

# Transnationals Becoming English Teachers in Mexico: Effects of Language Brokering and Identity Formation<sup>1</sup>

Transnacionales Convirtiéndose en Docentes de Inglés en México: Efectos de la Mediación Lingüística y la Formación de la Identidad

**Irasema Mora Pablo, Leonardo Arturo Rivas Rivas,  
M. Martha Lengeling and Troy Crawford<sup>2\*</sup>**

*Universidad de Guanajuato,  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México,  
Extensión San Miguel de Allende, México*

## Abstract

The objective of this research was to explore the effects of language brokering upon identity formation within the family unit of students who have lived in the United States for a period of time and have come back to live in Mexico. The participants are six students that are currently undertaking a BA in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) at a large public university in central Mexico. Findings from interviews, following a narrative approach, seem to show that these participants' experiences as language brokers are highly valuable when they decide to become English teachers. Most of them decide to become English teachers because they want to help others to learn the language and bring those experiences into the classroom.

*Keywords:* Language brokering, identity construction, narrative inquiry, transnational

7

<sup>1</sup> Received: Dec. 15, 2014 / Accepted: April 13, 2015

<sup>2</sup> imora@ugto.mx, leorivas.unam@gmail.com, lengelin@ugto.mx, crawford@ugto.mx

### Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación fue explorar los efectos de la mediación del lenguaje en la formación de identidad dentro del núcleo familiar de estudiantes que han vivido en los Estados Unidos por un periodo de tiempo y han regresado a vivir a México. Los participantes son seis estudiantes que actualmente están cursando un programa de pregrado en licenciatura en enseñanza del inglés en una universidad pública en el centro de México. Los hallazgos a partir de entrevistas, siguiendo un enfoque narrativo, parecen indicar que las experiencias de estos participantes como mediadores del lenguaje son altamente valoradas cuando deciden convertirse en profesores de inglés. La mayoría de ellos deciden convertirse en profesores porque quieren ayudar a otros a aprender el idioma y traen esas experiencias al salón de clases.

*Palabras clave:* Mediadores del lenguaje, construcción de identidad, investigación narrativa, transnacional

### Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa foi explorar os efeitos da mediação da linguagem na formação de identidade dentro do núcleo familiar de estudantes que viveram nos Estados Unidos por um período de tempo e regressaram ao México para morar. Os participantes são seis estudantes que hoje em dia estão cursando um programa de graduação em licenciatura em ensino de inglês em uma universidade pública no centro do México. As descobertas a partir de entrevistas, seguindo um enfoque narrativo, parecem indicar que as experiências destes participantes como mediadores da linguagem são altamente valorizadas quando decidem converter-se em professores de inglês. A maioria deles decidem converter-se em professores porque querem ajudar outros a aprender o idioma e trazem essas experiências à sala de aulas.

*Palavras chave:* Mediadores da linguagem, construção de identidade, pesquisa narrativa, transnacional

## Introduction

This study explores the effects of language brokering upon identity formation of six students currently undertaking a BA in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) at a large public university in central Mexico. They acquired English in the United States as the children of immigrants and at the same time maintained their Spanish by speaking it at home, with their families. They lived in the United States for an extensive period of time and have returned to live in Mexico, where they are now employed as English teachers. In order to know their present, it is necessary to look at their previous experiences. These past experiences are connected with social and economic reasons which led their parents to make the decision to migrate to the United States, seeking a better life for their children. In most of the cases, these parents did not learn English and they relied on their kids to communicate with others, creating a new role for them as language brokers.

The complex socio-political relationship between Mexico and the United States has created the constant migration of Mexicans looking for the “American dream” for many years. Some of these migrants succeed; some others face more problems in the host country than in their homeland, due to their lack of knowledge of English, or the difficulties of adapting to a new culture. In the case of these six participants, they started taking on a more active role in the community and they started living in “bilingual worlds” mainly with Spanish at home and English outside their homes, as the dominant language of the community.

This article will present the students’ voices, showing their conflicts and challenges during their childhoods. These voices also show the role of language brokering and its relationship to their future identity formation.

## Literature Review

### Transnationalism

Authors in different fields have used the term transnationalism to signify different phenomena (Levitt & Waters, 2002). However, for the purposes of this study, the term has been used to characterize the dense social networks that go beyond the national borders, created by the physical, emotional and economic movement of individuals and families, between countries and cultures (Binford, 2000). The emergent approaches in migration theory describe transnational communities as:

...dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, and increasing number of people are able to live dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both. (Portes, 1997, p. 812)

Transnationalism is not the same as immigration. Hornberger (2007) states that "...the latter involves a more permanent affiliation with the host country and separation from the home country while the former may imply no long-term intention to stay beyond what is economically necessary" (p. 326). Therefore, transnationalism can lead to a process of 'becoming other' to both home and host national-cultural contexts (Trueba, 2004), implying the development of transnational identities and social relations. This would mean that transnationals need to develop certain abilities that allow them to negotiate at the same time multiple contexts within local positions, which can become a cumulus of community contexts (Zúñiga, 2000) that symbolically end up becoming a decontextualized cultural limbo.

