Nahuatl as a Classical, Foreign, and Additional Language: A Phenomenological Study

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In this study, participants learning an endangered language variety shared their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the often complex and diverse language-learning process. I used phenomenological interviews in order to learn more about these English or Spanish language speakers' journey with the Nahuatl language. From first encounter to their current state in their journey, participants described their challenges with gaining access to the language through courses, materials and institutions, their language observations and their sustaining motivations. In addition to those descriptions, my analysis showed many participants shared two underlying motivations for studying this language: (a) using the Nahuatl language for specific purposes, and (b) using Nahuatl as a connection to an historical or cultural past. Both of these motivations were driven by a higher purpose in ensuring the survival of speakers of this language group. Keywords: Nahuatl, Endangered Language, Language Learning, Phenomenology

According to Nettle and Romaine (2000), the diversity of the world's languages is rapidly disappearing as speakers of minority language groups face mounting pressures to abandon their mother tongues. One of these languages, the Nahuatl language (primarily spoken within the borders of Mexico) is undergoing a shift in attitudes and interests among non-native speakers as a surge in both participants and programs have appeared with technology continuing to offer access to even the remotest locations (Abley, 2005; Eisenlohr, 2004). This surge is important given the relatively low level of prestige many of the language members and majority language speakers feel toward Nahuatl (Navarrette, 2003). For this study, I focused on the experiences of non-native learners (who are a part of this surge) as they acquire this endangered language. These learners are in a position to influence the revitalization efforts for this language group by providing meaningful work for the indigenous educators, ensuring the language is recorded in multiple formats for future generations and supporting the growth of the community's efforts.

What is the Nahuatl Language?

The Nahuatl language was the language of the Aztec empire before and after the Conquest of Hernan Cortes and the Spanish in 1520 (Ruiz, 1992). It has been considered one of the most documented Indigenous languages in the Northern Hemisphere (Lockhart, 2001). The people associated with the Nahuatl language also have a long history, including a centuries-long written tradition that strongly influenced the Spanish language and the population living within the borders of modern-day Mexico. Today, Nahuatl speakers number in the hundreds of thousands and are spread throughout the

Republic of Mexico. After the Spanish language, Nahuatl has around 1 million speakers, on par with speakers of the Mayan languages (Cifuentes & Moctezuma, 2006).

The language itself is a member of the Aztec-Tanoan family on the Uto-Aztecan branch and linguistically described as agglutinating and poly-synthetic. Agglutination refers to a type of language where grammatical relationships are expressed by affixation rather than through the addition of separate words or phrases. Poly-synthetic (versus analytic, like English) refers to the high ratio of affixations within individual words or phrases. Here is an example to demonstrate the difference between English and Nahuatl: *I am a woman*. In written form, this example contains four words to complete the thought. As an English speaker, I can change the meaning of this sentence by adding other words (or morphemes). For instance, I can change *I am a woman* to *I am not a woman* and the addition of the negative marker *not* changes the meaning of the sentence. In Nahuatl, that same sentence would be a phrase made up of various affixes in this form: *Nicihuatl or Axnicihuatl.* I can divide this phrase linguistically into the following affixes in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of agglutination in the Nahuatl language

Example 1: nicihuatl.			
Negative	**Subject**	**root**	**sing./plural**
Ø	ni-	cihua	-tl
I am a woman.			
Example 2: axnicihuatl.			
Negative	**subject**	**root**	**sing./plural**
Ax	ni-	cihua	-tl
I am not a woman.			

Some learners have difficulty with agglutinating languages because they have to learn to understand the look and feel of a language like Nahuatl. These same learners have this impression of Nahuatl as it is written using the example from Table 1: *nicihuatl*. This phrase requires the learner to read it is a whole in order to understand its meaning. By reading the phrase as a whole, I believe it would be the equivalent of reading the same meaning in English in the following way: *iamawoman*. This difficulty is not just in the written form, but as a learner myself I had a lot of difficulty retraining my brain to listen for the changes in affixes to figure out the meanings of various phrases. Whenever I look at a phrase in Nahuatl it seems that on some level I am looking at that phrase as if it were in English, except with characters strung together. I especially encountered this difficulty when more complex phrases needed to be learned because Nahuatl is much more than a language made up of long strings of characters.

The examples above come from the modern variety for Nahuatl and, because of its lengthy history, a number of varieties exist. In contrast to the modern variety, I refer to the language used from the early 16th century until the late 17th century as Classical Nahuatl. It survives in written texts using an orthography adapted from the Spanish language and is preserved in numerous documents studied by scholars and enthusiasts alike. This classical variety is distinguished from a foreign or additional language for a number of reasons. First, Classical Nahuatl is an extinct language that exists only in

written form. Second, many scholars consider Classical Nahuatl a variant of a high prestige form used by a very small subset of the population during and after the Spanish conquest. Much of the study of Classical Nahuatl is focused on translation issues, especially in terms of developments with the language around the time of the Spanish conquests and with translations of items found in the Florentine Codex (a document complied from 1540-1585). Sometimes, the grammar focus requires a discussion of linking modern Nahuatl with the Classical portion.

I refer to the modern varieties often studied by foreigners (e.g., Americans, Canadians, Germans and other learners with non-Mexican nationalities) as Nahuatl as a foreign language. In other words, these learners originate from a national background where Nahuatl is not recognized as a language in any capacity at a governmental level. This official recognition differs from Nahuatl as an additional language whereby a learner from within Mexico (who may have familial ties to a community where the language is spoken) is attempting to study this language. The difference between these two learners is difficult to ascertain because of the precarious nature of the Nahuatl language and its speakers. Because the language is generally considered endangered, with a number of factors pointing to the language group disappearing within this century, I am unable to provide a distinction between Nahuatl as a foreign or additional language as typically defined within the field of Second Language Acquisition. This distinction is important because there are a number of assumptions made about an individual who learned a language in a foreign context versus as an additional language. For instance, an individual who learned a language in a foreign context is assumed to have studied the language in a formal classroom and was not able to interact with the language once he or she left the classroom. This lack of interaction may lead to another assumption about the learner's limited conversational ability contrasted with higher level abilities in reading or writing. When an individual learns an additional language, the assumption is that person is able to learn the language in a classroom situation and use it in his or her daily life. Because the Nahuatl language competes with the Spanish language, the opportunities for a learner to interact in Nahuatl are limited. In a sense, the distinction between a foreign learner and an additional learner is not as clear as someone learning English in a country like China or Ghana (English as a foreign language) versus the US or the UK (English as an additional language)

Who Are the Nahuatl Language Speakers?

