

Experiences in Language Learning and Identity of *retorno* students in the BA program in Language Teaching and Translation in a Mexican State University on the border region with the U.S.

[spa] Experiencias en el aprendizaje de lenguas e identidad de alumnos de retorno en la Licenciatura de Lenguas y Traducción en una universidad pública en la frontera con Estados Unidos



Tatiana Estefanía Galván de la Fuente

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California



Eyder Gabriel Sima Lozano

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California



Jesús Eduardo Fong Flores

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

Recibido: 2023/05/5

Aceptado para su publicación: 2024/11/21

Publicado: 2025/03/15

RESUMEN

La migración ha sido parte de la historia de México y Estados Unidos desde hace algún tiempo. Recientemente se han realizado importantes investigaciones sobre esta migración, en particular el cruce y el recruce de la frontera y su impacto en cuestiones sociales, culturales y lingüísticas. En este artículo se discuten las experiencias de estudiantes de retorno de la carrera de la Licenciatura en Enseñanza de Idiomas y Traducción en una universidad estatal mexicana en la frontera con Estados Unidos. Vivieron en Estados Unidos un cierto período de tiempo y han regresado a México para asistir a la universidad. Se incluimos las voces de estos participantes para comprender sus percepciones sobre sus identidades y los cambios que presenciaron con respecto al aprendizaje de idiomas. A través de un marco cualitativo y a partir de entrevistas semiestructuradas, los datos revelan cómo estos estudiantes se sienten acerca de sus identidades desde un punto de vista cultural, social, personal y postura lingüística, así como la relacionan entre estos dos contextos educativos, y otras cuestiones de transnacionalismo. Los hallazgos respaldan la visión de Casinader (2017) del transnacionalismo como una “inestabilidad dinámica” que revela que el transnacionalismo es percibido de manera diferente por cada uno de los participantes y que estas experiencias han tenido un efecto en la forma en que se ven a sí mismos.

ABSTRACT

Migration has been part of the history of Mexico and the United States for some time. There has been significant research recently on this migration, particularly the crossing and re-crossing of the border and its impact on social, cultural, and linguistic issues. In this article, we discuss the experiences of *retorno* students in the BA program of Language Teaching and Translation in a Mexican state university on the border with the U.S. They lived in the United States a certain period of time and have returned to Mexico to attend university. We include the voices of these participants to gain insight into their perceptions of their identities and the changes they witnessed regarding language learning. Through a qualitative framework and drawing on semi-structured interviews, data reveals how these students feel about their identities from a cultural, social, personal, and linguistic stance, as well as how these two educational contexts relate, and other transnationalism issues. Findings support Casinader's (2017) view of transnationalism as a “dynamic instability” revealing that transnationalism is perceived differently by each of the participants and that these experiences they have had effect how they view themselves.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Sistema educativo, identidad, lenguaje, retorno, transnacionalismo, universidad.

KEYWORDS

Education system, identity, language, *retorno*, transnationalism, university.

Como citar (APA 7ª Edición):

Galván, T. G., Sima, E. G. y Fong, J. E. (2024). Experiences in Language Learning and Identity of *retorno* students in the BA program in Language Teaching and Translation in a Mexican state University on the border region with the U.S. *Quadrata, estudios sobre educación, artes y humanidades*, 6(12), 20-35. <https://10.54167/quadrata.v6i12.1211>

Introduction

Migration has long been part of the history of Mexico and the United States for some time now. Some Mexicans who have the opportunity to migrate to the United States to pursue the “American Dream”, and others who have the privilege to go back and forth from one country to the other for diverse reasons, navigating two educational, economic, political, and legal systems simultaneously has not always been easy. This dual navigation is sometimes a difficult one, as noted by [Rao and Stasio \(2017\)](#) “Many of those individuals spent their formative years in the United States and experience distinct challenges upon [their] return to Mexico, including extreme culture shock, depression and mental illness, and barriers to accessing employment and education in Mexico” (p. 10). This is the case of nine students we share as these *retorno* participants describe their experiences with English and Spanish and their feelings when returning to live in Mexico. They acquired English in the United States as children of immigrants meanwhile maintaining their use of Spanish at home. They have lived in the United States for a determined period of time and have returned to Mexico for diverse reasons, especially to attend university. Particularly, we present how these return migrants feel about their experiences in the classroom navigating two educational systems and how these impact their identities from a cultural, social, and linguistic perspective and the relationship to their future identity formation as language teachers and translators. The present paper is organized as follows. We begin with a brief description of the research context associated to the migration phenomenon between the United States and Mexico. Subsequently, this is followed by a discussion of the key concepts of the study: *retorno*, transnationalism, and identity. We describe the manner in which these have been conceptualized and how they relate to each other for the purpose of this study. This is followed by an explanation of the research design of the present project, succeeded by the presentation of the data in the form of semi-structured interviews that represent each of the emerging categories of the project. The paper concludes with a discussion on the diverse aspects that changed and shaped their identities upon their return to attend university.