For a long time, Mexico and the United States have had a difficult socio-political relationship. As a country, Mexico is in the first place as an "expeller" country ([www.data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org)). With the difficulties in the economy in the United States, many immigrants have returned to Mexico. According to National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, INEGI*, 2010), 350,719 people returned to Mexico in 2010, and about 48.8% of this population is between 20 to 34 years old. This means they are considered to be in a productive stage of their lives, meaning that they are at an age when they can work in different areas. This type of people are the participants who are part of this research. They are young adults who were raised in the United States with the role of language brokers, but now they have returned to Mexico seeking a better future because they cannot go back to the United States for various reasons. Some of them returned to Mexico because they were deported, and some others because they could not find school opportunities due to their illegal status in the United States.

10

In this situation of growing up in two countries without a legal status in one, children start developing their identities, by mirroring the dominant community. Suárez-Orozco (2000) explain this as "... all human beings are dependent upon the reflection of themselves mirrored back to them by others" (p. 213). Sometimes this mirroring can be positive or negative. This can give us a better idea of how these

former immigrant children start developing a sense of fragmented identity which may include feeling part of the community or feeling rejected (Petrón, 2009). While doing this, they are asked to perform as translators or interpreters for their parents, which contributes to their sense of rejection, or not, to the community and the language because these children enter a new culture and acquire the language without formal instruction. Also, it alters the family status as they are placed in an unorthodox power position when translating for their parents.

### **Language Brokering and the Conflict of Identity**

Language brokering occurs when immigrant parents rely on their bilingual children to translate or interpret any given circumstance, whether spoken or written, since the parents are not speakers of the country's native language (Buriel, Perez, Dement, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Love & Buriel, 2007; Morales & Hanson, 2005; Villanueva & Buriel, 2010; Weisskirch & Alatorre, 2002). Language brokering is the communication process where "individuals with no formal training (often children of immigrant families) linguistically mediate for two or more parties (usually adult family members and individuals from mainstream culture)" (Kam, 2011, p 455). Furthermore, playing the role of language brokers can lead these kids to experience complex and "adult-like" situations. For this reason, in 2002, California law makers introduced a bill to the state legislature prohibiting children from translating and interpreting in medical, legal, and social service settings (Coleman, 2003).

This role as language brokers can lead them to a sense of conflict of identity. The concept of conflict in identity development was elaborated by Erikson (1963). He states that "it is crucial for children to be surrounded by a supportive social environment so that they can appropriately develop a positive sense of who they are" (as cited in Brown, 2009, p. 4). In forming identity, there can be confusion and conflicts due to being able to establish a positive identity in the eyes of others and for not accomplishing personal values and expectations from two different cultures (Hornberger, 2007). When being in the United States, transnationals are constantly reminded that they are not part of the culture, but when returning to their place of origin (Mexico), they do not meet the expectations of this culture either (Mora Pablo, 2011a). Yet, they return with a language skill that is in demand in the Mexican educational system.