Nahuatl speakers live in many of the large cities within the political borders of Mexico. For example, numerous dialects are based on certain states: Morelos, Tlaxcala, D.F., Veracruz, Guerrero or based on regions like the Huasteca or the Rio Balsa (Ruiz, 1992). Given the size of the community-at-large for Nahuatl and the diversity present within the multiple communities, there is no one-size-fits-all answer for a description of this language group. For example, the Huastecan variety spoken in the Mid-Eastern area of Mexico is loosely comprised of the following Mexican states: Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, Hidalgo, Querétaro, and Puebla (Cifuentes & Moctezuma, 2006). Within this rather large geographic region, there are more than 1,600 different communities of Nahuatl.

Inquiry

Rationale for study

I completed an empirical phenomenological study in order to obtain a description of the experiences of non-native speakers who study or attempt to study the Nahuatl language. I used empirical phenomenology to unearth these speakers' beliefs, discoveries and perspectives on learning the Nahuatl language in any of its forms, experiences gained from studying this language in particular and the motivations that sustain these individuals. For this study, I have limited the participants to two types of individuals: English or Spanish language speakers who are actively pursuing the acquisition of Nahuatl in any of its forms through whatever method available to them and I have labeled them as English or Spanish language speakers. Through empirical phenomenology, I can view the language in terms of a phenomenon that has meaning drawn from the individual experiences of its participants. I conducted research through a series of interviews (via Skype and email) following phenomenological study guidelines. By investigating the experiences these individuals have with studying the Nahuatl language, I described the experiential components and important aspects of this endangered language acquisition experience. The details of this experience can be used to design other opportunities for interested learners. Additionally, these details can be used to improve the curriculum and materials used by Nahuatl language educators. Lastly, a full understanding of the language learning experience requires the experiences and perspectives of all language learners (including learners engaged in the study of an endangered language like Nahuatl). After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and receiving informed consent from participants, I used the following question to guide my inquiry: In what ways do English or Spanish language speakers experience and describe the process of learning the Nahuatl language?

Conceptual Framework

Phenomenology is a complex term that many fields use with varying perspectives and meanings. Scholars can look at phenomenology in terms of a philosophy, an interpretive theory, a qualitative tradition or a methodology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Phenomenology is also the study of the details of everyday life and experiences and how people make sense of those everyday activities. It can be used to focus on social order using phenomenological sensibility to discover how members make sense of the social world (Patton, 2002). For this study, I used empirical phenomenology to investigate the motivations and experiences behind these English or Spanish language learners in order to understand what sustains them. Through empirical phenomenology, I was able to gain an understanding of the participant's perceived reality of the language learning experience (Moustakas, 1994) by using open-ended questioning, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to shed light on the phenomenon. I employed phenomenology in order to understand the everyday life and the taken-for-granted realities of individuals studying an endangered language for personal as well as academic reasons.

In short, phenomenology is the study of the meaning or essence of a lived-experience for a person or group of people who have experienced a similar phenomenon. This phenomenon is explored by "carefully and thoroughly describing how people experience some phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The people who experience this phenomenon need to describe it, provide details on their feelings, their perceptions, and their understanding of it, and spend time talking about the phenomenon of interest. For phenomenology to work, the participants in a research study must have firsthand experience, or "lived experience," with the phenomenon of study (Van Manen, 1990). Additionally, phenomenology is a retrospective type of reflection because a lived experience is something that a person experiences and is then able to reflect on.

Description of my experience of the phenomenon. I first encountered the Nahuatl language during a trip to Mexico in 2003 (De Felice, 2005). During my trip, I visited a number of historical landmarks and sites that provided guests with informational signs that were written trilingually. These signs included English, Spanish and a third language that I was not familiar with at that time. That third language intrigued me because I assumed that if the government of Mexico was creating signs in that language then there were Mexicans who could read them. Reflecting on my own development, I can look back and see that during this period of time I was still equating languages to a nation-state. In other words, a language was unknown to me if it were not spoken by the population of a country or state. I spent many weeks trying to identify the third language and, eventually, locate a speaker of that language. My time spent looking for a speaker opened my eyes to a number of issues that I have never encountered before. First, as a majority language speaker in the United States, I would not be familiar with or know a speaker of an indigenous language and I found this perspective to be true of the Mexican nationals I interacted with. I was not able to locate a Nahuatl speaker using the people I was acquainted with in Mexico. Second, a number of Mexican nationals mentioned that I should try to establish a connection with a number of the vendors in the downtown plaza. These vendors tended to wear traditional dress and sold knick-knacks and other items to tourists. The assumption was that based on the dress and occupation of these vendors, I would be able to find a speaker who could help me with the language. I would learn there were a number of problems with this assumption. While these speakers fit the "stereotypical" image of an indigenous person, there was no direct connection between that stereotype and the Nahuatl language. Mexico has anywhere from 70 to over 200 indigenous languages within its borders (Cifuentes & Moctezuma, 2006; Nettle & Romaine, 2000), so the chances that one of these vendors spoke the variety of Nahuatl listed on these governmental/tourist signs was very unlikely. Another more problematic assumption that caused me the most difficulty was that I would be able to approach these vendors and interact with them. While Mexican nationals and tourists tolerate or accept the traditional dress and handicrafts, the history of language and culture oppression is part of a barrier that now exists between these vendors and the society at large. What I experienced because of this barrier was that these vendors would not admit to being speakers of another language. Instead, they would become uncomfortable with the question. In retrospect, one reason these individuals were uncomfortable was that I was also interested in finding someone who could read and write the language (again, another assumption I made based on my own experience with English and Spanish).

Over the years, I have studied Nahuatl in a number of ways, including self-study through online and paper-based resources, one-on-one tutoring with indigenous educators, immersion programs at the university level and home-stays in indigenous communities. Through these methods of instruction I have gotten to know various dialects of an endangered language spoken in Mexico and, more importantly, I have met someone who is currently fighting for the survival of his or her language. I found myself having a higher degree of commitment and passion when I was able to put a face to the language.

Method

I conducted this empirical phenomenological study in three parts. First, I recruited volunteers who participated through Skype or email and described their Nahuatl language learning experience. Second, I followed Giorgi's phenomenological analysis (2009) using the six overall steps in Table 2. Third, I shared my analysis with my study participants to ensure the analysis matched their expectations of what they had shared through the interview process or in their emails. I fully detail each part below with a description of my participants, an overview of my data analysis procedures and an explanation of the member checking I conducted.

