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Crossing Back, Looking Forward: Teacher Education as a Site of Being, Belonging and Transpedagogical Becoming

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the identity trajectories of four transnational language teachers who have returned to Mexico and enrolled in teacher education programs at a public university in central Mexico after living in the United States for a number of years. Drawing on poststructuralist views of identity (Barkhuizen, 2017; Norton, 2013), Anzaldúan theories, and anti-malinchismo (Kasun & Mora-Pablo, 2021; 2022), this study explores how these teachers manage conflicts between their personal histories abroad and the professional and sociocultural demands of teaching languages in Mexico. Through narrative inquiry, using autobiographies and semi-structured interviews, results show how their time in the United States significantly influenced their pedagogical views and self-perception as language teachers. However, returning to Mexico triggers complex negotiations of legitimacy, belonging, and recognition. Their participation in language teacher education programs turns out to be crucial for identity reconfiguration. These provide opportunities to balance their transnational experiences with local teaching realities, as well as academic grounding and reflective practice. The programs' function in fostering a feeling of both professional and personal belonging is highlighted by the findings, which also reveal institutional shortcomings in aiding returning teachers. This work aims to increase understanding of how mobility and organized academic and pedagogical engagement shape teacher identity in the context of return migration.

Keywords: teacher education programs; teacher identity; narratives; transnationals; return migration

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the ability of language teachers to move around has become an important aspect of the profession. This has changed the way people think about who teaches languages, where they teach, and under what conditions. Most of the research on teacher mobility has focused on teachers who work abroad as expatriates. These studies often talk about the problems of professional enculturation, linguistic legitimacy, and identity transformation in new educational settings (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Trent, 2016). But the stories of teachers who return to their home country after living abroad and want to fit back in are mostly missing from the literature. These teachers who have returned often have to deal with challenging issues of professional (re)positioning, institutional recognition, and emotional belonging as they try to fit their transnational selves into local school systems that may not fully understand or value their experiences.

This article focuses on the often-overlooked experiences of returnee transnational teachers. Different studies have addressed how people negotiate their identities in host countries, but it is just as important to look at the "return phase" of the transnational journey. This is when teachers return to their country of origin in a place that is both familiar and new, and how institutional spaces in their home countries affect or challenge their sense of belonging. This study changes the focus from typical experiences of expatriates to the processes of re-entry that define return migration and professional reconfiguration in the field of language education. This article is about the stories of four Mexican language teachers who lived for a number of years in the United States. They now work in Mexico in different roles in the language teaching field. All four were involved in formal teacher education programs in Mexico. Their experiences in both countries caused both stress and change. Their paths challenge simple ideas of "home" and "abroad" and show the complex ways that transnational professionals make sense of their changing identities.

The nature of how teacher identity is influenced through mobility and international teaching experiences has been widely investigated (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Trent, 2016). However, there is not much research on how return migration makes these processes more complicated, especially in places where institutional recognition does not match the symbolic capital gained abroad (Canagarajah, 2017; Flores, 2020). Even when there is an emerging body of research literature about the experiences of returnee language teachers in Mexico and in other countries (Christiansen, et al., 2018; Hidalgo & Kasun, 2019; Laboe, 2022; Mora, et al., 2016), there is a gap on how teacher education programs can shape or support the identities of returnees and in understanding the influence of return migration on this construction process as it relates to formal teacher education programs. Even more unknown is how teacher education programs can or cannot scaffold a sense of belonging for returning teachers. This gap is especially concerning in that migration patterns are only becoming more diverse and teacher mobility is becoming more common.

In particular, this study looks at how their experiences in Mexico and the United States are understood, revalued, or resisted in institutional settings, and how their sense of legitimacy and belonging changes as they go through formal teacher development.

Literature Review

Poststructuralist Perspectives on Teacher Identity

Conceptualizing teacher identity as a situated and narrative phenomenon has been an important theoretical development. This idea is built on Norton's (2000) earlier work and was developed by other scholars such as Barkhuizen (2016, 2021), Clarke (2009), and Menard-Warwick (2022). For

example, Barkhuizen (2016) has offered a dynamic model of teacher identity that comprises four aspects: situated, imagined, professional, and personal. This model has been used to better understand the relationship between a teacher's previous experiences and his/her current situation and aspirations. Analyzing the formation of identity trajectories over time, space, and geopolitical borders is of relevance for this model and to the study of transnational and return migration.

More recent contributions to the field on this topic have focused on more nuanced understandings of how emotions, ideology, and agency are at play and interwoven with teacher identity (Alsup, 2019; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). In addition to being socially constructed, teacher identity is also emotionally experienced and politically located in institutional settings, racialized discourses, and neoliberal professionalization ideologies that prescribe and proscribe certain ways of thinking and feeling about ourselves as teachers (Varghese, 2005). The resulting tensions can be particularly salient for returnees who become language teachers, in the way that they construct themselves professionally, may have felt simultaneously empowered and delegitimized as language teachers in Mexico by their transnational teaching experiences.

Intersectionality with other aspects of the self such as race, gender, class, and immigration status is yet another idea that is being given more and more attention by poststructuralist scholars in the context of teacher identity, as language teacher identities are often co-constructed with these aspects of the self (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Kubota & Lin, 2009). This might be particularly relevant to understanding potential discursive tensions that returnee language teachers in Mexico may experience because of the beliefs they hold about language teaching and learning, their perceived "foreignness," or their bilingualism.

