

Article

KATHLEEN TACELOSKY*
Lebanon Valley College, United States

TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: A CASE FROM MEXICO

Abstract: Educating for a future that assumes students will be educated in the country where they were born or that they will remain in the country where they are currently in school does not reflect the reality of the movement of people in an age of globalization. The research presented here examines the case of children and youth in Mexican public schools who have had some or all of their education in the United States, transnational students (TS) with a particular focus on their linguistic situation. Results suggest that TS struggle with the linguistic transition from Spanish as language of the home to Spanish as the language of education. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research and application to other contexts.

Keywords: bilingualism, education, Mexico, return migration, transnational education, transnationalism.

Educating for a future that assumes students will be educated in the country where they were born or that they will remain in the country where they are currently in school does not reflect the reality of the movement of people in an age of the global movement of people. Each year millions of people, by choice or by force, migrate from one country to another. From 1960 to 2016 there was a 200% increase in the number of international migrants, having gone from 79 million to 250 million (Connor 2016). As more families migrate, many children find themselves in schools where the language of instruction is different from that with which they were familiar. The world over “[s]chooling systems are facing something they never faced before: edu-

* **Corresponding author:** Professor of Spanish, Lebanon Valley College, 101 N. College Avenue, Annville, PA 17003-1400, 1-866-LVC-4ADM, Humanities 310-B, US
E-mail: tacelosk@lvc.edu

cating large and growing numbers of immigrant-origin youth [...]” (Suárez-Orozco, Tasha Darbes, Isabel Dias and Sutin 2011:311).

In Mexico, the number of students in the public school system who have had some or all of their education in the United States – over half a million (Alba 2013) - is significant enough to be prompting increasing attention by researchers and educators in recent years. Twenty years ago little was known about the linguistic (or other) struggles of transnational students (TS), here defined as those that are enrolled in public schools in Mexico who were born to Mexican parents and who had had one or more years of schooling in the United States. Martínez-León and Smith (2003) were among the first to observe the lack of educational support in Spanish and English for transnational students (2003). Zúniga and Hamann (2006) did the ground-breaking and laborious work of surveying school children in the northern states of Zacatecas and Nuevo Leon to begin to quantify the population. A few others were researching and telling the stories of students whose home language was Spanish and school language was English until they arrived in Mexico and the Spanish became their school language (Petron 2003; Schwartz 2008).

Now, as we near the close of the second decade of the 21st century the population that Zúniga and Hamann, once called “hidden” (2006:51) is coming out of the shadows. In the past decade more research has been published regarding transnational students’ experiences in Mexican schools.

Literature Review: Transnational Students in Mexican Schools

Linguistically, culturally and logistically, TS meet challenges when they enter or attempt to enter the Mexican school system. In fact, the system itself, the structure that is the Mexican public school, is not prepared to address the needs of students whose home language is not Spanish and those who have had schooling in the United States. Despaigne and Jacobo Suarez (2016) call into question the equity and value of a monolithic model that presupposes competence in and gives primacy to Spanish. It is little wonder that “[re]turn migrant children run a higher risk for absenteeism or being held back” than their schoolmates (Vargas Valle and Camacho 2015:157).

English and Spanish use

TS imagine they will continue to need English and be English speakers. Zúniga and Hamann found that a majority (nearly 95%) of the middle school students' in their survey in Nuevo Leon reported that their return to U.S. schools was either "sure" or "probable" (2006:49). More recently, a study in a town that borders Puebla and Veracruz revealed that parents and community members' valued the learning of English for not only employment opportunities, but also for potential return to the U.S. (Christiansen and Farr 2013). Influenced by the back and forth migration and increased return migration in certain Mexican municipalities, these "new language and literacy ideologies" (205) are the result of people's experiences in the U.S. with English. Parents want their children to have the English language skills appropriate to secure a space in their potential/imagined community in the U.S. Yet English class is a source of frustration and limited learning for TS (Tacelosky, 2018).