Participants

I recruited participants for this study through a list-serv and direct contact with individuals who run or have run a Nahuatl language school. All participants volunteered from an email request or contacted me directly after receiving an announcement sent via list-serv. In total, I worked with ten participants. To further protect their anonymity, I did not specifically collect information not pertaining to their language learning experience (e.g., demographics). Though I did not collect such demographic information, many participants provided information during the interview/email process. For example, some participants indicated their age in general terms (e.g., "I am an adult learner or older learner"), their gender (e.g., "I am a working mother"), their language preference (e.g., "I learned English as a small child"), and their education level (e.g., "I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Latin American History"). All participants were required to be over the age of 18 and an English or Spanish speaking person learning a dialect of the Nahuatl language. Included in the study were students in immersion programs in Mexico, in online courses offered through university systems, and in non-traditional outlets via web-based sources through wikis and blogs.

While a traditional empirical phenomenological study focuses on the essence of a shared experience without reference to an individual, I believe the participants' voices and identities are integral to developing empathy toward the study itself and an understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, I have organized a brief description of each participant in the following manner. First, I provide a pseudonym that the participant chose for him or herself or that I was allowed to chose. Second, I provide some demographic information that the participants revealed in the course of the interview. Lastly, I provide one or two additional distinct pieces of information in an attempt to maintain the individuality of those participants.

James is an administrator and academic who is personally and professionally involved in Nahuatl language learning. He has spent many years in Mexico and has become a highly fluent Nahuatl speaker.

Samantha studied Nahuatl at a summer immersion program because she has an interest in the language for academic reasons. She continues to study the language by translating texts while she completes her studies in Canada.

Linda is an English speaker from Canada who studies Nahuatl for academic reasons and believes in the benefits of interdisciplinarity that come from learning a language.

Fermi revealed he was born and raised in Mexico, where he first encountered the language through place names and stories in elementary school classrooms.

Stanley began studying the language in 1991 because he was interested in writing a book that involved the language.

Ellen began studying Nahuatl in 1980 when she was traveling in Mexico and became interested in the images found on Mexican currency, which has many images taken from Nahuatl history. She has been a life-long language learner and quickly fell in love with the language and culture.

Karen began studying the language during childhood because she grew up in Mexico and she was exposed to the language again when she took an intensive summer immersion program.

Marcial is a Mexican-American who learned of Nahuatl as a child when he was researching the history of the Spanish language in Mexico. He has studied the language over the years and recently attended an intensive summer immersion program.

Oscar currently lives in Mexico where he independently studies the language to learn more about the history of Mexico and its people.

Cualli has studied the language for nine years and learned of the language through his readings and coursework that dealt with aspects of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. He continues to study the language through self-study and by participating in various online discussion forums and list-servs.

Semi-Structured Interviews through Skype and Email

Of the ten participants, James and Linda chose to complete a semi-structured interview through Skype. Prior to the interview, I sent a list of questions for them to review (see appendix). Both interviews lasted for an hour and half and were recorded. During the interviews, I also used open-ended questioning, depending on the direction of the conversation, yielding more descriptive data and allowing me to see Nahuatl language experience as these participants see it (Creswell, 2007; Freng, Freng, & Moore, 2007). The use of interviewing was guided by the twelve aspects of interviewing for qualitative research as laid out by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). These aspects guided both the interview and the means by which the experience was detailed and are made up of the following terms: life world, meaning, qualitative, descriptive, specificity, deliberate naïveté, focused, ambiguity, change, sensitivity, interpersonal situation, and positive experience. In order to reach the meaning of this described phenomenon (the Nahuatl language learning experience), these descriptors (or aspects) allowed me to describe their lived world in relation to the phenomenon in question (Kirby, 2008; Sinclair, 1994).

In a traditional empirical phenomenological study, the sole method of data analysis is interviewing at length to obtain rich descriptions of the participants' experience. However, the remaining participants were unable to complete the interview through Skype (or any other applications/software) due to various reasons (e.g., computer/internet restrictions, scheduling conflicts or preference for working through the topic at their own pace). Since I was interested in obtaining multiple perspectives on this phenomenon, I chose to work around these logistical difficulties and use a non-traditional manner of data collection. In order to obtain rich descriptions without direct interviewing, I completed the data collection by email in three steps. First, I sent the participants the list of questions in the appendix. After reviewing their answers to these questions, I completed the second step by sending follow-up questions or clarifying comments to each participant as applicable. Finally, I compiled the entire set of email correspondence into one spreadsheet following the guidelines in Meyer and Avery (2009) and I asked for the participant to review his or her comments one last time. Upon completion of the Skype and email interview data collection, I began the analysis described in the next section.

Data Analysis Procedures

I used Giorgi's procedures for data analysis (2009), summarized in Table 2. The first half of his procedures has five steps to complete for each participant.

Table 2. My Overview of the Giorgi (2009) Method

Overview of the Giorgi Method	
First Half	1. Bracket out the natural attitude and assume a phenomenological attitude
	2. Obtain a sense of the whole through multiple readings of the data
	3. Divide into meaning units through phenomenological reduction
	4. Transform into more sensitive expressions using third person and revelatory language
	5. Synthesize into an essence or invariant structure and repeat steps 1-4 for each participant
Second Half	6. Using each invariant structure, transform them into the composite invariant structure

First, I bracketed out the natural attitude by assuming a phenomenological attitude where I posited the participant's experience was his or her lived experienced. In other words, the experience was described as experienced. I maintained this phenomenological attitude throughout the research process. Second, and to gain a sense of the whole experience, I carefully read and reread the data for each participant and divided it into meaning units using an attitude of phenomenological reduction. These meaning units marked when I perceived a shift in meaning occurring and I used them to make analyzing the data more manageable. In Table 3, the third column contains example meaning units where I placed a slash to indicate a change in meaning or sense. Third, and as suggested by Giorgi, I rewrote those meaning units into the third person while maintaining the

participants' voice. Using these rewritten meaning units, I rewrote them one more time where I expressed each meaning unit more explicitly in language revelatory of the lived-through experience of learning Nahuatl. I have provided an example from my data of steps 1-4 in Table 3.

Table 3. Example of Giorgi's Data Analysis Steps 1-5 from my Data.

Turn Number	Participant	Text with Meaning Units	Transformation into Third Person	Revelatory Language in 3rd Person. Researcher expresses each meaning unit more explicitly in language revelatory of the lived-through experience with respect to learning Nahuatl.
26	Samantha	Yeah,yeah, and it both, yeah, / I had, I mean we had some native speakers in that class and then we also had some other students who had done a little more with with classical Nahuatl before / so they had, just, yeah, I guess just watching how they worked through things I, sort of, picked up some rules along the way and I sort of become a little more familiar with how their language worked, so- /	She picked up some rules along the way with that class and became a little more familiar with how the language works, but most of the students in the class were native speakers or were more advanced in their studies of the Nahuatl language.	She stated that she picked up some rules along the way from the advanced class and became a little more familiar with how the language works. She claimed that most of the students in the class were native speakers or more advanced in their studies of the Nahuatl language.