The context where this return phenomenon takes place

The close proximity of Mexico to its northern neighboring country the United States, leads to an influx and continuous migration between both countries. The Tijuana-San Diego border is considered the largest land border crossing between both countries and the fourth busiest with 70,000 vehicles and 20,000 pedestrians crossing each day. In this sense, migration between both countries is said to be the largest ongoing movement of migrant workers in the modern world ([Massey, et al., 1994](#)). Thus, the relationship between Baja California and the state of California is in constant movement as day-to-day interaction is through the English language for diverse purposes such as commercial, academic and social as there is an increased population of migration from all over the world. As reported by the national Migration Institute, 1.6 million Mexicans have been repatriated between 2010 and 2014.

The last decade has witnessed an unprecedented return migration flow from the U.S. to Mexico ([Pew Research Center, 2015](#)). As a repercussion of this, hundreds of thousands of families with their children and young adults are coming back to Mexico. Vast numbers of migrants were U.S. born children or Mexican young adults educated in the neighboring country from a very early age. In this article, we

have decided to identify this population as *retorno* since most of the participants hold strong family and friendship connections in both countries and have developed an identification or appreciation with either one of both cultures.

The return migration phenomenon has generated an expanding interest among researchers across diverse disciplines such as education, applied linguistics and sociology. Some of this documentation is already occurring in Mexican higher education scholarship. While still relatively a new line of research, much of the scholarship has developed along three main lines. The first line focuses on establishing greater consciousness of the existence of the *retorno* population in Mexican society. For instance, recent work by Mexican scholars ([Cortez, et al. 2015](#); [Jacobo, 2014](#); [Moctezuma, 2013](#); [Zuñiga & Hamann, 2009, 2015](#); [Zuñiga & Reyes, 2006](#); [Zuñiga & Sanchez, 2000](#)), all make the compelling argument of the existence of this growing phenomenon of the returning diaspora in Mexican schools. Overall, they stress the diverse challenges this population faces to gain full engagement and agency in Mexican culture once they return. Specifically, the work of [Zuñiga & Hamann \(2009\)](#), [Cortez & Altamirano \(2015\)](#), and [De los Santos, Galván, Gonzalez and Nuñez, \(2020\)](#) draw attention both to the limits of current pedagogical theories in both educational systems and the challenges they face to gain complete participation in Mexican culture upon their return. As a group, these scholars affirm that Mexican schools- from grade school to university level- cannot overlook or ignore the educational needs of this expanding student population.

These studies (with the exception of [Cortez, Garcia and Altamirano, \(2015\)](#) focus on children at grade school level. A second research line has also been identified that centers on the *retorno* students' identity as they attempt to acclimatize into Mexican schools ([Jacobo, 2014](#); [Mora, 2015](#)). Noteworthy is the research carried out by [Pablo, Rivas, Lengeling and Crawford \(2015\)](#), [Christiansen, Trejo Guzman & Mora Pablo \(2018\)](#) examination of the role of how language ideologies impact decision making of three returnees as they seek a degree in English language teaching (ELT), and just how much these language ideologies shape the participants bilingual identities and teaching practices.

A third and newer research line is bringing attention and insights into the experiences of transnationals who have opted for a career in English language teaching and Translation. These diverse studies focus on the challenges that these teachers encounter as their professional identities materialize in the Mexican educational system and the outcomes for their future professional practice ([Mora, Trejo and Roux, 2016](#); [Rivas, 2013](#); [Petron & Graybeck, 2014](#); [Petron, 2009](#); [Mora, Lengeling, and Basurto, 2015](#); [Trejo, et al. 2016](#)).

Research in this regard has produced substantial insights into the understanding of the *retornos* participation and experiences in both the educational and social sectors. Nevertheless, research in this area tends to concentrate on a short span of their return experiences to Mexico, specifically identity work carried out by US/ Mexican *retorno* students, curricular discontinuities experienced when going back and forth from one system to another and those returnees who have opted for a career in English language teaching. However, research has not focused entirely on students at the university level and has not addressed the particular issues that affect the Mexican border states. Our study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by shedding light into the perceptions these students have of their identities, and the changes they witnessed regarding language learning once they return to Mexico to attend university.

Theoretical framework

Return migration is a term coined to describe migrants who leave the United States and return to live in Mexico. *Retorno* students can be described as “the person who returns to his/her country of origin in order to stay permanently after living in another country for an extended period of time, this return can either be voluntary or induced” ([Izquierdo, 2011, p. 172](#)). Of particular attention here are the university students that return to study at this university context. These students spend many years on the other side of the border but then return to their hometowns to work or study. With respect to Mexican migration, [Hazan \(2014\)](#) highlights a more fluid perspective on return migration as *transnationalism*, which perceives the migrant as a person able to sustain strong bonds to the country of origin and to the

country of destination, which in turn, provides them with concrete and impalpable resources that they are then able to employ tactically.

Such conceptualization is also used to characterize the dense social networks that go beyond the national borders, created by the physical, emotional and economic movement of the individuals and families, between countries and cultures (Binford, 2000). In other words, these individuals who go back and forth between two countries is the result of a dual life migration constantly receiving input from both cultures, therefore, concepts such as their linguistic practices or culture are not clearly demarcated.