12

In order to be recognized by the community, a social group should be seen to be distinctive —itself— by *others*. A sense of ethnicity can only arise in the context of relationships and interaction with others (Skeggs, 2008). “Without difference, there is no similarity. Defining *us* implies —if nothing stronger— an image of *them*” (Jenkins, 2002, pp. 120-121). This is similar to what happens with the participants’ identity formation. Their ambivalent feelings towards an American or Mexican ethnic group make it difficult to define who they are and who they want to be in the future (Taniguchi, 2002). According to Gutierrez (1987), groups tend to name themselves (and are given these names by society as well) using hyphens such as Mexican-Americans, Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans and Afro-Americans. As Murillo (1999) states, “the modern concept of community, based on the nation-state, common language, and experience has long become incapable to gain an understanding of the fragmented and often paradoxical identities that are negotiated between worlds” (p. 16). In this study, these participants have lived in two countries, they speak both languages but they do not completely meet the expectations of both communities, on either side of the border. However, they are forced at some point in their lives to serve as translators for their parents so they can survive in the host community of the United States. But when they are back in Mexico, they are aware of this cultural and linguistic capital they possess and that makes them have an edge over those who do not have it and there are no legal restrictions, they are at an age of more social autonomy. As Petrón (2009) suggests, these transnationals are “immediately classified as native speakers of English because of their fluency and native or native-like pronunciation” (p. 118). This is when they start to be questioned as not being Mexican enough. Zentella (2002) discusses that the problem with “transnationals” is that their ethnic identity starts to be questioned, because they are considered “*ni de aquí ni de allá*” (not from here, nor from there). This can be traced at different levels and one of them is at a linguistic level, in which the so-called *gringos*, *pochos* (meaning Americanized Mexicans) or “mexico-americanos” can face the linguistic pressure of losing their mother tongue (Spanish), acquiring a new language (English) and then re-learning their mother tongue once they return to Mexico (Mora Pablo, 2011b). As in Petrón’s study (2009), these transnationals “[...] have been able to trade their transnational cultural capital for both economic and social advancement” (p. 118). This means that they have become English teachers even before they started their undergraduate studies in TESOL, mainly because they were acknowledged as having an advantage over other potential teachers: they were considered native speakers of English and this was enough to qualify them as English teachers.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research approach was qualitative in nature. According to Maycut and Morehouse (1994), qualitative research “examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants” (p. 2). Our research was also based upon narrative inquiry. Nakamura (2002) mentions that “Narrative inquiry is about building public expression of personal understanding of the events, experiences, and people in our professional lives [...]” (p.117). In order to be able to understand and explain the statements of an interviewee/biographer concerning particular topics and experiences in his/her past, it is necessary to interpret them as part of the *overall context of his/her current life* and his/her resulting present and future perspective (Rosenthal, 2007). This approach was the most suitable for the study since the main intention was to know the experiences that contribute to identity formation. Webster and Mertova (2007) emphasise, “Narrative allows researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness. Narrative illustrates the temporal notion of experience, recognising that one’s understanding of people and events changes” (p. 2).

The following are the questions which guided our research:

- 1) What experiences have led these transnationals to choose a BA in TESOL?
- 2) Why do they want to become English teachers?

Our focus in this article is to explore how these participants’ experiences as language brokers played an instrumental part when they decided to become English teachers and during their identity formation

### Context and Participants

The participants taking part in this project include six males between the ages of 19 and 29. They were all born in Mexico and as young children migrated to the United States, specifically to the area of California and Oregon. They lived in the United States an average of 17 years, but always maintained contact with their home country through relatives, cultural and linguistic practices. After a number of years, they returned to Mexico. The reasons were varied: some of them were deported because they had problems with the police, as they were part of gangs; some others decided to return to Mexico because they did not have a legal status in the United States and they were aware of

their difficulties to begin university degree programs. At the moment of the research, they had been living in Mexico between one-to-three years. The research site is the language department of a large public university in central Mexico, where the participants are studying an in-service TESOL BA program.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

At an initial stage, participants were asked to write a short autobiography that served the purpose of a starting point of narrative inquiry. Second, they were interviewed and recorded based upon relevant information from the autobiographies. For these interviews, we decided to adopt a life-story approach; that is, we drew upon an analysis concept, where we distinguished not only between the perspective of the interviewee in the past, but also the present (Jaatinen, 2007). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed. Pseudonyms were given to the six participants in order to ensure the participants' privacy.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The process of analysing the data was on-going and there were moments where we went back and forth between the autobiographies and the interview transcriptions. As part of the narrative analysis, we relied on paradigmatic cognition, which entails "classifying a particular instance as belonging to a category or concept" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 9). We looked for similarities in the data and then grouped them in a same category. Barkhuizen (2013) mentions that "Thematic analyses follow the paradigmatic procedures of coding for themes, categorizing these and looking for patterns of association among them" (p. 11). The data used for this article is part of a larger study of return migration and their incorporation into the Mexican educational system at the university level.

Two main themes emerged from the data. The first theme is related to the beginning of their journey as bilinguals in a new country and how their parents established a language policy at home, in an effort to maintain their Mexican heritage. The second theme refers to their experiences of how this language policy at home established by their parents was not followed when these needed help from their kids



and how this ability to use both languages influenced their decision to become language teachers. Both themes revealed the complex identity formation of transnational bilinguals during their childhood, and how they project this in their current lives.