Table 4. Example of Step 4 in Giorgi's Method from my Data.

Phenomenological essence
The language can first be encountered through literature where there is a discussion of the Aztec people. This language is also an important component for professionals in specific academic fields that require source documents from colonial Mexico. The source documents are written in Nahuatl and are very useful for completing research projects that involve colonial Mexico. Many people study the language for practical and specific reasons, but then they just really start to like it because it has a problem-solving element to it that is kind of fun and that the structure of the language might make someone crazy but it is interesting and fun to work through. Other people study the language for cultural motivations in that they are trying to get in touch with their indigenous roots, possibly as Mexican-Americans. This language can be studied through an immersion course that has native speaker teaching assistants and focuses on the classical or modern variety. This language can also be learned by attending advanced level classes as a beginner and working on translating texts within a group. By attending an advanced level class, one is able to become a little more familiar with how the language works and allows for some rules to be picked up along the way. This language can be learned through a second language and these languages can intermix during instruction time with the instructor speaking the target language and the students speaking either their first or second language. Some of the challenges for learning this language can be finding courses or materials to work with. Another challenge with this language is the costs associated with taking courses, especially summer intensive sessions. Finally, there are just not as many opportunities to use this language as there are to use another language like English or Spanish.

By completing steps 1-4, I had transformed the participants' descriptions into phenomenologically sensitive expressions using Giorgi's (2009) column approach (see numerous examples starting on p. 146). This column approach began with the text from the transcription/emails listed verbatim in the first column and marked for meaning units with slashes. The second column contained the meaning units. The third column listed the meaning units into revelatory language using the third person. Giorgi provided a list of common verbs to complete this expression of more revelatory language: perceive, acknowledge, admit, be conscious, claim, describe, discover, explain, identify, note, observe, perceive, recognize, reflect, report, say, state, think (2009, p. 145). Lastly, I holistically analyzed the revelatory language from step four to synthesize the whole of the interview into its phenomenological essence. In Table 4, I provide an example of this fifth step in transforming the revelatory language into a paragraph form focused on the essence without reference to an individual. This essence, or invariant structure, is the synthesis of facts that stand out or can be considered necessary for the phenomenon to exist. In the second half of the Giorgi process, I analyzed the essence, or invariant structure, for each individual participant in order to create a composite essence for the phenomenon. I employed imaginative variation to create a synthesis of the shared experience of all the participants and I present the composite structure in the next section.

Presentation of the Structure

I derived the structure of this lived experience using imaginative variation and a unification of key constituent meanings from within the invariant structure for each participant. Using 35 pages of data (roughly 14,000 words from the two interviews and the eight email conversations), I came up with the diagrammatic form in Figure 1 and the following composite structure: Individuals begin their experience with learning the Nahuatl language through a first encounter with an artifact or from direct native speaker contact (generally within Mexico) or through literary sources (generally outside of Mexico, i.e., the US or Canada). After initial contact, individuals begin the language learning journey because many need to learn Nahuatl for professional or academic reasons while others need to reconnect with their heritage. The need to engage in a learning experience with an indigenous language or culture is also a strong motivation for individuals with a passion or desire to be part of this language group's revitalization and knowledge base. Once the individual decides to learn Nahuatl, he or she needs to work through these three interrelated elements: the Nahuatl variant, the environment and the curriculum-style to follow. If an individual chooses to study the classical variant, he or she will most likely study in a small group with scholar created materials. If an individual chooses to study a modern variant, he or she will most likely study in a classroom-based lecture with materials created by a linguist. For the simultaneous study of modern and classical Nahuatl, an individual will most likely study in an immersion program that incorporates materials created by native speakers, scholars and linguists and utilizes small group, one-on-one and lecture methods of instructions. One common method for all the Nahuatl language learning experiences involves self-study and the use of translation of texts, passages, or documents in the form of English-Nahuatl or Spanish-Nahuatl. During the learning experience, he or she may encounter some challenges in the amount of time, money and commitment invested and the accessibility of tools like courses, materials and

institutions. He or she might balance these challenges with the benefits of an expanding worldview, connecting with modern-day speakers or enhancing academic or professional goals.

I unpack the structure and the diagrammatic in Figure 1 by using the participants' emic voice and their experiences and realities in the next section.

Figure 1. Interrelated phases and constituents in the overall Nahuatl language learning experience. The process begins with a first encounter and continues until the individual's assessment of their current state in the learning process.
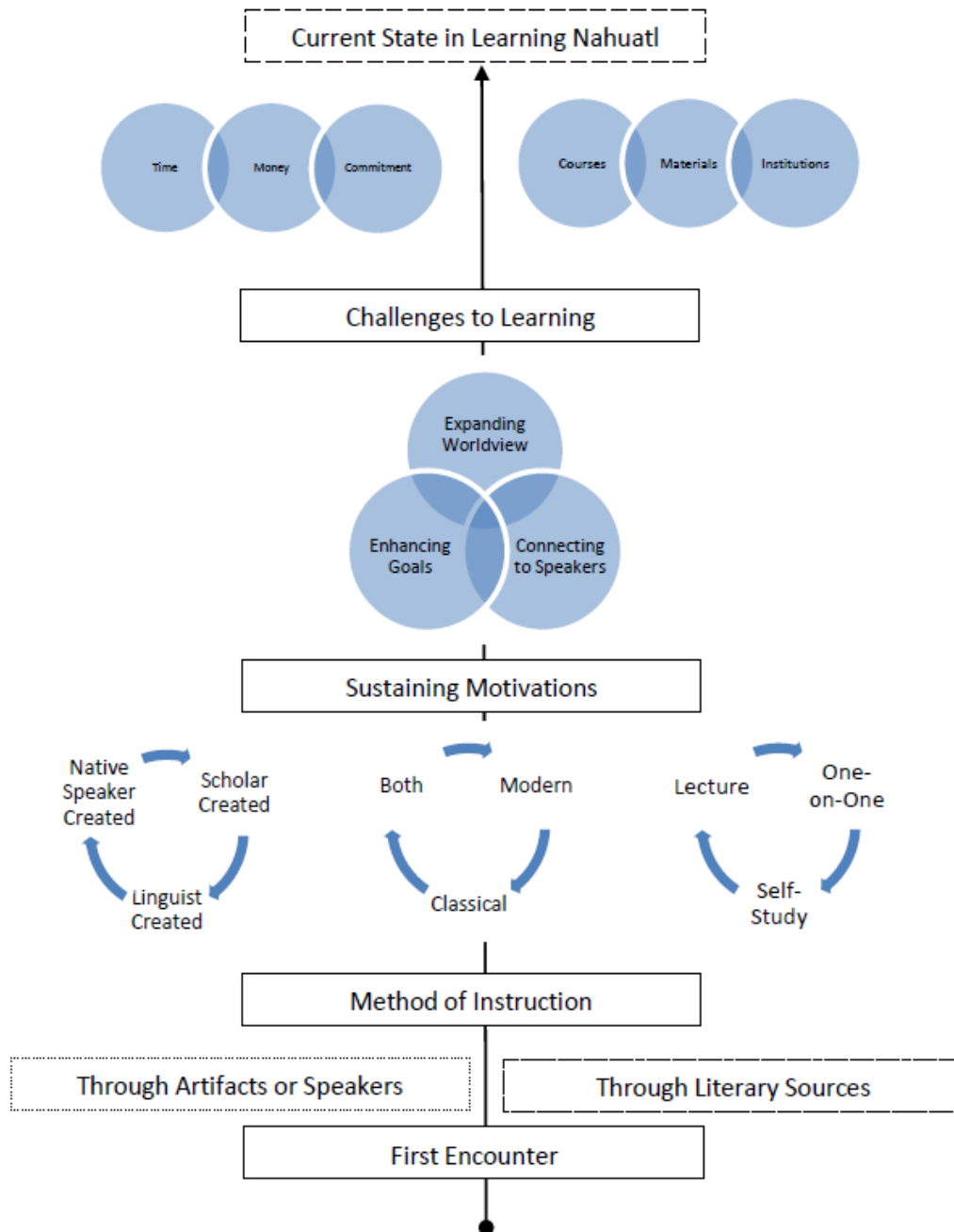
**The Phrases and Constituent Meanings for the Lived Experiences**