For these participants that migrated to the United States with their families in pursuit of a better way of life learning to navigate and eventually becoming immersed in the culture tends to be challenging, especially when it comes to identity. The concept of *identity* therefore lies at the center of the aforementioned view of transnationalism. As stated by Bauman (as cited by Buckingham, 2008), identity can be defined as a fluid process that can be deemed as “infinitely negotiable” as it is continuously evolving and adding new characteristics. Identity is understood as the special and social configuration that people have of themselves, based on their territory of origin and the new scenarios they arrive as a result of their migratory trajectory. In such scenarios, migrants face challenges and opportunities that contribute to the creation of their self-image. In this regard, La Barbera (2014), emphasizes that not all “studies have demonstrated that the patterns of identification among migrants vary greatly, ranging from identification with one’s country of origin to religion or mother-tongue to receiving country, neither or both” (p. 3). These migrants’ everyday interactions and border-crossings to and from the United States, enable sufficient exposure to experiences and situations that derive from both cultures. Thus, there is a probability that the individuals develop feelings of affinity towards both lifestyles. Furthermore, other research demonstrates that individuals can identify or be a part of two or more cultures (Berry, 1992; Padilla, 1994). To expand on this notion, it is convenient to add what Be (2011) defines as situated identity. Situated identity is the one that embraces the practices based on family and national origins, with an emphasis on the new context once they return. In other words, the individuals’ performance in the new migratory space that he/she arrives on, derives from the knowledge and traditions of their place of origin. Noteworthy is Be’s research regarding migrants from Yucatan who prepare food while living in an urban area in California, United States. The author describes this practice, based on the knowledge of the context of Yucatan, Mexico along with the adaptations carried out in their new place of living. In this sense, it is relevant to know how these individuals have inherited Spanish and have arrived to the context of Baja California to study at this university and how they generate linguistic practices in both Spanish and English.

Research design

This paper is part of a larger identity and transnationalism project funded by the Ministry of Public Education of Mexico (SEP- PRODEP, Mexico). The research design of this project is of a qualitative nature since it intends to describe the experiences of these *retorno* students to gain insight into their perceptions of their identities and the changes they witnessed regarding language learning. The research questions that guided our research endeavors are as follows: What are the causes for these *retorno* students to come back to Mexico? What are the changes they witnessed regarding their language learning and identity in the university context? These questions supply us with insight that reveal how these students feel about their identities from a cultural, social, personal, and linguistic stance, as well as how these two educational contexts relate, and other transnationalism issues. Finally, they have helped us identify how these students view and perceive transnationalism.

Research context and participants

The study focuses on nine participants- one male and eight female and are all considered *retorno*. For a summary of the participants’ profiles see Table 1. The state of Baja California draws many of these students from the United States during the last ten years or so to attend university. The Ensenada campus is approximately 113 km. (70 miles) south of the Tijuana-San Diego border. All the participants are

students pertaining to both the Language Teaching and Translation-Interpretation B.A. programs from the school of Languages at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC, as known by its Spanish initials). To date, the student population in Translation studies has 216 students, Language Teaching has 93 students and the beginning semesters have a population of 137. The total population of these two B.A Programs is that of 446 this current semester 2022. The university's importance as the main public higher education context cannot be underrated and remains the only viable economic option for most state residents and the student population mentioned in this article.

Table 1. *Participant's Profiles*

Name	Place of Birth	Age	Reasons to return to Mexico	Schooling years in the U.S.	B.A Program
Gaia	Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mexico	24	Work and attend university	8 years	Language Teaching
Leslie	Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico	26	Attend university	3 years	Language Teaching
Adan	Hayward, California, U.S.A.	20	Parents decided to come back and work	10 years	Language Teaching
Carola	Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico	21	Work and attend university	6 months	Language Teaching
Martha	Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico	22	Parents decided to come back	3 years	Language Teaching
Vanessa	Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico	23	Parents decided to come back	13 years	Language Teaching
Diana	San Bernardino, California, U.S.A.	24	Attend university	2 years	Language Teaching
Johanna	Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico	22	Attend university	11 years	Language Teaching

Juan	Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico	25	Work and attend university	4 years	Translation
-------------	----------------------------------	----	----------------------------	---------	-------------

Data collection strategies

The main source of data was a semi-structured interview. (See Appendix 1). This was chosen as a data collection instrument since we are interested in people's opinions and views. The 9 participants were given freedom to select the time and place to carry-out the interview. The interview was carried out in Spanish to make it easier for the participants to express themselves, as well as allowing space for following new and relevant information jointly co-constructed by the individual's experiences. The interviews were translated to English for the purpose of this article and later transcribed to identify emerging themes that will aid in understanding their positions regarding the questions addressed. The participants were interviewed on one occasion and each interview lasted between one and one and a half hours.

In this sense, we collected opinions to inquire about the participant's beliefs, identities, experiences, and life histories. It is this "process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes interviews a meaning-making experience". (Seidman, 2012, p. 7).