Poststructuralist theories of teacher identity suggest that these identities are socially and discursively constructed, emotionally felt, and materially located within an institutional context, as well as within discourses and ideologies that have local and transnational roots. This study is particularly interested in how these returnee and transnational teachers negotiated, resisted, and reconfigured their teacher identities with and against the norms of a teacher education programs in Mexico. *Cultural Tensions and Identity Work in Transnational Teachers: Anzaldúan Borderlands Theory and Antimalinchismo*

Cultural Tensions and Identity Work in Transnational Teachers: Anzaldúan Borderlands Theory and Antimalinchismo

It is not only through pedagogical and institutional discourses that the identity trajectories of language teachers become realized. In addition to the linguistic and academic capital that are intricately intertwined with bilingualism and transnational experience, teacher identities are also constructed through shared ideologies and cultural imaginaries about the meanings and values of language, race, and national belonging. For many Mexican educators with transnational experience, especially those who have returned from living and studying in the United States, hybrid subjectivities tend to be liminal, fraught with uncertainty and, at times, cultural suspicion and affective dissonance. To account for these affective and ideological tensions in addition to the lived experience of cross-border movement, I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987/2012) borderlands theory and a more recent conceptual development in the idea of antimalinchismo (Kasun & Mora Pablo, 2022)

In her theorization of Borderlands as both a physical site and a metaphor for conflictual and generative in-betweenness, Anzaldúa (1987/2012) writes poignantly about "life in the hyphen-between two cultures, two worlds, two value systems" and the "existential schiz" that comes from not feeling fully at home "in either country, in both" (p. 26, 78). Her central notion of "Nepantla" – a Nahuatl word for in-between space – and the painful, but also creative, potential of inhabiting

a “third space” or borderland are useful in understanding the liminal tensions that many of the participants in this study experience in their professional and personal lives. Just as Anzaldúa (1987/2012) theorizes her own identity as a bilingual, working-class, queer Chicana woman in the Borderlands, for the participants in this study, the space of the language classroom can also be understood as a borderland where “transnational selves” are constructed, disrupted, and made anew. This builds on Anzaldúa’s (1987/2012) concept of identity as multiple and fluid and her emphasis on identity as being formed “day by day through acts of resistance, reassembly, reconfiguring” of the self in a system of oppression (p. 77).

However, there is also an important cultural and sociohistorical factor at play for teachers with transnational experience. This is the weight of *malinchismo*, a longstanding Mexican cultural and political ideology that equates loyalty to foreign people and cultures (especially the U.S.) with national disloyalty. *Malinche* is regarded as the first woman to be screwed or violated by the conquerors; in this instance, she is known in Mexican Spanish as the “woman of Cortés.” According to Mexican folklore and contemporary discourse, this makes Mexicans offspring of *La Chingada* (the raped/fucked) (Anzaldúa, 1993). In their article on *antimalinchismo*, Kasun and Mora-Pablo (2022) use the figure of *Malinche* as the foundation of the anti-*malinchista* perspective, which emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the value of these transnationals and refraining from labeling them as “*malinchistas*” due to their years living in the United States. They argue that we should refrain from employing the term “*malinchista*” as a means of identifying an individual who has “sold himself to the neighboring country.” The anti-*malinchista* perspective posits that the linguistic and cultural abilities of transnationals are acknowledged and regarded as a strength rather than a liability. The purpose is to use *Malinche* as an example of what many transnationals — men and women — do and how they reconstruct their life stories over time.

Teacher identity work, then, is also work of cultural translation, affective labor, and positioning. Returnee and transnational educators must negotiate not only institutional and disciplinary expectations but also the more implicit ideologies surrounding what it means to be an “authentic” Mexican teacher and how one might or might not fit the role. The result can be a range of responses from returnee teachers to downplay, hide, or deny elements of their transnational experience in order to better “fit in” with the profession or to use teacher education programs as opportunities to re-signify or reframe their hybrid identities as pedagogical resources. It is these kinds of questions about representation, identity, and the politics of national identity and ideology that other research on linguistic or disciplinary borderlands do not typically attend to but that a culturally situated lens of borderlands can account for.

The Role of Teacher Education Programs in Identity Formation

This process of identity construction is driven by various interactional, curricular, and reflective dynamics within formal programs that make teachers “face” competing ideologies of what it means to teach, to be a user of a language, and to belong to the professional community (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). These experiences of “double consciousness” open up spaces for what Alsup (2019) describes as “borderland discourse”—a set of skills that teachers develop to negotiate between their own beliefs and experiences, and the master narratives that schools and other institutions attempt to inculcate. This is particularly salient for transnational and returnee teachers whose trajectories may place them at odds with either the local professional environment or the teacher education program itself.

Teacher education is a “site of identity work” (Yazan, 2023) because it is not just a place, or a curriculum, but a discursive and relational space in which prospective teachers negotiate their selfhood in interaction with peers, instructors, institutional discourses, and the ever-evolving inner life of the “self-as-teacher” (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Teacher candidates enter the program with

certain linguistic, cultural, and experiential repertoires, and the space offers a chance to both understand and incorporate these identities in a meaningful, validated way (Johnson & Golombek, 2020). For returnee language teachers, a teacher education program can be seen as a site of re-belonging, where they are not only learning professional knowledge but also being offered (or denied) symbolic recognition of their previously acquired capital (Trent, 2016).

Teacher education programs that open up possibilities for returnee teachers to reflect critically on their identity work in collaborative and narrative-based ways seem to be the most productive. On the one hand, they provide the necessary “conceptual scaffolding” (Johnson & Golombek, 2020, p. 118) for teachers to understand and internalize academic knowledge and interact with the program in a critical and dialogic way. The idea of teacher professional vision proposed by Johnson and Golombek (2020) is useful here as a construct that helps teachers in teacher education programs to develop multi-perspectival capacity to make sense of their teaching in various ways, both as professionals and as members of particular sociopolitical contexts. Teacher education programs that help develop critical sociolinguistic awareness and pedagogical hybridity—that is, the disposition to navigate, deconstruct, and (re)construct one’s pedagogy across multiple sources of knowledge and experience (Pennycook, 2021; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018)—can position returnee teachers to view their border-crossing experience as a resource and learning opportunity rather than as a deficit or marginalization. When they provide a space for critical reflection, symbolic recognition, and—if necessary—resistance, teacher education programs can not only help individual teachers to re-constitute and reconstruct their identities, but also contribute to the diversification and democratization of the profession.