The investigation of this language learning process through phenomenology allowed me to engage in the lived experiences of the participants through their thoughts, experiences and motivations. In analyzing the various interview and questionnaire data, I found that these participants' experiences often times overlapped and were intertwined. I organized these experiences into a journey from initial contact to their current state with the language.

Figure 2. The beginning of the process with the first encounter through artifacts or through literary sources.
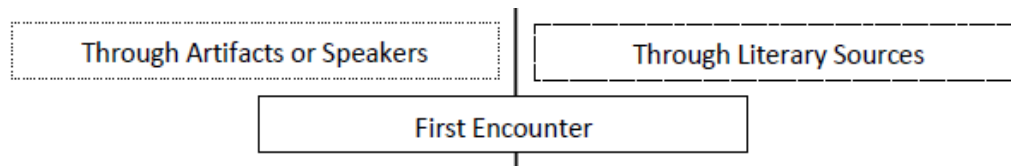
In my experience, when someone is studying a widely available language like Spanish, French or Chinese, many people will ask, "Why do you want to study that language?" or, "What got you interested in learning that language?" This line of questioning differs markedly concerning Nahuatl. When someone is asked about studying Nahuatl, two things usually occur. First, the person needs to explain what Nahuatl is (usually referencing the Aztecs) and that the language is still spoken today. Second, the person needs to explain where or how the language was encountered. Participants mentioned their first encounter occurred through one of the two avenues in Figure 2: artifacts/speakers or literary sources. Generally speaking, a participant encountered Nahuatl through artifacts or speakers when living or traveling in Mexico. When the language was studied for academic or professional reasons, the encounter occurred through literary sources (e.g., source documents, historical texts, or references to historical peoples). After encountering the language and deciding to pursue the study of it, these participants needed to choose their method of instruction (shown in Figure 3).

Figure 3. The method of instruction and its interrelated phases and constituents in the overall Nahuatl language learning experience.
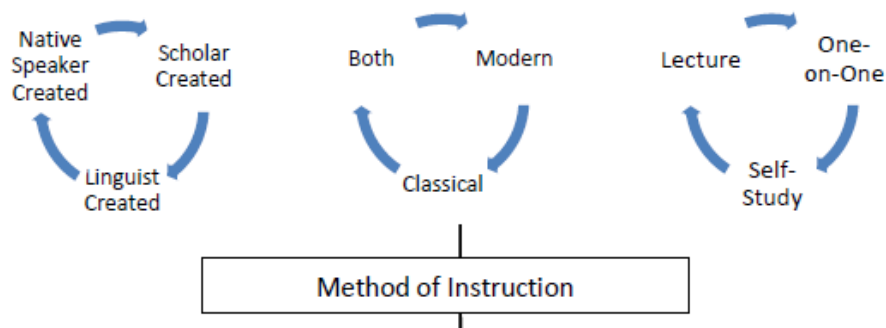
Once the individual decided to learn Nahuatl, he or she needed to decide on the Nahuatl variant, the environment and the curriculum-style to follow (see Figure 3). A pattern emerged from the analysis of the participants' experience with Nahuatl. If an individual chooses to study the classical variant, he or she will most likely study in a small group with scholar created materials. If an individual chooses to study a modern variant, he or she will most likely study in a classroom-based lecture with materials created by a linguist. For the simultaneous study of modern and classical Nahuatl, an individual will most likely study in an immersion program that incorporates materials created by native speakers, scholars and linguists and utilizes small group, one-on-one and lecture methods of instructions.

These participants discussed a variety of courses and materials that are offered via the Internet and in traditional classrooms and described some of the classroom environments they experienced. For example, many of these language learners attended informal tutoring groups led by a scholar, as Stanley described:

> A group of us met in (the instructor's) office once a week and went through the workbook that he had put together…It was a very inductive method.

Others attended community centers or small language schools within Mexico. Ellen discussed her method in working in a seminar with an instructor-created text:

> My courses were one-on-one seminars, 3 hours a week for 2 ½ years. One-on-one, with the use of (a specific text created by the instructor and soon-to-be published).

Finally, many of these language learners attended an immersion program in northern Mexico. Marcial participated in this immersion program and he discussed how the program was run:

> (A Nahuatl native speaker) conducted modern Huastecan Nahuatl courses and (a non-native speaker) conducted classical Nahuatl courses. Both professors had help from indigenous instructors for modern and classical courses, with some indigenous instructors occasionally teaching certain materials in the courses.

The variety of methods available for some participants allowed for a more diverse learning experience. When a variety of methods were employed, the participant was usually living in Mexico. For example, Fermi engaged in multiple methods of instruction:

> Formal programs or courses, I have taken three. The first one in a small cultural center in (central Mexico), focusing on Nahuatl from Guerrero…the second one in (Mexico City)…focusing on classical Nahuatl, it's about to end, it lasts one year, and I started a new one a month ago in a languages school…focusing on the modern variant from the capital.