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using a content analytical approach as this approach emphasizes the intervention of the researcher in the construction of meaning of and within texts, as there "is a willingness to permit themes and topics to emerge from the data naturally, rather than attempting to impose a preconceived set of themes on the data" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 563). We then looked for similarities to discover any logical connections and particular groupings that would reveal certain characteristics on this research. The interview contained two sections. The first section focused on the participants' background and the second on the reasons and perceptions regarding their language learning and identities once they returned to Mexico to attend university.

Discussion of findings

RQ #1 What are the causes for these *retorno* students to come back to Mexico?

Martha:

"My father was deported when I was seven years old, after a few months, my mother decided to return to Mexico because she did not want to be alone (this was when I was younger). I decided to return to Mexico to start university since where I lived in the United States, I would not receive financial support to go to college".

Martha's experience is typical of family migration. In this sense [Bean, Coron, Tuirán & Woodrow-Lafield \(1998\)](#), work emphasizes that for more than half a century, the migrant Mexican of rural origin left his family behind while working temporarily or periodically in the United States. Nowadays, this particular profile is being modified notoriously in the sense that family migration is more frequent. Migrants accompanied by their spouses or children is increasing since the post-IRCA period ([Durand, Massey & Chavet, 2000](#)) creating a more dynamic and fluid migrant society able to travel and reside legally in both countries.

Another aspect of family migration is the lack of financial support in the U.S. to attend university, thus making this a key issue in returning to their country of origin. Martha's concern for the high cost of university fees and living was a discouraging factor and she decided to return to a state university in Mexico where the tuition fee is more affordable. The cost of living and studying in this context is unfortunately an all-too-common experience:

Adan:

“I came back from the United States to Mexico with my family. The reason why is that university is very expensive and my parents did not want my brother and I to not go to college. For that reason, we moved to Ensenada and we started school here”.

Adan’s families’ reasons for returning to Mexico was for their children to attend university as they strongly believe that receiving an education is a priority. These efforts to access a higher education context culminate in a new, more prestigious status as university students, leading to better payment and a more stable employment. For Adan it is important to have a better way of life than his parents had, and getting a university education was the obvious way to do that.

These returnees come back to Mexico with a set of new skills and experiences that can help them in their reintegration process, and in their contribution to their country’s development. This set of new skills defined as “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2006) can be used in the classroom to develop continuity with their past experiences in the U.S. and the present experiences in Mexico. Consequently, the student’s curricular content and their ways of living can be linked. This particular connection also makes these students more “bi-cultural and bi-national than those migrants who returned in the past, and more fully aware of the extent of integration and mutual interdependence of the Mexican and American societies today” (Hazan, 2017:18).

Vanessa’s experience is typical of living on the border region:

Vanessa:

“My family decided that I would finish my studies here in Mexico and then work in the United States since many people do that. But me studying here was partly due to being with my family”.

This geographical movement between two countries constitutes a very common activity where the family decides for their offspring to study in Mexico and constantly move back and forth to the United States to work (Trueba, 1997). In this sense, the vast majority of university graduates living in Tijuana shuttle between the borders day-to-day as they are able to find work in the U.S. It is these types of migration patterns that create this particular academic population that is schooled in two different systems. Based on their legal status, this population goes back and forth as they have the “option” to either work or attend school in the U.S. What Vanessa’s experience suggests is that legal status marks the difference in these students’ lives as they are able to navigate between two countries.

Some may have dual nationalities making these everyday interactions across the border easy, facilitating both commercial and academic exchanges. This hints at the fact that a “legal” status simplifies a circular migration pattern that enables this rapid movement. For the bearer of this legal status, he/she has the opportunity to work, and move easily between both countries according to their necessities. This particular activity resonates with [Casinader’s \(2017, pp. 15-16\)](#) notion of transnationalism as “the dynamic instability of transformative transition that occur when people and ideas from different parts of the world meet, cross- pollinating dimensions of thought in the process”. From this perspective, these students view transnationalism differently as the experiences they have had on both sides of the border have shaped how they view themselves.

Based on these experiences, the emergence of a more “bi-national migrant society” ([Zuñiga, 2015](#)) that takes advantage of their legal privileges in the neighboring country is more evident. These privileges include the ability to buy a house or maintain a bank account, as this migrant society has the agency to live legally and exercise these rights. In this sense, the post-IRCA opens the door to a migratory pattern that is circular from a geographical perspective, but due to the legal characteristics, can also be defined as binational because this migrant society can move and reside legally in both countries ([Durand, Massey and Charvet, 2000](#); Bach and Brill, 1991; [Hagan, 1998](#); González-Baker, 1997; [Durand, Massey and](#)

[Parrado, 1999](#)). In another instance, Carola recalls a sense of not feeling at home in the neighboring country:

Carola:

“My parents did not feel comfortable being there- in the United States-and also, we were a big family living in a house with little space. That was one of the reasons why my parents decided for my brothers and I to return”.

The above reflection by Carola is shared by many return immigrants who reveal this “uncomfortableness” in living conditions during their time in the neighboring country. Due to socio-economic conditions, many are forced to live in precarious situations in a small and crowded space sometimes located in a marginalized area of the city or town. Carola’s parents feel “unwelcome” in a new country that does not resemble their country of origin is a pivotal factor in wanting to return. In short, this student experience reveals that family is a central issue why they decide to become part of this return migration. Central to this are financial and health issues, dislike of living in the U.S., and cost of attending university. These reasons validate that family is very important and constitutes the support they need to navigate a new culture and way of living.