The current study is interested in the teacher education programs as a mediating structure that shapes returnee teachers’ identity perceptions, sensemaking about prior experiences, and imagined future trajectories as language professionals in Mexico.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative narrative inquiry approach (Barkhuizen, 2011; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to understand how Mexican language teachers who have returned from the United States construct, negotiate, and reposition their teacher identities. Narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology to study identity as a lived, storied experience, particularly if the research questions focus on how individuals make sense of who they are, their positionality, voice, and how they change over time and in different contexts (Barkhuizen, 2016). Grounded in poststructuralist and Anzaldúan perspectives on identity (De Fina, 2021; Norton, 2013), this study understands teacher identity as multiple, socially negotiated, and situated within broader discourses of language, migration, and legitimacy. The narrative approach enables a contextualized and agentic view of identity work, highlighting how transnational and returnee teachers recount their experiences of living in the U.S., returning home, and engaging in formal teacher education.

Participants and Context

Participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2015) to locate those who had migrated to and lived in the United States at some point in their lives for a minimum of three years and had all returned to Mexico and enrolled in one of the two teacher education programs at public university in central Mexico. These programs are the BA in English Language Teaching and the BA in Spanish Language Teaching as a Second Language.

Four participants (two women and two men) between the ages of 23 and 33 were selected and included in the study. All had experienced different migratory paths to the United States, some

having migrated with their families at a young age while others were born in the U.S. to Mexican parents. Upon returning to Mexico, most had not yet gained formal recognition as teachers and had enrolled in the teacher education program to become certified language teachers in central Mexico. All participants had returned to Mexico and were enrolled in or had recently completed a language teacher education program at a public university in central Mexico.

Elena

Elena was born in San Diego, California, to Mexican parents and lived there for 13 years until her parents decided to return to Mexico. She frequently traveled to Mexico on vacation to visit her family, but she completed up to Middle School in the United States. At home, her mother spoke to her in Spanish, and her father spoke to her in English. Elena studied a BA in English Language Teaching and subsequently an MA in Applied Linguistics in English language Teaching at the University of Guanajuato.

Seth

Seth was born in a small town in Guanajuato. His family has a tradition of migrating to the United States (his cousins, uncles, and siblings) and they primarily work in agriculture in Mexico. When things became difficult financially, Seth decided, at the age of 18, to move to the United States to work with his uncle in a mechanic's shop. There, he had the opportunity to take English classes and save money to help his family and return to Mexico later. At the time of the study, he was finishing the BA in English Language Teaching.

Andrea

Andrea was born in Celaya, Guanajuato, and at the age of two, her parents took her to the United States. Her father immigrated first, but her mother's desire was for the family to be united, so they joined him in California. She lived in the United States for 15 years, and her adaptation to the Mexican educational system was not easy. At the time of the study, she had completed an MA in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching at the University of Guanajuato.

Noah

Noah was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to Mexican parents. His father attempted to cross the border many times and was deported until he was able to settle. Of his family, only he was born in the United States, and his older sisters were born in Mexico. He lived in the United States for six years. He is currently pursuing a BA in Spanish Teaching as Second Language and is participating in a program based in Guanajuato teaching Spanish to heritage language speakers, teaching online classes to children and young adults in Pennsylvania.

Table 1 shows the profile of these participants:

Table 1
Participants' profiles

Participant	Age	Place of birth	Place where they lived in the U.S	Years living in the U.S.	Teacher education program
Elena	27	San Diego, California.	California	13 years	BA in English language teaching. MA in applied linguistics in English language teaching
Seth	28	Guanajuato, Mexico.	Houston, Texas	3 years	BA in English language teaching MA in applied linguistics in English language teaching
Andrea	33	Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico.	California	15 years	BA in English language teaching MA in applied linguistics in English language teaching
Noah	23	Atlantic City, New Jersey	New Jersey and California	6 years	BA in Spanish language teaching as a second language

Data Collection

Data collection took place over six months and included a written autobiography and in-depth interviews. The researcher provided participants with guiding questions for writing their autobiography. Then, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, held in Spanish or English, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English when needed for the analysis, and member-checking was performed to establish accuracy and co-constructed meaning.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a hybrid thematic and narrative coding (Barkhuizen, 2011; Riessman, 2008). First, an open coding was performed on the autobiographies and the transcripts of the interviews to identify emergent themes associated with shifts in identity, senses of belonging and legitimacy, and pedagogical positioning, which were then grouped in thematic categories that related back to the research questions and literature.

Second, narrative episodes were constructed to account for the trajectory of each participant's identity across time and space: particular attention was paid to how the act of returning to Mexico, entering the teacher education program, or encountering resistance in their local contexts contributed to each participant's positioning and repositioning. The resulting narrative episodes were then reinterpreted through the lens of Norton's (2013) investment, De Fina's (2021) repositioning, and Wenger's (1998) participation in communities in order to identify how institutional and discursive affordances and constraints shaped the development of participants' sense of self and belonging in their local teaching contexts. Open coding was used to identify key moments of identity negotiation, belonging, and professional stress. Codes were created inductively (using data-identifying, emergent trends identified within the data) and deductively (using sensitizing terms and ideas identified from the literature reviewed such as 'cultural hybridity', 'sense of belonging', 'borderland professionalism', etc.). The codes were further refined and structured into broad, cross-cutting themes that summarized cross-cutting phenomena relevant to participants' trajectories: "reflective repositioning," "hybrid pedagogical stances," and "pluriversal

professionalism." Reflective notetaking and positionality concerns were captured on analytical notes.