In addition, TS must figure out how the Spanish they use at home might serve them in an academic environment. As Panait and Zúniga point out, they have more range and repertoire than their mononational counterparts, but they do not receive "proper help" in either school system (2006:248).

Barriers to school

In 2015 the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education) lifted the burdensome and prohibitive requirement to have academic transcripts, birth certificates and other documents from the U.S. and Mexico, officially stamped with a raised seal (apostille) According to the Guía Paisano, a booklet published by Secretary of Migration, which welcomes (back) Mexicans return migrants (and others): "La falta de documentación de identidad y/o académica no será obstáculo para el ingreso del alumnado a los servicios de Educación Básica, Media Superior y Educación Superior (The lack of academic and/or personal identification documentation shall not be an obstacle for students to enter the services of Basic, Secondary or Tertiary Education)" (Secretaría de Gobernación 2017:46-47) However, in practice, there are still many barriers for TS to matriculate into the schools (Jacobo Suarez 2017; Vargas Valle and Camacho 2015).

Teaching and teachers

Particular attention has been paid to the important roles teachers play in their interaction with and acceptance of TS (Kral and Solano Castillo 2015). Borjian, Muñoz de Cote, van Dijk and Houde (2016) call for teachers to encourage “cultural competence” and “resiliency” in their students and challenge teachers to inform themselves regarding their students’ prior experiences in the US. (Borjian et al. 2016:43-44). Educators at all levels must value the “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll and Amanti 2006) or what Borjian et al. (2016) call “gifts” (p. 51) of both a cultural and linguistic nature that TS bring. Jensen, Mejía Arauz and Aguilar Zepeda (2017) call for increased equity in the teaching of TS, specifically pointing to quality and time of instruction.

Valle and Aguilar (2018) found that recent arrival (2 years or fewer in Mexico) transnational students were more likely to report little or no interest in school. And that linguistic factors, namely difficulty with Spanish, are among those that “mediate these associations.” Other factors included lack of teachers’ support from teachers and the stated identification with United States.

Jensen et al. (2017) examined student-teacher and student to student interactions in elementary schools in the Mexican state of Aguascalientes. They used a systematic evaluation measure that examined many factors. Of particular relevance here, they found that in an area they call “Life Applications” (which has to do with “how classroom interactions explore and value children’s out-of-school lives” (Methods section) there was disconnect. In other words, transnational students, whose behaviours and practices are informed by experience unfamiliar to other students and teachers might not be getting appropriate support for their knowledge and experiences outside of school.

Signs of change

Calls for change to the education of TS have been partially heeded. In 2008 the SEP published a book, *Escuelas mexicanas frente a la globalización* (Zúniga, Hamann, and Sanchez García 2008) in which the educational needs of transnational students are recognized. More recently (2010) an accompanying teaching guide, with specific activities, was created to serve as a resource for current and future teachers (Sánchez

García, Zúñiga, Hamann, Bollain y Goytia, Castellanos Soto, Martínez Califa, and Ayala de León).

The Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante (Binational Migrant Education Program), an entity of the SEP, in the Mexican state of Morelos has established a database in which nationality, years of school in both U.S. and Mexico and grades (*calificaciones*) are recorded (González & Cantú 2017:6). Thus they are better able to understand and meet the needs of TS. In the Mexican state of Zacatecas the SEP has expressed interest in supporting the migrant families coming back to Mexico from the United States in their educational trajectories by establishing protocols and programs (Mercado, Gema, personal communication 2018).

Yet, even with the attention that TS have garnered in the past decade or two, academic struggles based on linguistic diversity continue to be under studied. Thus the nuances of TSs' experiences in public schools merit examination.

The current study

As part of a longitudinal research project that examines the school experience among those children who were formerly schooled in the United States, elementary and middle school children in Mexican schools have been interviewed and observed since 2010. Drawing on examples from the interviews, observations and writing samples in both Spanish and English, this article focuses on written and oral skills in both English and Spanish. In addition, the accommodation of transnational students in the Mexican school systems is addressed.

Specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do TS linguistically negotiate their return to/move to Mexican schools
 - how do they manage the transition to all-Spanish Mexican public schooling and
 - what happens to their English over the course of the first year (back) in Mexico?
 - What can be applied from this context to others?

The answers to these questions draw on, in part, over 50 interviews carried out

with TS from 2010–2018. However, the main focus is the case study of one student in the first year of this longitudinal study.

1.2. Terminology

1.2.1 Return(ed)/(im)Migrants, transnationalism/transnationals/translingual

Terminology used to describe the movement of people and goods from one place to another emphasize certain aspects of that reality. Reyes (2000) refers to “returned migrants” as those who have started their academic experience in the country where they are born, leave for at least a year of schooling elsewhere and then return to the country of their birth (as cited in Zúniga and Hamann 2009:331).

The prefix *trans* in the word *transnational* highlights the movement of those who go across a border at some point, whether for education, work or other reasons and can include a back and forth mobility. However, the notion of transnationalism goes beyond describing the movement of people across physical borders to include “the complex economic, social, cultural, and political processes that emerged in the world as a result of globalization” (Brittain 2002:11). Further, transnationalism includes how “identities [...] are negotiated with social worlds that span more than one place” (Vertovec 2001:573). Martinez-Leon and Smith’s broader use of the term transnationalism as “the two-way movement of families and children between countries” (2003:138) is fitting for the current study. Taking into account an amalgam of these descriptions, I will use the adjective transnational to describe students who have moved from Mexico to the United States and back to Mexico as well as those who were born to at least one Mexican parent and schooled in the United States and now live and go to school in Mexico.

1.2.2. Translanguaging and Translingualism

Only the narrowest definitions of bilingualism require that individuals be very proficient in all skills of the two languages (Bloomfield 1933; The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language 2018) Most linguists, however accept definitions of bilingualism that include varying proficiency levels (Baker 2011; Canagarajah 2012; García and Wei 2006) or define bilingualism on a continuum (Valdés 2014). This characterization allows for such unevenness as speaking ability in one language

but little or no oral proficiency in the other (sometimes called receptive skills) or ability to read and write in only one of the two languages spoken and dispenses with the notion that when a person is learning a language they are somehow deficient until they reach a certain level (Cook 2002).

In an age of regular back and forth movement of people in multilingual contexts, notions of bi/multilingualism and bi/multiculturalism necessarily have to be expansive. Descriptions of language use and access among transnationals include an acceptance of local and international variation and code-mixing (Canagarajah 2012). For example, a person may identify as bilingual when they speak and understand English and understand Spanish, but do not speak it, or when they only read and write one of the languages, in other words “functional competence in partial languages” or what the Council of Europe (2000) calls plurilingualism (as cited in Canagarajah 2012:6)

Thus, one possible way of defining bilingualism is to allow individuals self-report. Some might think of such personal evaluations of one’s own ability as a less than optimal method for assessing language proficiency. For example, Zúniga and Hamann express some regret that their “study of this important topic [students’ English proficiency] was *limited to* students’ self-reporting (2006:49, emphasis mine). However, in addition to the value of self-report pointed out above, it is worth noting that commonly-used tests to measure English (and by extension other languages) proficiency are known to be unreliable (Pray 2005). Furthermore, individuals’ perceptions of their own bilingualism may reveal perceived strengths and gaps in proficiency/communication/expression.

Self-reporting could be considered unreliable if statistical accuracy is the goal, but perhaps by taking into consideration students’ identification of their perceived competence and abilities with language in its various forms, we can begin to recognize the language skills that they think they need for survival and success. If a student claims that she does not speak Spanish very well, yet her parents report that she has been speaking Spanish in the home since childhood, one might ask, “Well enough for what?” Students may feel deficient in the academic discourse or the social and scholastic conventions that are encoded linguistically. Beyond having the linguistic skills to read and write for evaluations, such as grading, “[l]anguage proficiency is important in understanding school success [...] because [...] it is associated with the norms, practices and expectations of those whose language, cultural and class practices are embodied in the schools (Wiley 1996:172).