### **First Contact with Both Languages: Forming Identity**

Often, children are the first to start using and mastering the language of the new country in public domains. This use thus makes the children take on the face of the family (Buriel, Perez, Dement, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Hanson & Morales, 2005; Love & Burial, 2007; Villanueva & Buriel, 2010; Weisskirch & Alatorre, 2002). In spite of the aforementioned, at home, parents often have a contradictory rule of first language only. Craith (2012) explains that migrants may choose to use their native language but also learn or use the host country's language to use it only when necessary. Arriagada (2005) also notes that once English is accepted as the dominant language in public, the family's native language will be used in more intimate settings, such as the home. Mario, one of the participants in this study, states the following:

Well, ever since I can remember my dad he was very strict. He used to tell us "Hey you know, at home you are going to be using Spanish, 'cus in school you're gonna learn English more." So he was very strict with us using Spanish.

In this excerpt it can be noted that the participant's father made it clear that at home the language was Spanish. Furthermore, it seems as though the father justifies this use by stating that at school the participant will learn English. At home Spanish is used as a language of maintenance (Fishman, 1991; Holmes, 2013; Schecter & Bayley, 1997). This situation may be a reason that also allowed the participants to become language teachers, as it will be explained later. Since they have always been in contact and open to use English and Spanish depending on the people they are surrounded with, it seems as though it would not be very difficult for the participants to switch between English and Spanish and explain language to their students. Nick recalls a similar situation at home: "My mother and my father didn't want us speaking much English at home. They wanted us to speak Spanish. We had to learn Spanish". In this case, the participant's parents also justified the use of Spanish at home and the following represents this:

Now I know that this is because his brother had children and they didn't speak any Spanish and they were already teenager adults. They spoke really horrible Spanish because they didn't practice it while they were in the United States. They just spoke English, so he wanted us to speak Spanish at home and we could speak English at school. It was my home, my home was really Spanish centered.

Nick recalls that his uncle's children were the reason why his father wanted them to use Spanish so they could maintain their language and perhaps even their culture and ethnic heritage. He reflects on this as a positive influence on his current self-image and identity, when he says:

In my family I feel powerful because out of all my cousins I am the most developed in both Spanish and English. I'm the most developed in both Spanish and English! The rest either speak mostly English or speak mostly Spanish. By the time I left [ESL classes], I was more proficient in the English language than the average student at school and since I was excelling in English because all of the drilling of practices. I was lead into honors class in English and that lead me to appreciate English even more. I came from not knowing enough to know more than the average student at school.

This positive change in his use of English led Nick to establish a positive image of himself and boosted his self-confidence. Alba, Logan, Lutz and Stults (2002) mention that some families recognize the advantages for being a bilingual and will work to help maintain their native language while children learn English at school. This could perhaps be a reason why some of the participants' parents decided to use Spanish at home. Further, their families seem to be creating unity through their private language or perhaps maintaining authority over their children through language limitations. Ready and Brown-Gort (2005) mention that "The Latino family has a powerful influence on its members, and familial ties and loyalties probably exert an influence that is even more powerful than is typically observed in many non-Latino families" (p. 34).

16

Essentially, the participants' parents are forcefully limiting which language their children are to use at home; it can be noted that they seem to be strict about it. Consequently, during the participants' childhood they became expert users of both Spanish and English which may directly correlate with the fact that they are language teachers and also the ease and comfort they feel when using the languages. On the contrary, Samuel had a somewhat different case or approach to the use of Spanish at home:

With my parents, especially with my mom, I tried to speak more Spanish to her because she wasn't able to understand English that much. As to my father, he did kinda speak but the language there was mostly Spanish just to make it easier for my parents.

In this excerpt, a different tone can be noticed. It seems as if the decision of which language to use at home did not depend on his parents but on the participant himself. Samuel seems to be taking an empathetic role with his parents in this moment of his life and as a consequence, he might find this empathetic expertise an innate ally in the classroom as a language teacher today.

Regarding which language was used with siblings, Ivan recalls the following: "Well, when she (my mother) wasn't home and it was just me, my brother and my sister we would speak English but when she was home it was Spanish."

Mario mentions the following about which language he used with his siblings:

On the side, you know, behind his back (referring to his father), I guess you can say like that my sister and I used English all the time. And even today we use both English and Spanish. You know in one minute here we are talking in Spanish and the next minute we are talking in English about the same topic.

Oscar recalls:

With my mom, my dad, and my brothers I spoke Spanish, with my older sister, and my older brother in English. They've been in the US for about, probably over thirty years.

Both Mario and Oscar had a specific language for different family members. This might indicate that the participants have developed and adopted different identities for different people based on their language.