Researcher's Positionality

As a researcher, my own transnational and academic trajectory significantly shapes the lens through which this study was undertaken. I have been exposed to different language, cultural, and academic systems by spending some time in the United States in high school, obtaining my MA in an American university in Mexico, and finalising my PhD studies in the United Kingdom. During my professional journey, I have been engaged in several educational contexts within Mexico and trained. For the last 21 years I have been affiliated with the university from which this particular study was conducted, primarily being involved in the BA in English Language Teaching. While I am institutionally part of the greater Department of Languages, I have only tangentially been involved with the BA in Spanish as a Second Language. Three participants in this study were former students of mine, and I met the other throughout the research process. This proximity, as well as my own experiences of stepping over scholastic and cultural lines, inevitably affected how I read their narratives. This familiarity, while leading to trust and access, necessitated continual reflexivity in order to avoid over-identification or preconception, and to remain mindful of participants' production of meaning. This entailed keeping research diaries to document how I altered my assumptions over the course of interviews, the occurrence of resonance and dissonance in my responses to interviewees, and critically consider how my positionality had impacted on codes and topics. Although my background inevitably shaped my perspective as a researcher, I made every effort to remain as unbiased as possible, approaching the narratives with transparency, rigor, and sensitivity to the voices of the participants.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Member-checking and prolonged engagement with the participants were considered important to establish credibility and have the data verified by participants. Transferability was addressed by giving a rich description of the context, and dependability was attended to through an iterative process of coding and memo-writing. All participants signed informed consent letters, and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. This investigation fully adhered to the University of Guanajuato's ethical considerations and was approved by the Institutional Committee of Research Bioethics of the same university (CEPIUG-A02-2024). The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- *RQ1*: How do returnee language teachers in Mexico negotiate their professional identities after having lived in the United States?
- *RQ2*: In what ways does participation in teacher education programs support (or challenge) returnee teachers' sense of professional belonging and legitimacy?
- *RQ3*: How do returnee teachers make sense of and incorporate their transnational experiences into their emerging teaching philosophies and classroom practices?

The results discussed below are arranged by cross-participant themes; however, it should be noted that participants' experiences were conditioned by specific migratory periods and individual routes of experience. Two participants, for instance, were born in the U.S. and only one completed her primary school there, another came as an immigrant to the U.S. at a very young age and lived there for almost 15 years, while another one came to the U.S. in young adulthood and lived there for only three years. These disparities affected their navigation of professional identities upon returning to Mexico, particularly with linguistic confidence, cultural hybridity, and institutional acknowledgment.

Thus, while the themes show shared identity struggles and reconstruction processes, they also stem from unique positionalities, which are identified across the story excerpts and discourse.

Findings

***“Too American to Be Mexican, Too Mexican to Be American”:* Navigating Cultural Hybridity and (Non)Belonging.**

All four participants expressed experience of cultural liminality -being perceived as insufficiently Mexican or not Mexican “enough”. For example, Elena was born in San Diego California, and her parents wanted her to speak both languages, but they both followed different approaches:

My parents were really dead set on me knowing English, especially my dad, because I think he was really scared that people would see that I was Mexican... or that we were Mexicans... like “one of those Mexicans”. So, he wanted me to know English but my mom didn’t want me to be like one of those kids that are Mexican and they have like Mexican heritage, but they don’t know any Spanish and she said “no, that’s going to look bad”. So, first, I knew English because my dad really wanted me to know only English, but my mom wanted me to know like a lot of Spanish. So she started teaching me Spanish by herself at home, she started giving me like classes on her own like about writing, reading, all of the Mexican writing system like acentos and everything because she didn’t want me to, I don’t know, like come to Mexico for vacation and everybody would say something like “Oh, they are Mexicans, they’re trying to pretend that they’re Americans.” So, they wanted me to develop these two languages but each of them wanted like the opposite language. (Elena)

Elena’s parents had a very clear goal for her to function in both countries with the language she was “expected” to speak in each. However, even when Elena showed proficiency in both languages, she was excluded by Mexican peers in the U.S. and later mocked for her bilingualism because her family had the wrong skin color and this prejudice followed her to Mexico:

It was difficult. I was born and raised in San Diego and there... there are a lot of Mexicans, and Latinos and I always hung out with the white kids because the Mexicans didn’t want to be friends with me because they would say “you don’t look Mexican” like “your parents don’t look Mexican. We don’t think you are Mexican”. So, I didn’t share like the experiences they had... like most of them had been born in Mexico and they moved with their parents to the U.S and I didn’t have this experience. I think that was one of the reasons why we moved to Mexico because I was always excluded from the Mexican community. I had like a lot of white friends, I was not perceived or accepted as a Mexican. (Elena)

When she went back to Mexico with her family, life became more complicated as she faced rejection from both “sides.” But now the rejection seemed more aligned with language skills rather than skin color.

The first weeks [in Mexico] were very difficult because I knew Spanish, I had a good handle on Spanish. I could read and write in Spanish, but I had some problems with speaking in Spanish like re-organizing my ideas in Spanish. I remember like in the Spanish classes we had to write essays, and I first wrote them in English and then translated into Spanish because I wasn’t sure about how to organize my ideas. And of course everybody made fun of me for doing this. And that is when I realized that “oh, the Mexicans in the U.S. don’t want me because they don’t think I’m Mexican, but it’s the same over here, they don’t want me because they don’t think I’m Mexican! (Elena)

Noah experienced something similar. He was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey and he is the only member of his family who has dual nationality. However, instead of having this as an advantage, he was constantly marginalized and culturally “othered”:

At the same time, this "having papers" and "being born in the North" token would also generate comments among people who told me that I wasn't completely Mexican just because I wasn't born in Mexico, that I was gabacho, that I was pocho. Growing up, this always made me feel disconnected from others on some level. It was never an impediment for me, but it was a constant source of confusion about my identity and what I was. I've also always had a mania for naming things and trying to define them, and in my case, there were always different factors that made me feel different or disconnected from my social environment. (Noah)

For Noah, being called “gabacho” or “pocho” by others created a sense of confusion about his identity. Questioned about where he was born or where he had lived, but at the same time not fitting into the Mexican community upon his return, created a self-perception of being “between two worlds”. What is striking is that, despite the fact that both participants have a clear difference in the number of years they lived in the United States, they both experienced being “othered” by friends, classmates or family. In Elena's case it was due to her linguistic ability in Spanish (while being in Mexico) and physical appearance (while being in the U.S.), while for Noah it was more due to having “official documents” and being seen as different by others for having dual nationality. Participants reflected on a sense of being “in-between,” not fully belonging to the Mexican system to which they returned nor to the U.S. community that they had left. This appears to parallel the notion of transnational repositioning (De Fina, 2021), where identity is in constant repositioning across fluid social fields.