Likewise “(...) literacies vary according to the personal and social circumstances of [one’s] life, so everyone is considered literate in certain situations and not in others” (Guerra as cited in Hamann, Zúñiga and Sánchez García 2006:265). Transnationals who have varying level of skills may be considered bilingual in communicating with friends and family, but not in generating and understanding academic work.

Further, Arnett suggests that the word “bicultural,” in as much as it implies knowledge and experience of two cultures, may be misleading and inaccurate. Transnationals incorporate into their self-perception not only the place where they were born and the place they are now, but also “a global culture, thus leading to a multicultural identity or a complex hybrid identity” (in Lam 2006:219).

School-aged children who have academic experience in two countries have exposure to two (or more) languages, but unlike those enrolled in bilingual education programs, where, to varying degrees, two languages are used in the school setting, transnational students often find themselves handling one monolingual academic environment at a time – English in the U.S. and Spanish in Mexico - needing to adjust linguistically to each. Furthermore, the mobility of transnational students between two countries can interrupt academic achievement and progress in one or both languages. As such, transnational children must develop strategies for social and school success.

It is the goal of this research to understand the linguistic reality of transnational students and discern the ways they negotiate their linguistic environments. By examining in-depth the strategies and skills of one child’s oral and written language, the hope is that this case study will be of benefit to educators, parents and other transnational students.

2. Context

2.1 Language Proficiency and School Success

In order to succeed in school, TSs must learn how to negotiate the unfamiliar school system in Mexico. All students have to figure out what it means to be in school and where they fit in to the system, which, according to McCaslin, comes down to two questions “What is learning? Am I welcome here?” (2009:143). For a TS part of being welcomed has to do with their linguistic ability. Succeeding in school includes

simultaneously trying to apply the Spanish that they learned at home to an academic setting and doing well in content areas.

In her work regarding TSs who are now English teachers in Mexico, Petrón points out the “doubl[e] difficulty” of moving from school to school in an international context (2009:189). She tells how the participants in her study were brought to tears even 20 years later when they recounted their experiences of transitioning from U.S. to Mexican schools. In some cases the traumas were linguistic – being made fun of for not knowing Spanish well enough to function in school (p. 170-172), for example. In other instances the issues were sociolinguistic – not knowing to use formal register (*usted*) when addressing teachers (p. 172-173). Other difficulties were related to lack of familiarity with school customs such having to bring one’s own toilet paper and pencil sharpener (p. 174-175).

2.1.1 Transition from home Spanish to academic Spanish.

Many TS, even those born in the United States, speak Spanish at home, if not with siblings and cousins, at least with parents and grandparents. These fundamental, everyday conversational skills are not necessarily readily transferred to the academic context, especially after a certain grade level is reached (Cummins 1982). Results of research with immigrant students with no experience in the school language vary regarding the length of time it takes to learn the language of instruction well enough to handle academic demands range from five to seven years (Cummins 1981) to ten years (Collier and Thomas 1989).

One of the factors in the discrepancy is the age of arrival to the new country. Immigrants to the United States who are not native speakers of English were shown to have done well in school when the age of arrival to the United States was eight or nine. Younger children (preliterate) and older children (from whom more was expected academically) did not have the same school success rates (Collier and Thomas 1989). Regarding literacy in elementary school children’s “ability to use images, symbols, concepts, and rules increases, as does their vocabulary” (Epps and Smith 1984:291) “children in the upper elementary grades must become strategic comprehenders of increasingly sophisticated text. They must build a vocabulary of words”

There is a change in teacher expectations as students advance through school. “In grades 4–8, expectations for learners dramatically change. Teachers expect students

to apply the sight-word and decoding skills, supposedly gained in the earlier grades, to new and challenging content-area information.” (Robb n.d.)