RQ#2 What are the changes they witnessed regarding their language learning and identity in the university context?

Diana offers an insightful experience with the changes to her Spanish upon her return to the Mexican university context:

Diana:

“I have noticed some changes to my Spanish, it has improved both orally and in my writing. Before, my ability to write was not bad, I have simply improved because I used to speak Spanish with my family at home. Now, living and studying at the university in Mexico I am obligated to use Spanish more. Now at university, I have to use both English and Spanish alike formal and informally. This helped me in practicing and improving both languages”.

Diana, unlike many other *retorno* students who speak very little Spanish upon their return to Mexico, had the opportunity to interact in Spanish at home. As she mentions, she “has simply improved” due to this. As a language resource, Spanish is a necessary component for developing the English proficiency. Spanish, then is a necessary tool that students use to further their English language growth. While U.S. bilingual programs may be largely successful in teaching English to immigrant children, these interviews highlighted some issues. If Spanish in U.S. educational settings functions mainly as an entry point, (i.e., a learning tool) to aid students in the development of their English language proficiency, many, if not most *retorno* students may not be linguistically prepared in Spanish to re-enter Mexican schools, specifically the higher education context. Our own evidence supports this. For instance, Leslie reported that her Spanish was very limited upon her return to the Mexican university:

“Personally, I think that taking a few Spanish courses would have helped me with my Spanish-grammar classes- to help reinforce my Spanish grammar”. I felt somewhat unready returning without the skills in Spanish.

In her response, Leslie intimated that she felt her grammatical and syntactical structures were not very logical or natural in Spanish. Altogether, she felt she was not ready linguistically [in Spanish] for the rigors of the university context in Mexico. By no means does this suggest that there is something implicitly flawed with current methods and approaches to U.S. bilingual education, the context of the learners’ language differences is to be noted. In other words, an unintended consequence may be that learners are not sufficiently prepared in their L1 to [re] enter their birth nations educational context. This impacts students as they attempt to “reintegrate back into their birth nation’s social, economic, political, legal and educational systems, especially if no formal programs or systems exist to assist them” ([De los Santos,](#)

[Galván, Gonzalez and Nuñez, 2020](#)). In this sense, [Zuñiga \(2015\)](#), highlights the need for the development of programs that aid these students to transition from an English literacy to a Spanish one, as well as for educators to be familiar and understand curricular content in the United States and Mexico. For that reason, one of the most important challenges is the construction of educational policies for these *retorno* students and their diverse educational trajectories. Therefore, the knowledge or command of academic Spanish and curricular content of these students varies according to their previous academic experiences in Mexican schools. This migrant and transnational population questions equity, inclusion and the appropriateness of the dominant Mexican educational model and its practices ([Hamman, 1999](#)). In other words, these students challenge a monolithic model that seeks to develop social demands of a modern world instead of postmodern world in constant change and evolution. The linguistic, pedagogical and cultural obstacles of this expanding student population demand to redefine the current educational model and recommend alternative strategies for learning. For these students, the return to Mexico with their families or without them implies *re-integrating* to the Mexican educational system, a task that is not so simple. The following student, Gaia, offered a recollection of her friends being discriminated and a feeling of “otherness” upon their return to the university context:

“One thing that they could do-the school- is create consciousness in classmates, from my experience I never had problems. My friends had problems in talking with other people since they labeled them “pochos”. Being able to open up and share our experiences growing up with two different languages and cultures would help”.

This impression offered here by Gaia is perhaps the most demanding aspect that the new educational context has on the identity of *retorno* students. Even though she has had no negative experiences in this regard, her friends were called “pochos” (a colloquial term used to refer to a person of Mexican origin who lives in the U.S. and mixes English and Spanish when speaking) in school. Being discriminated or this feeling of “otherness” is a common feeling among these students. Upon their arrival in Mexico, these students are perceived as “different” or as “not real” Mexicans and sometimes deemed as “traitors” to the country because they speak Spanish in a “weird” manner ([Zuñiga, Hamman & Sanchez, 2008](#)). Therefore, at the identity level they collide. In the United States they were considered foreigners and in Mexico, “pochos”. Their multiple identities were not accepted here or there, which makes them feel discriminated in both contexts and countries. Gaia emphasizes the fact that more should be done on both sides of the border to deal with these issues in terms of creating a “safe” space in the classroom to talk about their experiences with two languages and cultures. A call for educational contexts to develop and promote support programs that enable these students to engage in a smooth transition upon their return to the classroom. Another student, Johanna, offered a recollection of her identity and being part of two cultures:

“Even though my mother-tongue is Spanish, and I do use it quite a lot, as a speaker I identify myself more with English. I identify with it more because it is a language that I learned from a very young age and I continue to use it- (I am in contact with it by watching movies in English, listening to music, interacting with my friends in the United States through the different social networks, etc.) as well as the career I chose- language teaching”.