Regarding Spanish use at home, the participants were clearly limited by their parents. Some of them justified why they could only speak Spanish. Nonetheless, it appears as though some of the participants disregarded parental rules about language whenever they saw an opportunity, particularly when speaking with siblings. It is possible that the participants were more comfortable with the use of English because they were growing up with the language and their parents were just an element that allowed them to maintain their Mexican heritage through

perhaps their language. Ivan questioned his mother at one point on the issue:

Well, we would sometimes like, I don't know, question her about that. We would say "How come all we can speak at home is Spanish and whenever we go out we have to speak English or you ask us to speak English?" and she would tell us: "No, cus I'm your mother. Just do what I say."

This participant was the only one who mentioned having questioned the rule of Spanish only at home; the others did not question the matter. While for some participants Spanish at home was mandatory, others chose to do it in order to facilitate family affairs. Moreover, the rule of Spanish only at home was broken once the parents were not around which is an indication of not only the different roles they had in their house but also the different identities they were building at this time period in their lives. However, the rule of Spanish at home started to take another direction when these transnationals were asked to perform a new role for the family, as language brokers, as it will be explored in the following section.

### **Language Brokering**

All of the participants conducted language brokering in the United States starting at an early age, continuing into their adolescence and even in young adulthood in the United States. Through their narratives, they recounted their experiences by mentioning difficult moments which can be recognized as communication barriers, but that indicate the beginning of their experiences as language brokers. Nick recalls an episode that shows the moment when he decided that he needed to learn English in order to be accepted in the new community while in the United States. He and his mother faced a difficult moment when asking for a glass of water from an American:

...she [my mother] asked me "Well, since you are being educated here in the US you should at least know how to ask for a cup of water." So that's when she told me "Ask them." I didn't know how to ask for water. I had not learned a lot of English so I told them. I just made signs. I pretended I had a cup in my hand and I opened my mouth and I did the action of drinking water. It's like "Me want water" and they didn't understand. I said "Ooohh." Finally they understood and they passed us, they gave us a cup of water and we went on our way. That was the first incident when I was like "Oh God, I never want to be in that situation again. I have to learn English in order to communicate and just survive."

This difficult experience influenced him to learn the language so that he would never feel embarrassed again and would get past the language barrier that he had to confront. But more importantly the link between language and social survival became evident.

Another participant, Oscar, narrates a moment when he was asked to translate for his parents:

I did it a few times, when my mom used to go to the doctor. I used to translate for her, and for my dad. I used to work with him and he didn't know much English, so I used to translate for him and we also had a family business, and my dad had two employees, and sometimes whenever he wanted to say something, or bitch at people he would get me, "Like tell this guy to..., that he's not doing things right". I'm like okay.

In this excerpt, Oscar relates two instances of language brokering, when visiting the doctor and when relaying messages to his father's employees. Of particular interest occurs in the last few words of this excerpt when he merely says: "I'm like okay." The participant seems unaware of the importance of the role he was undertaking in his father's business and accepts the task quite easily. Perhaps he did not realize the importance of his new role within his father's business. In greater depth, there is a reversed role where the participant takes on the role of boss of his father's employees, thus becoming the face of his father's business. Villanueva and Buriel (2010) mention that in language brokering there is a common reversed role where children often take on adult roles and have to relay potentially vital messages. It appears as though this circumstance in life has molded the participants into having an innate sense of assistance when situations that require translation (visiting the doctor and speaking to employees on behalf of the father) have taken place in their lives. In the following two excerpts we have similar situations. Mario states:

All the time...when we went to the doctor 'cus when my dad had like an appointment or something he used to tell me for example: "Dile al doctor que esto, dile al doctor que aquello" ["Tell the doctor this, tell the doctor that"] and so...I used to help my dad a lot with that.

Samuel states:

...when she [referring to the participant's mother] would go to the hospital for her doctor's appointment, at that time I was already...not a native speaker, almost, but I had enough conversation skills to keep up with the conversations as to...my brother, well he had a hard time understanding and translating so I was my mom's translator.

Mario appears to mention the task of language brokering as something he would do in a nonchalant manner similar to both Oscar and Samuel. Furthermore, the situation of going to the doctor is mentioned repeatedly and it appears to be a critical moment which many of the participants were able to recall easily. Furthermore, this incident is fundamental since it portrays a critical instance that shaped the participants identity and may have played a vital role when they chose to utilize their language abilities to make a career out of it as English language teachers.

Love and Buriel (2007) state that language brokers often translate sensitive medical information for their parents. Seemingly, such has been the case with all of the participants since they were young children. In this research, it is important to highlight their innateness in helping their parents in complex situations, whether at the doctor's or with their parents' employees. A salient element in utilizing children as interpreters has been pointed out; Coleman (cited in Morales & Hanson, 2005) states that in 2002, California passed a law prohibiting the use of children as interpreters in the medical field claiming that they were too young to be handling what might potentially be sensitive and/or traumatic information. Nonetheless, this happened long after the participants in this study fulfilled their obligation as language brokers in the state of California. Samuel recalls a relevant moment in the following:

It put me in a tough situation because I really had to understand what the doctor was saying in order for my mom to say to agree upon a surgery so it was kind of a tough situation.