Some research supports the idea that development in one language may positively influence proficiency in the other. In one study, elementary students in a bilingual program who were more exposed to Spanish had improved scores on standardized tests in English reading significantly more than students with less exposure to Spanish and who spent more time in English classes (Ramírez, Yuen, Ramey, Pasta and Billings 1991). It has been claimed that developing the academic language of L2 is at least somewhat dependent on how much academic (“context-reduced”) language a student has in L1 (Cummins 1984:74). Because the linguistic experiences of TS deviate considerably from other types of immigrants, it may not be appropriate to speak in terms of first and second languages; thus it is not clear whether these claims apply to TSs.

3. Methods and Procedures

In order to contribute to the understanding of language use and ability among transnational students, a case study of a fifth grader enrolled in a Mexican school over a period of seven months (October – May 2010-2011) was undertaken. Martínez Leon and Smith (2003) suggest that due to the mobility of the population, case studies are a practical and “likely means of beginning to build a knowledge base” regarding academic and linguistic realities of transnational students. The mixed-method qualitative research presented here is informed by a constructivist view that meaning is created through experience and interaction. As such, this was an experiential educational project in which there were several participants in addition to the researcher and the TS. Through analysis of interaction – conversations, journals, interviews and observation – an attempt is made to understand the experiences of one transnational student in order to apply what is learned to others.

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study were the researcher, two university students (Petra and Sara) engaged in a community-based learning assignment and a fifth grade transnational student, Adam (pseudonyms). Additional data were gathered from the school administrator, a teacher and parents.

During the academic year during which the project took place, I was teaching at a medium-sized university just outside of Puebla, Mexico, a state in central Mexico, about 75 miles east of Mexico City. I was introduced to Adam by a university student from the United States who was teaching English at Adam's school three hours a week in the fall of 2010. In an initial interview, Adam agreed to participate in the project which included not only interviews and visits from the researcher, but regular sessions which would offer him the linguistic support of his choosing. English is my first language, and I have been speaking Spanish for over 30 years and regularly visiting Mexico for most of those years.

Adam was born in New York City on August 30th of 2000. He was 10 years old at the time the research began and had been enrolled in a Mexican school just a couple of months, having done all of his previous schooling, (through 4th grade) in the United States. During those 10 years, he and his family traveled frequently to Mexico to visit family and friends.

After 10 years, Adam and his family moved to San Pedro, Cholula in Puebla, the home of Adam's mother's family, located just a few miles from the university where Sara and Petra are students and where I was working. According to the principal, Adam's teacher and parents, Adam and his little brother were the only students in the school who had had U.S. school experience.

As part of the experiential learning component of courses in Contrastive Grammar (fall 2010) and Academic Writing (spring 2011) two university students, Petra and later Sara, were assigned to work with Adam for 15 hours over the course of each semester. Petra and Sara use Spanish at home, where their family members all speak Spanish. Spanish was the language they first encountered at school. At the time of the study, they were undergraduate students majoring in Language and Linguistics, a course of study that includes speaking, reading and writing in English.

3.2 Procedures

After obtaining permission from the principal, teacher, parents and Adam himself, an open-ended, initial interview was undertaken in which Adam talked about his school and linguistic experiences in the United States and Mexico. While working with Adam to support his English language skills (per his request), Petra and Sara recorded some of their session and carried out interviews with the principal, classroom

teacher and parents.