Johanna recognizes that even though her mother-tongue is Spanish, she identifies more with English as she considers it an essential part of her identity. Her formal education has been in the U.S. and still has strong social ties with friends and family, therefore adopting English as her dominant language in every area of her life. Johanna has nothing but fond memories of her life in the U.S. with friends and school as she uses English to keep in touch with friends and family. Having substantial social ties on both sides of the border is important as she has a dual nationality. An aspect that is noteworthy as these students and families are constantly moving between both countries as they have an option to enroll their children in school in the United States ([Zuñiga, 2000](#)). In regards, to the career she chose- Language Teaching-she views English as being a commodity. With this skill she was able to attend university and this is the reason why she considers it to be an important aspect in her life. Johanna emphasizes that

returning for higher education is a strategy that could allow them to access and develop their imagined identities as college-educated professionals.

It is often the case that these return students find a place in the B.A. programs of Language Teaching and Translation due to their command of English ([Mora-Pablo, Lengeling & García Ponce, 2019](#)). Johanna understands that it is not enough to know the language and become a language teacher, she needed to study and obtain her degree in order to validate her command of the language and the academic content learned through her academic trajectory. This particular aspect breaks down the stereotype that in Mexico all you need is to speak English to become an English teacher. With time, being part of this B.A. community provides her with a feeling of confidence as how she identifies herself now and in the future.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the reasons these *retorno* students come back to Mexico and what changes they witnessed regarding their language learning and identity in the university context on the border region with the U.S. The voices of these participants bring to the floor many contextual issues such as discrimination once they return to Mexico, the “option” to go back and forth between their nation of origin and the host nation for work, and the lack of teacher-training of teachers on both sides of the border that will aid this population in their re-integration in the Mexican school system.

First, as an emerging population, UABC needs to consider these almost “invisible” students in terms of their communicative and language learning needs and how both languages are used in both contexts. It comes as no surprise that Mexican educators do not know what to do with these students in diverse levels and linguistic competencies in the classroom. In this sense, teachers on both sides could reach out to one another with the purpose of learning and understand how people do schooling. The fact that not many schools in the U.S. address the needs of migrants, therefore a call for educational contexts to develop and promote support programs that enable discussions between scholars who receive this increasing returning population. In this sense, [Hamman \(1999\)](#) reflects and questions the role of these two educational systems that are conceived as mono-national, as these children and young adults “need to be embraced by two worlds, but at the same time have been abandoned by both (p.1).

As seen from the participants’ semi-structured interviews, the return to Mexico was considered a stepping-stone to a higher education degree or also as an “option” as they have the privilege to go back and forth between both nations as some have dual nationalities. The high cost of attending university made returning to Mexico a feasible option for continuing their education. At the same time their bi-cultural orientations were persistent in their everyday lives. These participants have lived and grown-up in the United States in Mexican households and in the meantime maintained close social ties with Mexico, especially in this cross-border context in Baja California. As *retorno* students, their acculturation approach was an important aspect in their lives as they learned to navigate two languages and two cultures, looking for alternative identities, while coming to terms with their hybrid identities (Kanno, 2003). The phenomenon of transnationalism allows for migrants to interact and maintain close ties with family and friends in both countries. It is precisely this interaction with other Mexican friends or colleagues that provides the opportunities to use Spanish as a means of demonstrating and maintaining this shared identity. Mobility or being able to move between two countries is a constant flux nowadays. One of the main reasons of people moving is for a better way of life or better opportunities-academic or monetary. It is precisely this privileged position of these students that go back and forth between two nations to work and study is different from what others who had no option but to return to their nation of origin. In this regard, transnationalism is achieved or viewed differently by the participants as they make sense of their multiple mind spaces inhabiting multicultural contexts. [Casinader’s \(2017\)](#) consideration of a more holistic view of the world and a more nuanced amount of transcultural

understanding can be developed by those who have gained a trans-spatial perspective, not confined to established, preconceived identities or geographical borders.

As a field, we need to reframe our loci of attention away from the strict privileging of mono-national interests in order to ask new questions. We must re-think if our current methods and theories fulfill the educational demands of this population, especially those who one day have to return and go back and forth to their nations of origin.