Unlike the other participants, Samuel recalls the psychological implications for him to interpret such important information. Evidently, the participant was conscious of the implications of relaying incorrect information. Morales and Hanson (2005) state that there are a number of studies which point out that children who serve as interpreters do not necessarily feel positive about doing so and might even be affected negatively.

20

Language brokering has been a sort of transcendental factor for shaping their identity which in turn influenced not only their career choice but also who they are today as they realized the importance of the roles they were fulfilling for their families. Additionally, the participants continue to fulfill this role nowadays, which they mentioned as a defining factor in their career choice, as Mario mentions:

I decided to become an English teacher because I thought that was the only thing I was good at... and I wanted to help others so they didn't experience the same as I did when I was in the States, struggling with a new language. Helping my parents with the language made me realize I was patient enough to become an English teacher.

For Mario, helping his parents with the language was a pivotal factor in making his decision of becoming an English teacher. But also, he was exposed to a somewhat different kind of language brokering at school where Mario had the opportunity to serve as an interpreter for school officials:

...with the new students that came from Mexico, went into the public educational system which was in middle school or high school they told me "Hey Mario, help us out. This student just came in and he doesn't speak English so can you please tell him that... these are the rules that we gotta follow and this is what we have to do so"... I guess, in a way I was an interpreter or translator.

In this excerpt, there appears to be an element of pride, and it seems as though once again the participant innately agrees to fulfill the role of language broker which he is already all too familiar with having done so for his family under different circumstances. This time was different since someone outside the family asked him to perform this role, as if they acknowledged his skills as bilingual speaker. Moreover, after asking Mario how he felt about his ability to be an interpreter he stated, "That is actually one of the reasons why I became an English teacher." Further, Luis recalls his feelings towards being a language broker:

When I think about those times, it made me feel proud that I was like helping my mom, number one. I was really proud of it and I think my brother was too. We were ok with it.

It is quite evident that for this participant and his brother there was also a real sense of pride in their ability to fulfill the role and to help their mother or others. Samuel also shares these feelings: "It was a great time for me 'cus I did what I was expected to do at school. And I proved it by translating for my mom and she felt great." These participants show pride when taking the role of interpreters or translators, which eventually influenced them in their career choice. Having had to return to Mexico to look for different alternatives in life, they may have been reminded of this satisfaction and helpfulness when they realized that

they could use their language abilities due to the level of English and the level of cultural and linguistic knowledge they had. Sometimes, it was a family member who actually noticed this and encouraged the participant to pursue his studies as English teacher, as in the case of Samuel:

I came here [Mexico] to study at the university but I didn't know what, but then I took a year off. Then I started to think, "Well, the only thing that I'm good at is in school and I feel comfortable within the school." Then my aunt told me: "Well, why don't you just go to be a teacher? You were always helping your parents with English, you can help kids now."

And Samuel became a teacher of English in a primary school. He acknowledges that he shares his experiences with his students when they ask him where he is from:

They notice I have an accent in Spanish and they immediately tell me. "Teacher, you are not from here, where are you from?" and I only tell them that I lived in the States but that I'm Mexican, like them, that they can learn the language as I did.

Another participant, Luis, noticed he had linguistic superiority both in knowledge and competence at his BA program:

When I started the BA for example I noticed I had an edge right away because of English. I noticed you know, I don't want to be mean or anything or condescending or patronizing or whatever but I noticed that my English was a lot better than many of my classmates.

He further stated that he wanted people to notice that, and he would participate a lot because of it and that he intentionally translated for his classmates when they did not know how to say some things. Later he admits that he wanted to make a profit off of his linguistic ability by selling his assignments and help his classmates if they needed assistance with the language. Eventually he stopped charging his classmates because of an article he read where students with more linguistic knowledge, competence and more target language culture were used as teacher's aids. He mentioned that he stopped charging them and would just help his classmates.

22

Contrary to these positive feelings though, Luis further recalls a feeling of being "embarrassed and ashamed" as a consequence of his mother not being able to communicate efficiently in English:



...at certain times you know...I felt...if my mom went to school for example and couldn't speak to my friend's moms or something I would feel embarrassed. I felt ashamed, I was like, "Oh man, here comes my mom. Oh man, they are going to make fun of me." I felt a little bit of that, I mean it was ok; it wasn't bad. It was just me, my sense of "Come on, Mom. You gotta learn some English woman, please. You have a job here, you know. Why don't you speak English?" And for many years I really looked down on my mom for that.