I recorded and transcribed interviews at the beginning (October) and end (May) of the project. As well, oral recordings and writing samples taken throughout the academic year were used as data. As part of a paper she wrote for the Academic Writing class I was teaching, Sara collected ten writing sample prompts in the spring semester, five of them in English and the other five in Spanish. They were included in the analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Oral language use

When asked if he preferred to speak English or Spanish during the initial interview Adam chose English. Although a variety of factors affect why a person may choose to speak one language or another when given the option to do so, two factors are relevant here. One, he had only been in Mexico about two or three months (he was not sure) at the time of the initial interview, having lived in the United States for the 10 years prior, his whole life. Secondly, although he heard me speaking Spanish to his parents and teachers and even to him prior to turning on the video camera and he knew that I am also proficient in Spanish, Adam knew also that I am a native-speaker of English. These factors may have influenced his decision to converse with me in English. It is noteworthy, however, that seven months later when asked which language he preferred to use in the (final) interview, he answered in Spanish, “*los dos*” (both) and proceeded to answer in Spanish at least some of the questions (about 4% of the words he spoke were in Spanish, compared with 0% in the initial interview).

Adam stated unequivocally in the initial interview that he was better at English than Spanish. In his home, both in the United States and in Mexico, he reports having spoken / speaking both English and Spanish, though it was clear to me from observing and participating in conversations with his parents, that their dominant and preferred language is Spanish. The first time I met her, Adam’s mother uttered a few words in English, but upon realizing that I was also a Spanish speaker, she quickly and permanently switched to Spanish. In the U.S. school where Adam attended, he reported that there were children who spoke Spanish as their mother tongue, and Adam said he had some friends who were Spanish speakers, yet he reports using En-

glish almost exclusively at his United States school. By contrast, in Mexico he speaks Spanish in school and just about everywhere else. When I asked him if the other kids in his school speak English, he rather diplomatically replied, “not that much.” Later he said his level of English was “higher” than theirs.

In the initial interview, I asked Adam whom he speaks English with in Mexico and he said that he speaks sometimes with members of his family. In the final interview, when asked if he knew “people who can speak two languages like you can?” Adam replied simply, “No.” And then when asked specifically if he knew anyone else who spoke English he also replied in the negative. I asked him if he wished he knew someone else who spoke English to which he replied that he did. “What would you do if there were someone else in the school who spoke English?” I wanted to know. Adam’s reply demonstrates a longing to identify with someone linguistically and socially: “Probably be my best friend.”

Adam’s linguistic identity is linked to his being an English speaker. He longs for a friend who can identify with that part of him. Skutnabb-Kangas argues that serious psychological damage is done when the identity associated with use of one’s own language is denied, and individuals and groups are “psychologically transferred to another group” (2000:xxxiii). That is, when Adam’s teachers and friends identify with him as a monolingual speaker of Spanish, Adam is potentially damaged.

4.1.1 Oral language

An analysis of Adam’s language production during several read-aloud sessions reveals that he was in the process of developing and negotiating his performative competence (Canagarajah 2012). Adam is a lad of few words, so in the interviews he did not reply with long, rambling answers, which makes analysis of his spontaneous, spoken English skills somewhat challenging. In our interactions, he appeared to understand everything that I asked him and he is able to make himself understood orally.

In reading aloud exercises, when Adam does not know a word in Spanish, he guesses, often inventing a word or phrase that might make sense (i.e. *han bloceado* for *emboscaron* or *encontrar* for *engrosar*) or coming up with a part of the word (*está* for *estaba* or *acer* for *acercandose*) or lengthening as in *explicaba* for *explica*. The result, in the case of omission or addition, for example, could be that important morphological information is lost or changed.

4.2 Written language

Adam's writing in English (see figure 1) shows a level of sophistication of style. Following a brief conversation about superpowers, Sara, his learning partner from the university, wrote the prompt, "If I were a hero I would have the powers of flying, strength speed and morph" and assigned Adam to continue the story in writing. After two sentences using the conditional "would be" and "would have" (as in "I would have to face enemies..."), he turns to employing the future ("I will be all in black with black boots"), which has the effect of drawing the reader in from an imaginary place to some possible future. Together with the future, Adam employs a narrative present, "I work alone, almost like a lone wolf" which gives the reader either a sense of immediacy or takes us to a habitual present which describes what this masked superhero is like. He then takes us back to the magical and potential future with "I will fly in the sunset with the birds."

