languages into their curricula. In Bolivia and Peru, new teacher-training colleges specifically prepare Indigenous bilingual educators (proficient in an Indigenous language, Spanish, or English) to work in rural schools. These hometown teachers are more likely to remain in their communities, which improves their continuity and cultural relevance in English instruction. It is important to note that these case studies were conducted under different national conditions. For instance, Uruguay's centralized education system and strong digital infrastructure contrast sharply with the fragmented and resource-constrained systems in Peru and Bolivia. These contextual differences shape models that are feasible, scalable, and sustainable in each setting. While these programs differ in scale and delivery models, they emphasize culturally grounded instruction and localized teacher engagement. However, they should be viewed as illustrative rather than representative, as the conditions vary widely across regions.

Looking ahead, we propose a Latin American research and policy agenda. In Mexico, we expect that addressing structural barriers identified during COVID-19, such as lack of Indigenous-language teachers and weak infrastructure, will reduce inequities in English learning. In Chile, we hypothesize that strengthening curricular time for Mapudungun alongside Spanish will foster both cultural identity and readiness for English as a third language. In Peru, sustained investment in intercultural bilingual teacher training and digital access will likely determine whether trilingual models can scale beyond small pilot projects. These hypotheses are grounded in recent empirical work and set a forward-looking agenda for evaluation.

Across cases, the pattern is consistent: without institutional guarantees for Indigenous-language literacy and academic Spanish, English initiatives risk becoming add-on programs that do not persist. The ATEM frame recasts success as a package, teacher pipelines, L1/L2 guarantees, and governance continuity, rather than a set of English inputs. This shifts evaluation from “Did we add English?” to “Did we secure multilingual learning conditions that travel and endure?” The research agenda that follows from this is empirical, not rhetorical.

Conclusion

English education for Indigenous Latin American populations is a critical juncture. On the one hand, the deficiencies of the current models have left many Indigenous students behind in their English proficiency, reflecting and reinforcing broader educational inequalities. However, emerging approaches offer a glimpse into how these challenges can be met through culturally responsive and resourceful strategies. This requires concerted efforts by policymakers, educators, and communities to reimagine English language teaching as part of a holistic, intercultural educational framework.

Key recommendations include investing in teacher training programs that recruit and develop Indigenous educators with multilingual skills, as demonstrated in Bolivia and Peru's intercultural teacher colleges, which improve both continuity and cultural relevance. Successful models such as Uruguay's Plan Ceibal highlight how technology can expand access where teacher shortages are severe, while Na'atik's community-based trilingual program illustrates the importance of culturally sustaining curricula that integrate Indigenous knowledge systems. Designing English programs to be additive rather than subtractive is critical, echoing Lambert's (1975) and Cummins (2001) frameworks as well as García's (2011) translanguaging approach, which together stress that new languages should enrich rather than displace heritage repertoires.

Feasibility, however, varies across national contexts: centralized systems with strong infrastructure (e.g., Uruguay, Chile) may support rapid scaling of technology-driven solutions, while more fragmented and resource-constrained systems (e.g., Peru, Bolivia) may require locally adapted, community-led strategies. Taken together, these recommendations emphasize that while broad principles are transferable, their implementation must be tailored to local conditions and capacities.

Governments and international organizations should also improve the infrastructure in underserved areas, ensuring that Indigenous students have access to learning resources and technology on par with their urban peers. Importantly, Indigenous leaders and communities should be involved in planning English curricula to ensure that the content is relevant, respectful, and empowering.

We acknowledge that this article relies primarily on secondary evidence, including program reports that are not always peer-reviewed. Evaluations of initiatives such as Plan Ceibal, English Opens Doors, and Na'atik are often based on internal or non-peer-reviewed data, which provide useful descriptive insights but cannot be taken as definitive measures of long-term effectiveness. Future research should generate and incorporate longitudinal, community-based empirical studies, including independent evaluations of initiatives like Na'atik and Plan Ceibal, to triangulate findings and rigorously assess both short-term and long-term impacts. Without such evidence, program outcomes must be treated as illustrative rather than conclusive.

English language education is not a threat to Indigenous cultural identities. Careful planning can become an asset that Indigenous learners use in their own terms. The stories of innovative programs in Latin America show that when Indigenous voices are included, and when education is approached with creativity and respect, students can embrace new languages as part of a diverse linguistic repertoire. By maintaining a commitment to intercultural values and continuous improvement, Latin American countries can develop English education pathways that uplift Indigenous populations and equip them for the globalized world, while cherishing the rich cultural tapestry that defines the region. As Indigenous and community-engaged scholars argue (Busquets, 2009; García and Lin, 2017; López, 2010; Romero, 2012, 2015), sustainable English education requires centering Indigenous perspectives, intercultural practices, and multilingual repertoires so that new languages strengthen rather than displace cultural survival.

We close with three predictions. First, schools that adopt an additive trilingual equity model will raise English outcomes without eroding Indigenous languages. Second, programs that neglect Indigenous and Spanish language development may achieve short-term English gains but will not sustain them. Third, only systems that invest in Indigenous teacher preparation and stable governance will be able to scale equitably. These propositions are intended as hypotheses for researchers and policymakers in Latin America to test and refine.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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