In this case, the participant has very strong feelings about his mother's inability to speak the language. At the end of the excerpt one might consider this participant to be somewhat condescending when he replies: "I really looked down on my mom for that." However, an event changed the image he had about his mother:

She's never wanted to speak English to me, to me personally and I recently had a friend from France in my house and he speaks English and French, no Spanish. I thought that I was going to translate again for my mother...but then... so I heard my mom talking to this guy [in English], this is recently and I'm like, "Woah, my mom can speak English!" I mean even after 27, 28 years I didn't know my mom's potential!

Under circumstances such as the two cases just mentioned, and as Morales and Hanson (2005) have pointed out, the feelings of being interpreters are not always very positive. Furthermore, the participants take on a superior role than that of their parents due to their language proficiency and interaction with society at a different level than other kids at the same age. This may also be a factor contributing to the participants' identity formation which as we have seen, has taken different hues in public and private contexts through the language they have to use when speaking to parents, siblings, or others. With the comments concerning the negative feelings they have towards their parents, perhaps the participants' identity can be seen as vulnerable.

The concept of language brokering has had a great impact on the lives of the participants. Many of them mentioned this as an accomplishment due to the positive impact they had on their family life. Even though the participants recalled many moments which made them feel proud of their ability, some also expressed feelings of anxiety, frustration or embarrassment. This is the case with Samuel who mentioned that at times it was difficult to do because of the type of information he was required to communicate. Moreover, Luis mentioned he looked down upon his mother which could perhaps have

had psychological repercussions in his family. It is possible that he did not see his mother as the leader of the family or role model. Villanueva and Buriel (2010) state that children often take on their traditional roles at home whereas in public domains they are given the role of authority which could potentially have additional “developmental challenges and stressors” (p.198).

### Conclusions

These students were placed in a situation where they were required to use language to survive. They served as a bridge for their parents socially and took a vital role in medical issues. These are all important elements in society that children normally are not asked to perform. So, it is important to understand that bilingual children experience life changing events that monolingual children may not. This makes these participants understand at an early age the power and value of language. Also, they understand cultural differences because they experience a different value associated with their skills in each country. Their diverse experiences and rich trajectories have shaped who they are. They take on the challenge of engaging in an identity struggle between their American self and their rooted Mexican one often falling into a “grey zone” which is in the middle of both and which constantly shifts from one to the other depending on who they are with. Participants then start to build bridges in order to connect their past experiences and their current situations, going back and forth between their American and Mexican identities, forming a new identity that enables them to become professionals.

The way the participants use languages as cultural and linguistic capital in their personal and family life plays a direct impact of their identity formation for their future. These young people have found themselves in a BA program where they can make more sense of who they are and their language and cultural skills give them a plus in their process of becoming language teachers in Mexico. In essence, their identity development involves a stage where they exchange their brokering skills for teaching skills, creating a stepping stone for the creation of their professional identity that will always be founded in their childhood skills.

### References

- Alba, R., Logan, J., Lutz, A. & Stults, B. (2002). "Only English" by the third generation? Loss and preservation of the mother tongue among the grandchildren of contemporary immigrants. *Demography* 39(3), 467-484.
- Arriagada, P. A. (2005). Family context and Spanish use: A study of Latino children in the United States. *Social Science Quarterly*, 86(3), 599-619.
- Barkhuizen, G. (Ed.). (2013). *Narrative research in applied linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, C. L. (2009). Heritage language and ethnic identity: A case study of Korean-American college students. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 11(1), 1-16.
- Buriel, R., Perez, W., Dement, T.L., Chavez, D.V., & Moran, V.R. (1998). The relationship of academic performance, biculturalism, and self-efficacy among Latino adolescents. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 20(3), 1-9.
- Coleman, J. (2003, April 2). Bill would ban using children as interpreters. *The San Jose Mercury News*, p. 19A.
- Craith, N. M. (2012). *Narratives of place, belonging and language: An intercultural perspective*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Gutierrez, R. A. (1987). Unraveling America's Hispanic past: Internal stratification and class boundaries. *AZTLAN*, 17(1), 79-101.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.
- INEGI (2010). Retrieved September 23, 2014 from Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática website, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/>
- Hornberger, N. H. (2007). Bilingualism, transnationalism, multimodality, and identity: Trajectories across time and space. *Linguistics and Education*, 18, 325-334.