Reclaiming the Transnational Self: Making Sense of Lived Experience Through Language and Pedagogy

As participants narrated their experiences, it was evident that they gradually transformed their transnational pasts into pedagogical resources. For example, Andrea, who was taken by her parents at the age of two years to California, reclaims her U.S. schooling as a model for how she teaches today:

My classes in the United States were very enjoyable. I felt like we were playing, and learning was like a game. I remember they made us practice sounds a lot, and the teacher was very patient with us, and I liked that part. Now, looking back, I remember that, and I try to be that way with my students. (Andrea)

Andrea remembers her teachers and how the experience of having teachers who showed interest in her learning has shaped the way she approaches classes now in her role as teacher. Similarly, Seth, who went to the U.S. illegally at the age of 18 years old, reflects critically on how his early classroom management mistakes stemmed from misapplied imitation of models he remembered of his school days in an ESL program in the U.S.:

[when I started teaching in Mexico] there were many situations that I couldn't handle, like classroom management, I felt like in my classes, the environment was not appropriate for students to learn. Now that I have time to reflect about it in classes... I was like, starting my classes, it was a lot of teaching talking time. And I saw that my students were getting bored in my classes, but I didn't know what to do. Because I was replicating some of the strategies that my teachers in the in the ESL program [in the U.S] were using. But obviously, I was not applying the strategies. I was just, I just thought I was just focusing on keeping the students under control. And I was not narrowly focusing on their learning. I

was also presenting things only once. And I was expecting my students to learn everything with one time exposure and that was super crazy. I wish I could go back and apologize to my students. (Seth)

For Seth, his reflective process made him realize that his initial days in teaching was just about replicating strategies from his former teachers, without any consideration to the context where he was teaching. While Andrea lived in the United States for 15 years and completed all her initial schooling there, Seth only spent three years in the U.S. This difference in the number of years living in the United States may be an important factor in how they perceive themselves as teachers now. While Andrea models teaching from the teachers she had in the United States, Seth simply copied those models with the tools he had at the beginning of his teaching practice. In the case of Noah, his phonetics class in the BA in Spanish Language Teaching as a Second Language served as a turning point—helping him revalue his accent and heritage through linguistic analysis:

I still remember when I discovered how I spoke. It was in phonetics class. By analyzing my voice and my father's, we could demonstrate how our accents changed words ending in "o" to "u," as in "rio" to "riu," and from "e" to "i," as in "noche" [night] to "nochi." I remember this class, I remember hearing my voice and identifying it, I remember finding the similarities with my father's voice and wanting to cry with happiness. This made me see and demonstrate that I am from Michoacan, regardless of any paper that said, "foreign born." (Noah)

For Noah, analyzing Spanish in depth in his phonetics class helped him redefine his concept of accent and how to locate himself as a Spanish speaker within Mexico. This allowed him to see that his identity went beyond the place where his passport says he was born. Their experiences show a sense of repositioning in which people make sense of their social positioning and identity through new understandings and discourses. Participants do not just deploy what they learned while abroad; they recontextualize it in a more reflexive way to create hybrid, culturally responsive teaching selves.

Finding a Professional Home: The Teacher Education Program as a Site of Recognition and Re-Belonging

For all participants, the teacher education programs in Mexico offered a sense of symbolic institutional recognition. For example, Andrea says that she found “her place to belong” when she realized the program was in English and her language was no longer mocked:

Returning to Mexico was very difficult because I felt like I was leaving everything, my entire life in the United States, and coming to a place I didn't know. And again, no one asked me if I wanted to come, but I understood that it was very important to my dad that we returned to Mexico because my grandmother was sick. But returning was difficult because my Spanish wasn't good; I had an accent, and people made fun of me. At school too, not only my classmates but also the teachers. I cried and I asked my parents to let me go back to the U.S. but of course, they didn't let me... I felt fine in English class, but not in the rest. It was very hard for me to find a way to adapt. And it was by pure chance that I found the English Language Teaching program. When I saw that all the classes were in English, I said, "This is where I belong." Not because I initially wanted to be a teacher, but more because I had finally found the place where I could be myself. (Andrea)

After being bullied upon her return to Mexico due to her accent in Spanish, Andrea found a place that gave her a sense of belonging. Even though being an English teacher was not her main goal at the time, finding a place where she felt she belonged was all she needed to start her current profession. Elena, on the other hand, notes that it was “great to use my language fully again” and that her classmates’ similar experiences made her feel “accepted”, but still in between as she was in Mexico, but holding on to English.:

At first, I wanted to study the BA in Spanish Literature because I thought “Oh, I like to read” ... but then I realized that the program had nothing to do with that. But I wanted just an excuse to study in Guanajuato...and I studied two BAs at the same time, the Spanish Literature and the English language teaching program. I loved this last one. My teachers really looked that they wanted to be here, that they liked what they were doing... I liked that about the program. It was great that I could use my language fully again. I liked my classmates because they had almost the same experiences as me. Some of them had lived in the U.S. so I felt like very accepted and that I could relate to my classmates (Elena)

For Elena, “using her language” when she refers to English, indicates her closeness to that side of her history and how she started to develop a sense of belonging in the teacher education program. But at the same time, this is the place where she found other classmates that had experienced similar trajectories as hers. Noah reflects further on what the teacher education program has given him. He reflects on how the program helped him to understand the linguistic repertoires of his own family:

I was never aware of the differences in Spanish on a deeper level. In fact, growing up and listening to my cousins who grew up in the U.S., I had never been aware of a difference in their accent or words. But the BA in Spanish Language Teaching as a Second Language allowed me to acquire linguistic awareness, and little by little, I discovered and became more aware of the variation in the Spanish spoken by me, my family, and my family living in the United States. (Noah)

Participants make connections between their experiences in the U.S. and how the teacher education programs opened their eyes to new ways of analyzing their own linguistic repertoires and the value of what they had lived before. For example, Seth reflected on how an unexpected event led him to decide on becoming an English teacher:

After the recession... I decided to come back to Mexico. My plans were to plant some crops and to raise cattle. But... in 2015, I lost it all. And by all, I mean 150,000 pesos, capital... because some insects ate my crops and I couldn't stop them. And then I was like, “Oh, my goodness, I need to find another way to make money because agriculture is too risky”. I had to work for three years, [work] pretty hard to pay the debts and everything. And after that, during 2019, I enrolled in the BA in TESOL. And because of the BA program, I was able to have a job as a teacher, because I had some proof that I was studying to be an English teacher, it was easier for me to get a job. I mean, the schools are changing now. They want people who are really prepared to teach English not just because you know English you can teach, they are moving towards this idea that the teachers must have some certificates or some preparation to teach. (Seth)

These reflections highlight the teacher education programs as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where transnational trajectories of returnees are validated and repositioned as a space of expertise and confidence. This allows us to see the notion of identity as built through relational and dialogic learning.

Towards a Professional Future: Reimagining Teaching Philosophies through Transnational Lenses

Participants used the teacher education program to shape forward-looking, reflective teaching identities grounded in transnational insights. For example, Seth links his pedagogical growth to a desire to “be a professional teacher,” having moved beyond survival strategies toward reflective practice.

It's like a great way of practicing what I was being taught in the classes, and also applying things and learning better, because you get to see what works and what doesn't, or what needs improvement. So, it was good that I started to study the BA, I thought that if I was going to be a teacher, I needed to be a professional teacher. And I understood that it was not easy. So, I needed some preparation. (Seth)

For Seth, having theoretical and practical knowledge allows him to value the teacher education program and develop his own identity as English teacher. Noah views his role as a heritage language teacher as a way to serve communities like his own and to connect with family who never returned:

Also, during my studies, thanks to the heritage speaker program with Professor Claudia, I was able to understand what a heritage speaker is, and that many of my cousins and relatives were. Now I could also identify their voices, recognize them, give them names, and understand the reasons for their Spanish. This was a process that required a lot of reflection and always left me excited and moved to better understand their speech. Working with these types of students means growing and learning both professionally and personally. For me, I believe that being able to help this type of students to learn Spanish means supporting the community and families like mine who have been impacted by migration to the United States. It means connecting with all the cousins I didn't grow up with and getting to know all those relatives who haven't returned in over 20 years. These are the heritage speakers my sisters and I could have been if my parents had decided not to return to Mexico. (Noah)

Noah highlights insights gained from his BA in Spanish Language Teaching as a Second Language and draws a particularly pronounced parallel with his view of relatives who have not visited Mexico for years. He was briefly in the United States, yet he is grateful for the benefits he and his sisters took from returning to Mexico. He is now teaching online classes to heritage language speakers based in the U.S. and acknowledges how the program has helped him to understand better these students and empathize with them due to his own experiences. Also, Andrea expresses a desire to support students who feel out of place:

At first, I was the youngest in the program because everyone else was older, with more teaching experience, and I didn't even know what teaching was. But little by little, they helped me. I think the program gave me the confidence I needed, and I felt protected by my classmates and because they didn't think I was weird. Speaking English was well-regarded here, even admired. And that gave me the confidence to want to be an English teacher. Those four years of my bachelor's degree were very enjoyable for me, and that's why I later decided to pursue a master's degree at the same university because I wanted to help people like me to feel better in school. (Andrea)

Finding a place and a purpose in her professional trajectory gave Andrea a clearer vision of her next professional steps. When questioned about what both countries (Mexico and the U.S.) have given her, Elena articulates a cross-border identity that allows her to see herself as “living in both countries.”:

Mexico has given me the opportunity to develop academically and... specially at the university level. I felt I finally found a place where my English was not questioned... or that my mexicanness was not questioned. Before the BA I thought that I was going to do everything by myself... but then it really changed the way I see myself, I feel more confident now. The U.S. gave me my real first sense of identity. Having to navigate like “I know I'm Mexican, but I can't claim that publicly”, it was like a weird identity kind of formation. But it is where everything started and it gave me my language and, my American citizenship. Now, I don't feel like an outsider anymore... after researching on this and having the classes in the BA and in the MA, I think I can live in both countries... Truly, studying in these programs has helped me to see that what I experienced is very common, that I'm not the only one who went through that and that makes me feel better, like at peace. (Elena)

The findings here show the trajectory from identity dissonance to identity coherence through the lenses of critical pedagogy and affective commitment. All participants encountered challenges re-entering Mexican educational institutions after a period of adjustment, but a noticeable divergence in pedagogical expectations was observed especially for Elena and Andrea as they had spent their formative years completely in the U.S. On the other hand, Seth, who moved back after three years in the U.S. as a young adult, demonstrated flexibility, but struggled through their first years of teaching experience in Mexico. Noah was only in the United States for six years but showed keen empathy for heritage speakers, such as his relatives, developed from his experience teaching heritage-speaking children during his practicum in the teacher education program. The findings expose the returnee teachers' journey of regaining their lost linguistic and cultural histories, and further into the future by anticipating it through their teaching philosophy, which reflects teachers' agency rather than simple adjustment.