The participants provided a wide variety of courses and programs that they used to pursue their goal of learning the Nahuatl language. Some of the participants engaged in formal classes that offered a set meeting time and a weekly schedule while other participants engaged in tutoring sessions. Very few of the English or Spanish language speakers indicated that they studied with a native Nahuatl speaker with the exception of the participants who took an immersion course or other type of course that originated in Mexico. All of these instructional decisions were influenced by the motivations sustaining these individuals (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The sustaining motivations and their interrelated phases and constituents in the overall Nahuatl language learning experience for participants as they expand their worldview, enhance their academic or professional goals and connect with modern-day Nahuatl speakers.
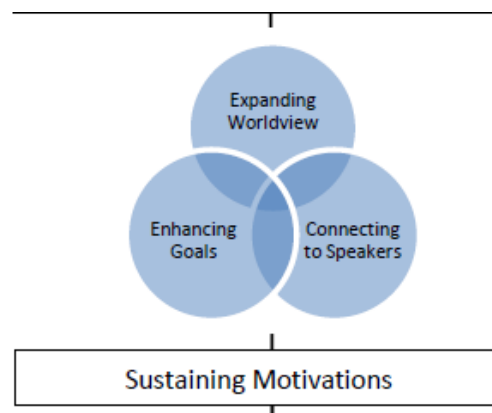
The motivation to study a language can be complex, flexible and diverse. These English or Spanish language speakers indicated a variety of reasons for their interest in continuing studies with the Nahuatl language. Some of the speakers referred to a historical link or an ancestral link as an important piece of their motivation. For example, Fermi discussed his language learning experience with other foreign languages before he decided to attempt Nahuatl:

> Well, I study other six foreign languages, and suddenly I asked myself, why not studying the language of my own region? And then, a couple of years ago, I also figured out my great-grandmother was a Nahua, from Guerrero. Now I feel so happy to contribute in its spreading and I have some personal projects with it.

This connection between an identity and a region was also noted by Samantha when she attended the immersion program. She was motivated to learn Nahuatl for academic reasons and she was surprised to see so many people learning Nahuatl for their own cultural motivations:

> It was interesting for me in this program -- meeting all these people who were learning Nahuatl for different reasons, because the only way I sort of ever encountered before was through colonial documents that I mean I knew it was still spoken today it's just for some reason it didn't occur to me that there might be so many people learning it in this course learning sort of for the modern and for their own, sort of for their own cultural motivations, I guess.

Marcial is an example of a person learning Nahuatl for the cultural motivations Samantha mentioned. He talked about his comfort level discussing issues of identity with friends and took the same immersion program as Samantha:

> I felt very comfortable talking about Native American and mestizo issues with my friends and thought to myself that I should learn an indigenous language. I looked online and found out about (an immersion program).

These personal or cultural elements were not the only motivating factors for studying Nahuatl. A number of participants mentioned the ability to move beyond their own worldview through Nahuatl. Oscar discussed his motivation for learning Nahuatl:

> Develop your own motivation for the study. I think the study requires a separation from European academic norms because the cultural root of this language is not in Europe.

> In reaching their learning goals, a number of participants mentioned some aesthetic aspects of Nahuatl that kept them motivated. For example, Ellen was pleased with the structure and sound of the language: Again with Nahuatl, as I said, something about the logic of the structure of the language really tinkles my fancy, and I love the sound of Nahuatl, very pretty language.

James also noted the same pleasure with Nahuatl and he referred to the study of the language as an infection:

> People say that a lot of times when a person starts to work with Nahuatl it's kind of like getting infected. You get a bug and it bites you and then it like transforms you and you can never get away from it.

He believed this infection stemmed from the structure of the language and he described his love of it here:

> And I don't even know what that means, but I love working with the structure of language and I love sitting down and talking, just being with other people and talk to other people.

James and Ellen were not alone in discussing the structure of the language, but many of the other participants found more challenge than pleasure in it. I discuss those participants' experiences later on.

Another important motivational factor came from their need for Nahuatl language proficiency in their personal or professional goals. Linda talked about studying Nahuatl in order to fulfill requirements for her academic career:

> To get a PhD in History you must show proficiency in 2 languages. Also, I want to use Nahuatl source documents in my present and future research.

Samantha had a similar experience with Nahuatl becoming an integral part of her professional work. She initially began to study Nahuatl to develop an ability in reading source documents as they were intended (rather than through translations):

> I was, you know, I was really interested in colonial Nahuatl and it was, by the time I had done this course, I had done a couple of research projects where I just found it really frustrating not being able to read it. I found- I had all of these documents or other sources that would have been so useful for to have been able to read and I just couldn't. So that was, so that was my initial reason for doing it.

Though Linda and Samantha had their Nahuatl studies linked to their academic careers, a number of participants were motivated to study Nahuatl for personal reasons. For instance, Karen was looking to make her conquest-era novel more authentic. She described her motivation in the following way:

> I want to write a novel set in the era of the conquest. Reading what has already been written led me to understand that none of the authors understood the Tenochteca culture. Several boasted of speaking and writing Nahuatl, but I grew up in the country, culturally mestiza and I knew that these people did not resemble the actors of the Mesoamerican drama as written by first-hand observers or present-day Mexico. So, I decided if I was going to make a stab at writing it, my Cuitlahuac had better not look and sound like Mel Gibson, I'd better do some real studying.

Karen was not alone in using a personal goal as a motivating factor. Fermi was very interested in the language because of the possibilities that may come to fruition with the recent language planning policies in Mexico:

> Well I just love the culture, it's so mystical, and fantastic. I would like to see a TV channel in Nahuatl, I was very happy to hear in 2003 that all 62 indigenous languages in Mexico had from that point the same official value Spanish had, so we have now 63 national languages. That's very motivating. Plus, I've seen many people who are trying to do modern

music, modern literature, etc., in Nahuatl and other languages. That's all very motivating as well.

Within Fermi's description of his motivation, he talked about a connection to the people who use the language for their daily lives and to create lasting documents, traditions and media. James also discussed this ability to make a connection as a motivating factor. For James, his motivation for the language grew because he was able to use modern and classical Nahuatl on an everyday basis and he compared that experience to sitting down and having a conversation with a person. He described this experience:

> I think there are two things that really grabbed me about Nahuatl. It was that, number 1 the structure and number 2 if (my instructor) or the person who I started working within Nahuatl had been working with high culture documents, ok, like poetry and history and stuff like that, I might not have become interested in the language. But not (my instructor), was working this corpus of mundane documents where it's basically it's kind of like sitting down with a person and having a conversation. They are talking about everyday life in the village in the colonial period and it's kind of like they're just sitting down and talking with you.