- Jaatinen, R. (2007). *Learning languages, learning life-skills: Autobiographical reflexive approach to teaching and learning a foreign language*. New York: Springer.
- Jenkins, R. (2002). Imagined but not imaginary: Ethnicity and nationalism in the modern world. In J. MacClancy (Ed.), *Exotic no more: Anthropology on the front lines* (pp. 114-128). Chicago: The University Chicago Press.
- Kam, J. A. (2011). The effects of language brokering frequency and feelings on Mexican-Heritage youth's mental health and risky behaviors. *Journal of Communication*, 61(3), 455-475.
- Love, J., & Buriel, R. (2007). Language brokering, autonomy, parent-child bonding: Biculturalism and depression. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 29(4), 472-491.
- Maycut, P., & R. Morehouse (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London: Routledge.
- Mora Pablo, I. (2011a). The 'native speaker' spin: The construction of the English teacher at a language department at a university in central Mexico. PhD unpublished dissertation, Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University.
- Mora Pablo, I. (2011b). Un acercamiento al bilingüismo: La identidad del retornado. [A rapprochement to bilingualism: Returnee's identity] In B. Valdivia (Ed.). *Primer Foro Internacional Interdisciplina y Espacios Sustentables* (pp. 796-802). Guanajuato: Universidad de Guanajuato.
- Morales, A., & Hanson, W. (2005). Language brokering: An integrative review of literature. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 27(4), 471-503.
- Murillo, Jr., E. G. (1999). Mojado crossing along neoliberal borderlands. *Educational Foundations*, 13, 7-30.
- Nakamura, I. (2002). Narrative studies to enhance teacher development. *JALT 2000 at Shizuoka*, conference proceedings, 111-118.
- 26 Petrón, M. (2009). Transnational teachers of English in Mexico. *The High School Journal* April/May, 115-128.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8, 5-23.
- Ready, T., & Brown-Gort, A. (2005). The state of Latino Chicago: This is home now. *Institute for Latino Studies*, November, 1-13.

- Rosenthal, G. (2003). The healing effects of storytelling: on the conditions of curative storytelling in the context of research and counseling. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9, 915-933.
- Schechter, S. R., & Bayley, R. (1997). Language socialization practices and cultural identity: Case studies of Mexican descent families in California and Texas. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 513-541.
- Skeggs, B. (2008). The problem with identity. In Lin, A. M. Y. (Ed.), *Problematizing identity: Everyday struggles in language, culture and education* (pp. 11–35). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Suárez-Orozco, C. (2000). Identities under siege: Immigration stress and social mirroring among the children of immigrants. In Robben, A. C. G. M. & Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (Eds.). *Cultures under siege: Collective violence and trauma* (pp. 194-226). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taniguchi, S. (2002). Second language writing as a way of negotiating bilingual identities: Case study of a returnee from China. *JALT at Shizuoka, Conference proceedings*, 36-41.
- Trueba, E. T. (2004). *The new Americans: Immigrants and transnationals at work*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Villanueva, C., & Buriel, R. (2010). Speaking on behalf of others: A qualitative study of the perceptions and feelings of adolescent Latina Language brokers. *Journal of Social Issues*, 66(1), 197-210.
- Webster, L. & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method*. New York: Routledge.
- World Bank. (n. d.). Retrieved September 23, 2014, from World Bank data website, [www.data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org)
- Zentella, A. C. (2002). Latin@ languages and identities. In M. Suárez-Orozco & M. Páez (Eds.), *Latinos: Remaking America* (pp. 321-338). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zuñiga, V. (2000). Migrantes internacionales de México a Estados Unidos: hacia la creación de políticas educativas binacionales. In R. Tuirán, (Ed.). *Migración México-Estados: Opciones de política*, México: Consejo Nacional de Población/ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, pp. 299-334.

**Authors**

**\*Irasema Mora Pablo** is a full-time teacher at University of Guanajuato, Mexico, in the Language Department and currently coordinates the MA in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics, University of Kent, UK. Her areas of interest are bilingualism, Latino studies, and identity formation.

**\*Leonardo Arturo Rivas Rivas** holds a BA TESOL degree from the University of Guanajuato. He has been an English instructor and trainer for eight years. Currently he is the head of the English Department at UNAM's Extension San Miguel de Allende. His research areas include identity and transnationalism.

**\*M. Martha Lengeling** holds a PhD in Language Studies by the University of Kent, UK, and is currently a full-time teacher at the University of Guanajuato, Mexico. Her areas of interest are teacher development and socialization as well as identity formation of teachers.

**\*Troy Crawford** holds a PhD in Language Studies by the University of Kent, UK, and is currently a full-time teacher at the University of Guanajuato, Mexico. His areas of interest are second language writing and identity.