Figure 1

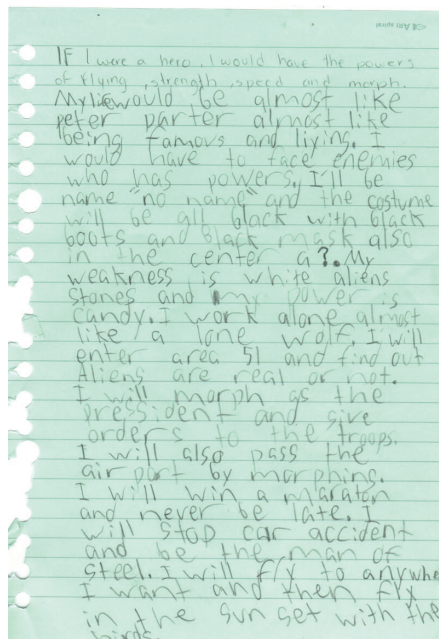
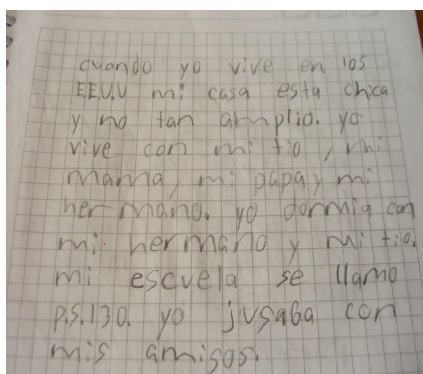


Figure 2 shows an example of Adam's written Spanish in which he writes about his real life experiences in the United States. Here he employs a limited use of compound tenses, use of present tense to recount past experience (Cuando vive (instead

of vivía) en los EEUU mi casa esta (instead of estaba) chica. When one lives (instead of I lived) in the United States my house is small) and lack of agreement between noun and adjective (Mi casa esta chica y no amplio). Also of note is the absence of any diacritical marks (accents), an essential part of Spanish orthography. Furthermore, given the same amount of time, Adam produces less written text in Spanish than in English.

Figure 2



5. Discussion

Due to the fact that his family mostly speaks Spanish at home, Adam's spoken Spanish is fluid and he seems to have the vocabulary he needs for daily life and expression. He reports not being able to understand every word in class, but feeling comfortable expressing and understanding oral Spanish.

A few peculiarities notwithstanding, Adam has high proficiency in English. Most importantly, he feels he has the English he needs for his own success and identity as an English speaker. In our final interview he told me he was going to New York for a friend's graduation and that he was looking forward to talking to his family members there in English. I asked if he thought he could still do so in the same way he had nine or so months prior when he left. He was confident that he could. He is clearly comfortable speaking both languages and identifies himself as a speaker of both.

It is in his writing where the most discrepancy is seen in the two languages. Given that Adam spent 10 years of his life, and four of his five school years in the United States, it is little wonder that his writing skills are more developed in English than in Spanish. After a year in school in Mexico, Adam still has some deficiencies in reading

Spanish aloud and writing in Spanish, especially as compared to English. It appears that he has made some effort to transfer skills, but with mixed success. According to Adam's father, Adam got low grades at the beginning of the year, but by the end he had nines (about an A- average) in most all of his classes.

According to his last report card in New York, Adam was reading at a "Q" level (New York rates on an A through Z system for reading), which put him squarely at grade-level. He earned a 3 (meets standard) in writing and 4 (exceeds standard) in listening and speaking. In Mexico near the end of fifth grade, his grades were in Spanish were 8 (about a B-) and in other content classes in the 7-8 (C to B) range.

When I saw Adam a year later, in May 2012, he was quick to tell me that his grades in general had improved. I asked him why he thought that was and he said that he was studying more. Exposure to more Spanish in and out of school also could be a factor.