Finally, participants talked about the Nahuatl language in terms of a larger picture or broader perspective on human affairs. For these speakers the Nahuatl language represents an overarching issue within the current geopolitical landscape. The speakers also indicated an urgency in their studies, given the precarious state of so many indigenous languages in the Americas. Here are some examples from James and Cualli, respectively:

> For me the future of indigenous languages in America, how do I say this, the tendency right now, if things keep going the way things are going right now, there will be no more indigenous languages any place in America in a very short number of years and I'm talking like a century or a half a century something like that. The governments in Latin America, no the governments all over America, have absolutely no interest in maintaining indigenous languages and indigenous culture.

> Well, I recall a friend's message that encourages the study of Nahuatl because he says "if we continue to speak Indo-European languages such as English and Spanish, we will continue to think like Indo-European speaking people." Based on my graduate studies, I found that early language-study research affirms this relationship between language and cultural expression. The 20th century linguist and anthropologist E. Sapir (1929) summarized his language-study conclusions with this thought-provoking statement, "Language is a guide to social reality…it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes." I am also interested in cultural preservation. Nearly all of the indigenous languages of North America are endangered and stand at a high-risk of being

completely lost in usage. In a little more than 500 years, nearly 300 extant and distinct Native American languages were spoken in regions north of the Rio Grande. An estimated 155 of these indigenous languages are still spoken today, yet, nearly one-half of the original estimate are now extinct with little remaining evidence of their existence If we fail to take responsibility and learn an indigenous language such as Nahuatl, then we lose an entire worldview of knowledge that cannot be replaced.

As I mentioned before, the motivation to study a language is a complex, personal and diverse piece in the language learning process and in the case of an endangered language like Nahuatl, there are dimensions to studying the language that may not be present in other language learning experiences. For instance, the pressure on the communities using Nahuatl to abandon their language creates an added barrier to learning the language as the number of native speakers continues to decrease. Additionally, these participants discussed their motivations in terms of a higher purpose or goal. Whether discussing the thought processes of an Indo-European language speaker or the perceptions of a person in the United States toward a Nahuatl speaker, these English or Spanish language speakers embraced their language learning experience as a way of tapping into their own ideals and worldviews. With these motivations behind them, the participants talked about the challenges they faced in learning Nahuatl (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The challenges to learning and their interrelated phases and constituents in the overall Nahuatl language learning experience for participants as they grappled with the amount of time, money and commitment invested as well as the lack of or limit to courses, materials or institutions.
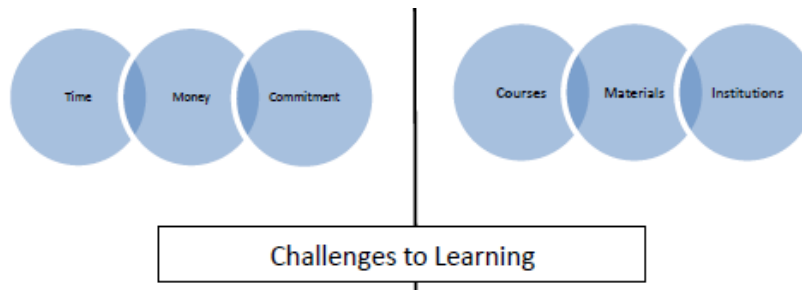
An integral piece in the essence of this experience came from the challenges each participant faced with the investment of time, money and commitment and the issue of gaining access to materials, courses and institutions (see Figure 5). For instance, many of the English or Spanish language speakers struggled with the cost of attending institutional programs. These speakers mentioned this monetary cost because the availability of courses and native Nahuatl speakers was limited in their geographic areas. One option available to a few of the participants involved a summer immersion program and though each participant mentioned the quality and value for this investment, it was a challenge for them. Karen mentioned this challenge in terms of both time and money in the following excerpt:

> Whew! Going to Mexico for better than 6 weeks was a severe challenge.
> I'm a working woman in her 50s and had to take a large amount of leave,
> and find caretakers for all the obligations I was leaving behind.

Karen's challenge with time and money differed from the experience of Samantha and Marcial. Both of these participants were students at the time and they encountered difficulties in obtaining funding from the various sources available to them through their home institutions.

> So I found out about this program and looked into it and, of course, the only way that people usually fund it is through (a scholarship program). But, that's only available to American citizens and I'm Canadian. So that was all kinds of complicated and I actually, um, I actually ended up getting a little bit of funding from (my home university) and then paying part out of pocket. [Samantha]

> The biggest challenge I had was paying for the courses in order to learn Nahuatl. The first time I took this course I was an undergraduate student and was not applicable for scholarships to travel and study Nahuatl in Mexico. [Marcial]

While the investment of time and money for studying Nahuatl is no different from studying most languages, these participants discussed how the cost was difficult to overcome based on each of their unique situations. Investment is not only restricted to quantifiable factors like time and money, but also to the level of commitment needed to reach learning goals. These participants found additional challenges that increased their commitment based on the language itself and had the following observations concerning the linguistic structure of Nahuatl, the similarity in languages (between English or Spanish, and Nahuatl) and the differences in comparison to their native languages as well as other languages these speakers attempted or had attempted to learn. The following excerpt contains Fermi's observation on the diversity of variants for the language:

> I think the main challenge is that there are so many different variants in modern Nahuatl, so I started learning in the internet, Nahuatl from Puebla, then I met a Nahua girl in Cuernavaca and she taught me some Nahuatl from Morelos, then I studied Nahuatl from Guerrero, then Classical and now the one from Mexico City. Fortunately, most of them are quite intelligible between each other, but it can be a bit frustrating sometimes, especially with new words, for modern things like cars, television, robot, etc., because most of the time each variant has its own version.

The existence of numerous varieties for a language group is a part of the language learning process for any attempt, but as Fermi noted, the Nahuatl language variations are more pronounced and distinct. These variations exist within very small areas within Mexico (from the community to the state level) and added to the time and commitment the participants needed to invest in order to gain more understanding of Nahuatl. While variation was a common experience, the English or Spanish language speakers found the underlying Nahuatl language structure an important element in their language learning

experience. The following excerpts contain the participants' observations on the underlying linguistic structures, similarities and differences:

> The language is highly nuanced and very different grammatically from English or Spanish. All words and sentence forms are foreign and take time and effort to learn. [Linda]

> The fact that it was not Indo-European. The structure of the language was quite different, for example, parts of speech are not as clearly delineated. [Stanley]

The grammar of the language was not only an important aspect in most of the participants' journey, it was also a challenge for many. As Linda and Stanley indicate in the quotes above, they found the language to be markedly different from their understanding of English or Spanish and this difference added to the amount of time and commitment they needed to spend on learning new vocabulary or grammatical structures. Marcial (in the quote below) discussed the time it took for him to understand how the language worked because of his lack of exposure to any language structured in such a way.