Discussion

This study aimed to better understand 1) how returnee English teachers in Mexico negotiate their professional identities in relation to their formative transnational experiences in the U.S., 2) how participation in a teacher education program supports or challenges their (re)construction of belonging and legitimacy, and 3) how their transnational experiences were integrated into their emerging teaching philosophies. The results of this study have shown that these processes are intricately linked with affective tensions, sociocultural ideologies, and institutional encounters that are difficult to make sense of without considering the participants' border-crossing experiences. In this section, the findings are connected to relevant theoretical traditions, including poststructuralist identity theory, Anzaldúan borderlands thinking and antimalinchismo, and the scholarship on teacher education as a site of (re)construction.

Identity as Negotiation Across Linguistic and Cultural Borders

RQ1: In what ways are returnee English teachers in Mexico negotiating their professional identities in relation to their formative transnational experiences in the U.S.?

As showed in the findings, all participants in this study revealed that the process of returning to Mexico was marked by discursive dislocation and heightened awareness of not fitting in either back "home" or back "abroad." In other words, the linguistic and cultural in-betweenness that they were experiencing aligned with a poststructuralist view of identity as multiple, relational, and context-dependent (Barkhuizen, 2017; Norton, 2013). Returnees like Elena and Noah discussed how their linguistic abilities, accents, and even citizenship were interpreted through the lens of "foreignness" in Mexico, while they had also felt (to varying degrees) ostracized or othered in the U.S. for not being "Mexican enough."

These identity tensions are perhaps most clearly aligned with Anzaldúa's (1987/2012) theory of the borderlands and *Nepantla*, an emotional, ideological, and physical state of fragmentation and possibility. Participants seemed to be stuck between the powerful pulls of two countries: Mexico, which would not entirely claim or legitimate them, and the U.S., where they had also experienced discursive rejection and displacement. This feeling was perhaps strongest for Andrea. For her, coming back to Mexico involved being laughed at, institutionally neglected, and, at times, reduced to tears. However, her discovery of the English language teaching program ("a place where I could be myself") shows how professional belonging was made possible through the validation of her transnational capital. In addition, these stories are clearly shaped by antimalinchismo (Kasun & Mora Pablo, 2022). In this vein, participants were frequently judged, ridiculed, misjudged, or

excluded for their linguistic behavior or for having previously lived or studied in the U.S., which directly evoked past historical discourses of national purity and cultural suspicion.

Teacher Education Programs as Sites of Re-belonging and Recognition

RQ2: In what ways does participation in a teacher education program support or challenge the participants' sense of belonging and professional legitimacy?

The results of this study demonstrated that the programs in question acted as a critical space of re-belonging—not only through credentialing, but also through discursive and relational processes of recognition (Trent, 2016; Yazan, 2023). In other words, participants such as Andrea and Elena spoke about how, for the first time in their lives, their linguistic identities were not problematized but valorized. The classroom was a place where they were allowed to speak English without fear of mockery or judgment and where their transnational experiences were no longer seen as cultural deviance, but as pedagogical capital. This also reflects Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice, in which participants (through mutual engagement and recognition) come to feel legitimate or find a sense of belonging. For these teachers, the re-positioning or (re)construction of identity was therefore not a straightforward trajectory of assimilation, but one of being reclaimed and recognized through community support and critical reflection.

However, this is not to say that the program was wholly affirmational. As noted in the results, it also served as a mediating structure that enabled participants to (re)interpret their past teaching encounters and experiences. This is seen, for example, in Seth's journey: from being overwhelmed by classroom management issues and relying on unsuitable approaches borrowed from U.S.-based ESL instruction, he was able to use the program's theoretical and pedagogical components to develop a situated and responsive professional self. In this sense, the program facilitated a form of reflective identity work (Johnson & Golombek, 2016) in which experience was recontextualized through academic tools and community support. Also, participants' structured engagement with concepts of linguistic awareness, such as Noah's eureka moment in his phonetics class, allowed them to not only make sense of themselves, their communities, and their students, but to have the tools and discourse necessary to do so. These critical moments were not just cognitively transformative but affectively so as well. Participants were able to ground themselves in a more secure sense of place within the profession that was linked to the past as much as it was to their future.

Transnational Experience as Pedagogical Foundation

RQ3: In what ways do these participants integrate their transnational experiences into their emerging teaching philosophies?

The results of this study show that transnational experiences were not additive to these teachers' practices but were constitutive of their emerging pedagogical identities. In other words, these returnee teachers did not and would not teach despite their transnationalism; they teach through it.

The personal struggles that many participants had faced (living in liminal spaces, being ridiculed, having been cultural strangers) were often translated into learner-centered, empathetic, and self-reflective approaches to teaching. Andrea's recollections of patient, playful, and caring teachers in California certainly shaped her present-day classroom ethos, while Noah's desire to work with heritage speakers and to give back to his community were linked to his growing understanding of familial language variation. Similarly, Elena's decision to study both English and Spanish language degrees was clearly motivated by her initial experiences of rejection, which she later reinterpreted as fuel to create more inclusive learning spaces. As such, these examples point to a more general

pattern in the form of transnational pedagogies—ways of thinking about and teaching that are responsive to issues of cultural hybridity, linguistic diversity, and migration experience (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Menard-Warwick, 2022). By engaging in critical academic practice, these teachers were able to turn their marginality into pedagogical insight and to develop identities that were simultaneously critically aware and emotionally grounded.

Toward a Theory of Returnee Teacher Identity as Ongoing Negotiation

Overall, this study's findings are indicative of the fact that returnee language teachers in Mexico make sense of their identity not as a product of reintegration but as a matter of ongoing negotiation across transnational, institutional, and ideological borders. Rejection and recognition, conflict and compromise, rupture and re-creation: all these terms and affective tensions were visible in participants' pathways and have shaped their trajectories as language professionals. In this sense, the teacher education programs, as well as key sites and people in the participants' journeys, served as a discursive and affective scaffold for their construction of professional belonging.