References

- Bach, R. L., & Brill, H. (1991). Impact of IRCA on the US Labor Market and Economy. *Institute for Research on Multiculturalism and International Labor, Binghamton, NY, SUNY*.
- Be, P. (2011). Dimensiones culturales e identidades situadas: la herencia maya en migrantes yucatecos a Estados Unidos. *Estudios de Cultura Maya*, 38, 167-192.
- Bean, F. D., Corona, R., Tuirán, R., & Woodrow-Lafield, K. A. (1998). The quantification of migration between Mexico and the United States. *Migration Between Mexico and the United States, Binational Study*, 1, 1-90.
- Berry, J. W. (1992). Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. *International migration*, 30, 69-69.
- Binford, L. (2005). A generation of migrants why they leave, where they end up. *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 39(1), 31-39.
- Buckingham, D. (2008). Introducing identity. En Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, identity, and digital media* (pp. 1-24). The MIT Press.
- Casinader, N. (2017). *Transnationalism, Education and Empowerment. The Latent Legacies of Empire*. Routledge.
- Cohen, Louis, Manion, Lawrence, & Morrison, Keith (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. London and New York.
- Corona, R. y Rodolfo T. (1998). *Tamaño y características de la población mexicana en edad ciudadana residente en el país y en el extranjero durante la Jornada Electoral del Año 2000, Subcomisión Sociodemográfica, Anexos I.1, I.2 y I.3 al Informe de la Comisión de Especialistas para el Estudio de las Modalidades de Voto entre los Mexicanos que viven en el Extranjero*. IFE, informe no publicado.
- Cortez, N. A., García, A. K. y Altamirano, A. I. (2015). Estudiantes migrantes de retorno en México: Estrategias emprendidas para acceder a una educación universitaria. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, 20(67), 1187-1208. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1405-66662015000400008&lng=es&tlng=es
- Christiansen, M. S., Trejo Guzmán, N. P., & Mora-Pablo, I. (2018). You know English, so why don't you teach?" Language ideologies and returnees becoming English language teachers in Mexico. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 12(2), 80-95.
- De los Santos, Galván, González & Núñez. (2020). Revealing the Educational Experiences of los Otros Dreamers. *College of Composition and Communication, Vol 72 (2)*.
- Durand, J, Zuñiga, V. (1998). *Distribución de los mexicanos, mayores de edad (nacidos en México) en Estados Unidos a nivel nacional, estatal y por condado, Anexos de la Subcomisión Sociodemográfica, Informe Final de la Comisión de Especialistas para el Estudio de las de Voto de los Mexicanos Residentes en el Extranjero*, Instituto Federal Electoral.

- Durand, J., Massey, D. S, y Charvet, F. (2000). The Changing Geography of Mexican Immigration to the United States: 1910-1996, *Social Sciences Quarterly* 81(1), pp. 1-15. http://www.catedraajorgedurand.udg.mx/sites/default/files/2000_changing_geography_of_mexican_migration.pdf
- Durand, J., Massey, D. S. y Parrado, E. (1999). The new era of mexican migration to the United States, *The Journal of American History* 86(2), 518–536. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2567043>
- González-Barrera, A., Lopez, M. y Tohal, M. (2015). *More Mexicans leaving than coming to the US*. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/>
- González, N., Moll, L. y Amanti, C. (2006). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hagan, J. M. (1998). Social networks, gender, and immigrant incorporation: Resources and constraints. *American sociological review*, 55-67.
- Hamman, E. T. (1999). *The Georgia Project: A Binational Attempt to Reinvent a School District in Response to Latino Newcomers* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Pennsylvania.
- Hamann, E. T., Zuñiga, V., y Sánchez, J. S. (2008). From Nuevo León to the USA and back again: Transnational students in Mexico. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 6(1), 60-84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15362940802119245>
- Hazán, M. (2014). Understanding Return Migration to Mexico: Towards a Comprehensive Policy for the Reintegration of Returning Migrants (San Antonio: MATT Working Paper), 22.
- Hazan, P. (2017). Beyond borders: The new architecture of transitional justice?. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 11(1), 1-8.
- Izquierdo, E, A. (2011). Times of Losses: A False Awareness of the Integration of Immigrants. *Migraciones Internacionales*, 6(1).
- Jacobo, M. (2014): “Diáspora en retorno: Inclusión en el sistema educativo mexicano de retornados, dreamers e hijos de migrantes. *Memorias. Seminario Permanente de Evaluación de Políticas y Prácticas Educativas. CIDE, CLEAR Y PIPE*.
- La Barbera, M. (2014). Identity and migration: An introduction. In *Identity and migration in Europe: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 1-13). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1994). An evaluation of international migration theory: The North American case. *Population and development Review*, 699-751.
- Moctezuma, Ma. (2013). “Retorno de migrantes a México. Su reformulación conceptual” Papeles de Población, Vol. 17, Núm. 77. Toluca, México. Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México. Julio-septiembre.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., y Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534>.
- Mora, A., Trejo, N. P., y Roux, R. (2016). The complexities of being and becoming language teachers: Issues of identity and investment. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 16(2), 182–198. doi:10.1080/14708477.2015.1136318.
- Mora, P. (2015). Transnationals Becoming English Teachers in Mexico: Effects of Language Brokering and Identity Formation. *Gist Education and learning Research Journal*, Vol. 10, pp.7-28.