5. School accommodation

5.1 Strategies – when one does not understand

When Adam does not understand the Spanish spoken in school he is reluctant to speak up: He says that sometimes the other students help him. When I asked if his teacher helped him, Adam reported that his teacher was "a little" helpful but that he (Adam) was hesitant to ask for help. The principal and teacher are aware that Adam has needs different from the other students, but do not seem to have the know-how or the resources to help him. His teacher knows some English and seems eager to offer assistance. Adam's father told me that in his estimation the improvement of Adam's grades had to do with the extra help he has been getting (from his teacher and my university students), but Adam said he did not feel like his teacher was much help to him. His grades have improved, but at the end of the year, Adam himself admits to still feeling like he does not understand all that is going on.

As to maintaining English, Adam's options are limited. His family has a visit to the United States planned soon, and he looks forward to speaking with friends and family there, but in Mexico he knows almost no one who speaks English. In the English class taught by the international student teacher, he told me he does "almost nothing". It appears that Adam does not like to draw attention to himself either by showing that he knows too much English or not enough Spanish.

I lost touch with Adam after our interview in May 2012. The possibility that Adam

would have continued through the school system and not fully succeed in attaining grade level reading ability in Spanish was very real. Moreover, that he maintained or improved his English was limited.

Mexican schools are not prepared to accommodate transnational students and their specific linguistic needs. Adam entered the Mexican school system at a critical time in his education – grade five. In the early elementary grades all children in the class are decoding and sounding words out – learning to read. Eventually, in the later elementary and early middle school years, as expectations shift to a higher level of comprehension, TS like Adam may not be able to keep up: His literacy level in Spanish, while perhaps improving somewhat in the year that he has been in Mexico, is potentially keeping him from learning content matter. Without some specific support, he risks school failure and drop-out.

Adam’s identity as an English-speaker is already suffering as evidenced by his longing to connect with someone who speaks English as he does. Some TS report speaking English with their siblings, but Adam’s younger brother is quite young, just seven and in second grade at the time he started school in Mexico.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Schools in Mexico and other countries that receive transnational students should be aware of the factors that affect transnational students’ linguistic development: language practices in the home; prior exposure to the language of education in an academic context; age of (re)entry into the new educational system. Future research could include

- use of mixed method approaches that include groups controlled for age of arrival/return to new country’s school system
- examination of the role of teacher support or lack thereof
- establishing of pilot intervention programs, such as specialized teaching of reading in Spanish and examining affects TSs’ school success

Based on prior research, the case study described here leads us to the conclusion that those who enter at critical points in their education may struggle with Spanish. Teachers play a particularly important role. Referencing the “central Vygotskian construct” of “supportive relationships,” McCaslin claims that “teacher supportive

relationships have been found to be especially important for [...] students who cope with barriers to participation” (2009:138). The language skills of TS are potentially just such a barrier. Teachers in training need to be made aware of the needs of TSs and taught how to encourage the use of both languages. Even when teachers do not know all of the languages of their students, they can allow and even promote use of children’s other languages in the classroom.

Heretofore, the onus has been entirely on the children and youth (and perhaps their families) who are entering Mexican schools to catch up, seek solutions, teach themselves or risk falling behind or even dropping out. It is incumbent on teachers to be aware of the background of the students, support their unique educational needs and encourage the unique contributions that TS can make to classmates and others in the school. Thus, teachers must be afforded at least some specialized training. Many institutions of higher education that prepare teachers now include courses that include the teaching of diverse populations – students with special needs of all kinds. As teachers prepare to teach *all* of the students in the school population, they must be aware of those who have been educated in other countries prior to arrival in their classrooms.

Many academic issues affect immigrant children not just in Mexico and United States, but also in other countries in the world. A new curriculum and a new approach to preparing teachers and administrators, and even parents and other students, is in order to be able to help transnational students. Further, they must be provided with adequate education and accommodations in terms of materials, teachers and an environment where they can be successful learners.

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