Theoretically, the results of this study add to the broader field of language teacher identity by pushing for a more nuanced and empirically informed discussion of expatriate teachers' identity-making processes. The focus on returnees has served to shift the conversation away from questions of mobility, adaptation, and acculturation and toward more complicated processes of re-rooting, re-positioning, and, perhaps most importantly, emotional re-centering.

The present study's findings suggest the need for new conceptual terms for the development of new ways of speaking about the identity trajectories of returnee language teachers whose learning to teach is not a process of cumulative change marked by assimilation and acculturation, but an ongoing, recursive process of meaning-making and re-signification that traverses and transgresses diverse discursive and material contexts. I introduce the concept of transpedagogical becoming as a way of describing a non-linear form of hybrid identity work in which teachers build on their transnational and transcultural experience to refashion their teacher identities, often for the first time, in critical dialogue with participants in Mexican teacher education programs. It also makes visible the generative tension in what teachers bring, what is validated and what is possible within institutional contexts of return. In parallel, I introduce the term pluriversal professionalism as a way of naming their emergent epistemological positioning as teachers who contest conventional notions of monolingual and monocultural legitimacy by refusing to narrow their understanding of the complex work of teaching language to a single, universal definition of "being a qualified language teacher" (Mason, 2010). Drawing on their experience in the United States, the participant teachers in the study did not return to Mexico with fully formed identities or a clearly defined sense of what it means to teach English or Spanish well, nor did they arrive already legitimized as teachers. Instead, they returned to Mexico and, for some, to the world of teacher education as a site of liminality or cultural and linguistic in-betweenness, where they were able to meaningfully question who they are as language teachers. As returnee teachers engage in transpedagogical becoming, they develop a pluriversal professionalism that is founded on a hybridity of pedagogies, multilingual repertoires, and a reconstructed sense of legitimacy within national and institutional contexts.

Based on the obtained results, Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the identity trajectories of returnee language teachers with teacher education programs at the core of the process. The two up and down curved arrows form a cycle that represents the movement and flow between participants' transpedagogical becoming and pluriversal professionalism.

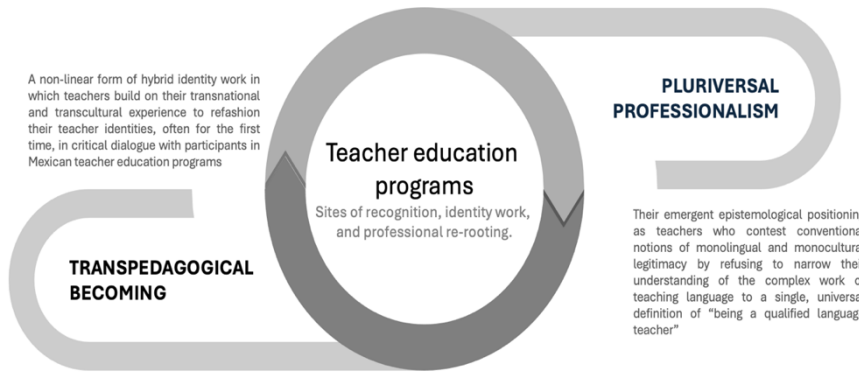


Figure 1. Emerging conceptualizations of the role of teacher education programs as sites of recognition, identity work, and professional re-rooting.

These two concepts serve the double purpose of enriching the applied linguistics lexicon of terms for theorizing identity in return migration contexts and of making visible the role of teacher education programs as sites of recognition, identity work, and professional re-rooting.

Conclusions

This study offers a glimpse into the lives of a group of returnee language teachers. It indicates that belonging is not automatically recuperated after returning to one's home country. On the contrary, one must work toward it by finding ways to relate and feel recognized in local institutional spaces, such as a teacher education program. The teacher education programs where the study took place are examples of spaces for belonging and agency. The programs enabled the participants to think about their migration and transnational experience critically and to value this experience in their own lives and the lives of others. In the programs, participants had access to theoretical resources to understand and give voice to their teaching philosophy. Finally, through academic and community support, the participants found recognition as professionals. All this affirms that teacher education programs have the potential to be an important site of identity-building, a place that transcends a site for teaching methodology to a place that values each candidate's trajectory and forms the critical language teacher, a place that validates diverse trajectories and cultivate pedagogical hybridity.

Teacher education programs need to give curricular room for participants to reflect and critically position their linguistic trajectories, migration histories, and cultural affiliations. Also, these programs should acknowledge pedagogical hybridity rather than enforce monolingual or monocultural standards. They need to provide academic and linguistic resources to articulate their border-crossing experiences and draw on them to shape their teaching practices. Finally, teacher education programs must also pay attention to participants' affective dimensions, e.g., the desire for legitimacy, recognition, and community—dimensions frequently left outside the formal curriculum.

Language education policy also requires a reframing of returnee teachers' qualifications and identities. Transnational experience should not be understood as a deficit or failure to conform to national educational standards but as a form of legitimate expertise. Certification and hiring processes should consider transnational capital—linguistic, pedagogical, and intercultural capital—as an asset to establish a competent, innovative, and future-oriented language teacher.

This study is just the beginning of a conversation that requires more nuanced research on return migration and teacher identity in diverse national and global contexts. Future research on teacher returnees requires a longitudinal design to account for how their identities shift over time, especially as they take on positions of leadership, curriculum design, language teaching or multilingual education policy. It would also be interesting for future research to consider how teacher education programs themselves evolve to respond to growing transnational diversity and complexity in their classrooms—and how programs can better incorporate critical pedagogy, translanguaging theory, and decolonial and multicultural approaches to language education.

In sum, the returnee English teachers presented in this study are a reminder that to be a language teacher is never an established identity or a definitive location. Rather, it is a process that is constantly being shaped by the experience of displacement, affective connection, and self-reconstruction. As more transnational language teachers cross physical, linguistic, and ideological borders, it is crucial for our academic and institutional spaces to evolve to support the varied and complex trajectories of belonging, being, and becoming.

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