- Mora P., Lengeling, I., M., y. Basurto, N. M. (2015). Crossing borders: Stories of transnationals becoming English Language teachers in Mexico. *Signum: Studios da Linguagem* 18(2), 326–348. doi:10.5433/2237-4876.2015v18n2p326.
- Pablo, I. M., Rivas, L. R., Lengeling, M., & Crawford, T. (2015). Transnationals becoming English teachers in Mexico: Effects of language brokering and identity formation. *Gist: Education and Learning Research Journal*, (10), 7-28.
- Padilla, L. (1994). Mobility, Family Formation, and Fertility in a Transitional Society: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis. *Philippine Sociological Review*, 42(1/4), 142-158.
- Petrón, M. (2009). Transnational teachers of English in Mexico. *The High School Journal* 92(4), 115–128. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40364009?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- Petrón, M., & Greybeck, B. (2014). Borderlands epistemologies and the transnational experience. *Education and Learning Research Journal* 8, 137–155. doi:10.26817/issn.1692-5777.
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *More Mexicans leaving than coming to the U.S.* http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2015/11/2015-11-19_mexican-immigration_FINAL.pdf.
- Rao, A., & Stasio, F. (2017). The Other Deamers. *The State of Things*. <https://www.wunc.org/post>
- Rivas, L. (2013). Returnees' identity construction at a BA TESOL Program in Mexico. Profile issues in teachers' professional *Development* 15(2), 185–197. <https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/39071/42067>
- Seidman, I. (2012) *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Teachers college press.
- Trejo, N. P., Mora, A., Mora, I, Lengeling, M., y. Crawford, T. (2016). Learning transitions of returnee english language teachers in Mexico. *Lenguas en Contexto*, 13, 121–133. <http://www.facultadlenguas.com/lencontexto/?seccion=revista&script=visor&idrevista=21&pagina=121>.
- Zúñiga, V., y Hamann, E. T. (2009). Sojourners in Mexico with US school experience: A new taxonomy for transnational students. *Comparative Education Review*, 53(3), 329-353. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599356>.
- Zúñiga, V., y Hamann, E. T. (2015). Going to a home you have never been to: The return migration of mexican and american-mexican Children. *Children's Geographies* 13(6), 643–655. doi:10.1080/14733285.2014.936364.
- Zuñiga, V. (2000). Migrantes internacionales de México a Estados Unidos: hacia la creación de políticas educativas binacionales. en Tuirán K. (Ed.), *Migración México-Estados Unidos: opciones de política* (pp. 300-327). CONAPO.
- Zúñiga, V y Reyes, M. (2006). La cultura de los pasaporteados: Familia y migración internacional en Vallecillo, Nuevo León”, en Isabel Ortega Ridaura (Ed.). Fondo Editorial Nuevo León.
- Zúñiga, V. y Sánchez, J. (23 de Mayo de 2000). *Alumnos transnacionales en Nuevo León: Hacia una política educativa* [Ponencia no publicada] Foro de Consulta para el Programa Nacional de Educación 2007-2012. Monterrey, Nuevo León.

Appendix 1

Entrevista

1. ¿Dónde nació? (Ciudad, País)
2. ¿Qué lengua o lenguas habla?
3. ¿Cómo aprendió su lengua materna?
4. ¿Cómo aprendió su segunda lengua?
5. ¿En su familia qué lenguas se hablan?
6. ¿Cuánto tiempo viviste en los Estados Unidos? (U otro país)
7. ¿En Estados Unidos cuándo y en dónde usabas el español? ¿Cuándo y en dónde usabas el inglés?
8. ¿Desde cuándo regresaste a México?
9. ¿Por qué el retorno? ¿Qué le motivó a retornar? ¿Vino solo o con su familia?
10. ¿En qué nivel de competencia comunicativa te consideras como hablante del español?
11. ¿Considera que en la universidad le ha facilitado el uso del español? ¿y del inglés cómo ha sido el proceso de uso del idioma? ¿se ha sentido cómodo?
12. ¿Por qué eligió la carrera que cursas actualmente?
13. ¿Con qué lengua se identifica más como hablante y por qué?
14. ¿Cómo se nombraba a sí mismo cuándo viviste en los Estados Unidos?
(Americano, estadounidense, mexicoamericano, hispano, latino, otro y por qué)
15. Y ahora, aquí en México, ¿cómo se denomina a sí mismo, ¿o se considera mexicano?
16. Ahora que está en México, ¿cuándo y en dónde usa el inglés?
17. ¿Crees que debe seguir aprendiendo español? ¿Por qué?
18. ¿Qué debería hacer la universidad para personas como usted que siendo herederos de la lengua española y de identidad mexicana regresan a México?
19. ¿Ha tenido alguna experiencia negativa por hablar inglés o español aquí en México?
20. ¿Si viniera una escuela de idiomas muy reconocida y le ofreciera un curso gratuito por cinco años y le dan a elegir entre alemán, francés, mixteco, zapoteco? ¿Cuál elegiría y por qué?
21. ¿Considera que hay algún cambio en tu forma de aprender una lengua? Es decir, ¿ha notado que aprendió algo o te esforzaste en aprender algo del idioma español u otra lengua?
22. En ese sentido, ¿ha cambiado su identidad como hablante, individuo, sujeto, estudiante al momento de aprender la lengua meta, el español u otra lengua?
23. ¿Cómo se siente en el escenario mexicano y cómo compararía el anterior en el que estuvo, tanto social, cultural, lingüísticamente y lo que guste compartir?
24. ¿Y en el ámbito educativo, ha cambiado su forma de ser estudiante, universitario?
25. ¿Qué idioma prevalece en sus interacciones académicas?
26. ¿En algún momento mezcla las lenguas que habla en el aula de clases?