> Nahuatl, like many American Indian languages is a polysynthetic language. I had never been exposed to languages like these, so it took a while to get used to. The result is that I am able to make a lot more connections to the environment when building and deconstructing words in the language.

This discussion on the structure of the Nahuatl language was touched on by every participant in the study and based on the hyperbolic language used to describe the participants' experience with it; the language structure played an integral role in the essence of this experience.

The physical cost involved was not the only limitation these English or Spanish language speakers faced in terms of their commitment. Most of the participants also encountered difficulties in accessing materials. Cualli and Fermi mentioned the recent change in availability for some materials in the following excerpts, though more wide-spread availability of these materials (especially in certain language combinations) was still noted as a problem.

> Today, Nahuatl courses are available in the U.S. and Mexico, but most all of the course offerings are restricted to just a few universities, and some are unaffordable or far away. Besides the limited availability of Nahuatl offerings, the resources and materials for self study are often in Spanish/Nahuatl—not English/Nahuatl. I'm a native English speaker with limited study in Spanish, so, I prefer English/Nahuatl materials. Conversational Nahuatl is another barrier. Some Nahuatl materials only address Classical Nahuatl, and, few resources are available on modern Nahuatl dialects. [Cualli]

Nowadays I would recommend studying classical Nahuatl first, and then choose a modern version, pretty much like when you study Arabic (standard and then one variant). Another challenge in the beginning was the lack of material and courses, but that has quickly changed where I live, in the last couple of years. [Fermi]

These elements (investment in time, money and commitment, and access to courses, materials and institutions) made up the challenges participants faced trying to learn Nahuatl. I believe in most language learning situations that many of these challenges may influence a language learning experience, but there are specific experiences that may only be a part of learning a language like Nahuatl.

Final Reflections

Certainly, the results of this inquiry offer only a glimpse into the lived experiences of the English or Spanish language learners during their journey of learning Nahuatl. The structures that emerged capture the essence of these learners' journey and highlight the complexity and diversity of each individual learner's perspectives, motivations, and experiences. As a number of participants indicated, the issue of accessing this language remains a significant hurdle, especially in terms of the financial burden. Though there appear to be more choices available through various institutions within and outside of Mexico, these English or Spanish language speakers still indicated some difficulty in engaging in formal coursework, as most outlets for studying Nahuatl are located only in certain areas within Mexico.

Another structure, or the observations on language structure, is common in any language learning endeavor, but the marked differences in grammatical, lexical, and dialectical variations proved to be problematic for some of the English or Spanish language speakers. Additionally, many of the English or Spanish language speakers needed to make a choice in studying either classical Nahuatl or focusing on the modern variant. These speakers made this choice in conjunction with their motivation for studying the language, whether for an academic or other purpose. Finally, many of the speakers discussed the similarities and differences they found with their own native language as well as any other additional languages learned. These similarities and differences will occur in any language learning endeavor, but given the distance in language families between Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan language family) and English and Spanish (Indo-European language family), these speakers found the differences more striking and the similarities more surprising.

Two strands of research should be developed from this phenomenological inquiry. First, there is a specific need for using Nahuatl as a language for an academic or specific purpose. Many of the English or Spanish language speakers discussed the importance of the Nahuatl language in their particular area of study or in their development academically. Second, there is a need for using Nahuatl as a connection to a historical or cultural past. This familial link is important to English or Spanish language speakers who have a Nahuatl speaking individual in their family tree or to individuals with a particular ideological stance toward this endangered language. Some of these English or Spanish

language speakers identified their studies as having a higher purpose that included ensuring the survival of this language.

Limitations

First, as is the case with any phenomenological study, my assumptions are not generalizable to other language learners in the same circumstances. The language learners who contributed to this study have unique perspectives and personal life histories that underlie their responses during the data collection process. Second, a phenomenological perspective depends on self-reported data, so my own analysis depended on the willingness of these members to both describe their realities and reveal their inner thoughts (Richards & Shea, 2006). Additionally, I struggled with separating myself from the participants while I was engaged as the researcher. Researcher subjectivity was a central consideration in my methodological choice as I am a language learner who shared a common bond over some of the courses taken, the instructors met, the institutions visited, and the materials used. Finally, the semi structured interview format may have influenced the direction of the language learners' responses. I made every attempt to allow the interviewee to share his or her experience on his or her terms, but the specificity of the questions I asked might have caused the interviewees to reevaluate their own experiences in a different way from what was expected.

Future Research

One obvious voice missing in this phenomenological journey is the indigenous native speaker mentioned by many of the English or Spanish language speakers. Though there are voices in the artifacts (mostly documents and texts used during the language study), the key element of this language contact comes from these indigenous educators in the summer immersion programs. Further research should incorporate their observations in order to fill in some of the gaps. Finally, I believe there is a connection between these language learners and the survival of the Nahuatl language speakers. One of the English or Spanish language speakers, James, identified this link when he described the attitudes of Americans (U.S.) toward the indigenous Nahuatl language assistants:

> The only people that look at an Indian with admiration and say I love who you are, teach me what you know, enrich my life with what you know are people from countries that are not Latin America. The only way you raise the self-esteem of an indigenous person with respect to their language is by having them work with a foreigner who basically looks on them as an Aztec princess or an Aztec prince, a person with knowledge that can enrich human society, so unless there is participation from first world countries in the conservation of, you know, indigenous languages in the Americas, nothing good is going to happen.

Researchers should continue to explore this phenomenon by conducting research with more learners from outside of Latin America and with the indigenous speakers of this endangered language.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Name:

Please answer as much as information as you would like to tell me.

1. How long have you studied Nahuatl?

2. How did you first learn about or encounter the Nahuatl language?

3. What courses have you taken or programs have you enrolled in?

      a. How were these courses or programs conducted?

      b. Where did these courses or programs originate?

      c. What types of materials were covered in these courses as well as themes?

      d. What was the background of your instructors?

4. What challenges did you face studying this language?

5. If you have studied another language before, how does your experience with the Nahuatl language differ? Was the experience similar in anyway?

6. Why did you choose to study this language? What cultural, linguistic, social or other motivations led you to studying Nahuatl?

7. What cultural, linguistic, social or other motivations led you to continue studying the Nahuatl language?

8. If you have discontinued studying the Nahuatl, what are some of the reasons that occurred?

9. What suggestions or ideas do you have for others studying the Nahuatl language?

10. What else would you like to tell me about your experience with the Nahuatl language?

Author Note

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