



Transnational English Teachers in Central Mexico: Constructing a Professional Identity

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight how those who have migrated between both Mexico and the United States, and whom will be referred to as transnationals, arrive to an understanding of their professional identity developing as English teachers throughout central Mexico. A qualitative approach was selected to explore the lived epistemologies of the participants and the construction and reconstruction of their professional identity through phenomenology. The data suggests that the past migrating experiences of the participants play a crucial role in how they are viewed within their English teaching practice.

Keywords: transnationalism, transnationals, transnational English teachers, professional identity.

1. Introduction

The study reports on how transnationals construct their professional identity as they develop as student-teachers throughout central Mexico. The participants are eight student-teachers undertaking a BA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and an MA in Applied Linguistics in ELT (English Language Teaching) at a large public university in Central Mexico. It is pertinent to explore how the migrating experiences of the participants enable them to construct a professional identity as they now develop as English teachers throughout Central Mexico. Findings from semi-structured interviews show how the knowledge obtained from their migrating experiences helps the participants obtain a better understanding of how they are viewed by their colleagues, peers, and students. Various themes emerged from the data as part of a larger study; however, for the purposes of this article, the focus will be on how transnationals take advantage of their past migrating experiences to decide to be English teachers, as well as how they incorporate their epistemologies developed as transnationals into their English language teaching practice, and how they are viewed upon the portrayal of their English language performance.

2. Literature review

It is pertinent to initially highlight the particular context of the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.

- Transnationals may rely on their migrating experiences to decide to be English teachers.
- Transnational English teachers embed their transnational epistemologies into their ELT practice.
- The resemblance of the English language is noticeable amongst transnational English teachers.

2.1. *The State of Guanajuato*

The closeness of Mexico to its northern neighboring country, the United States, leads to continuous migration between both countries. Migration between Mexico and the United States is said to be “the largest sustained flow of migrant workers in the contemporary world” (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pelegrino & Taylor, 1998: 73). Nonetheless, illegal immigration practices from Mexico citizens towards United States territory has increased conflict in the socio-political relationship between both nations.

Return migration is a term used to describe the phenomenon of migrants who decide to leave the United States and return to live in Mexico (Sidury Christiansen, Trejo Guzmán & Mora-Pablo, 2017). Thus, the numbers of return migrants in Mexico have increased due to reduced economic opportunities in the northern neighboring country and enforcement of deportations by the U.S. Office of Homeland Security (Romo, 2016).

The State of Guanajuato was once considered the main expeller state with over 100 thousand migrants to the United States according to the 2010 *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (INEGI, National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Information) census. Concerning the 2015 *Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica* (National Census of Demographic Dynamics) of the INEGI census, Guanajuato is positioned as the fourth immigrant expeller state to the United States just below Michoacán, Guerrero, and Nayarit. Constantly raising issues in political, economic, and migratory situations for undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States encourages return migration to their native homelands.

Nonetheless, many return migrants may choose to develop as English teachers.

2.2 *Transnationalism*

Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992) first approached transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement,” including “multiple relations (familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political) that span borders” (p. 1). Also, Binford (2000) refers to transnationalism as a term which is used to refer to the condensed social networks that go beyond national borders, created by the physical, emotional, and economic transition of individuals and families between two cultures.

Similarly, Duany (2011) presents transnationalism as “the construction of dense social fields through the circulation of people, ideas, practices, money, goods, and information across nations. This circulation includes, but is not limited to, the physical movement of human bodies as well as other types of exchanges, which may or not be recurrent, such as travel, communication, and remittances” (pp. 20-21). In this sense, not only does transnationalism imply physical migration of people, but it also involves other elements that people embrace along with them.

I make reference to transnationalism as the interaction and network construction of individuals, involving their identity construction and reconstruction carried out as a result of their

migration practices amongst and between two nation-states (in this case Mexico and the U.S.), with a significant time spent in each.

2.3 *Transnationals*

Petron (2003) refers to transnationals as “those individuals who have considerable life experiences on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. This definition includes objective factors such as years spent on both sides of the border and subjective factors such as both sides ‘feel like home’” (p. 6). Additionally, these transnationals “acquire cultural knowledge and cultural tools from different nation states and cultural spaces, which they weave together to form distinct identities, understandings, and ways of being” (Petron, 2003: 285).

Sánchez (2009) refers to a transnational as one who engages in a lifestyle with personal and family attachments to two nations or states (in this case Mexico and the United States).

I use the term transnational to refer to a migrant who becomes familiar with and emotionally involved with the lifestyles of both Mexico and the U.S., and acquires knowledge of both cultures to establish his or her conceptions and perspectives of developing throughout the world.

2.4 *Transnational English teachers*

Several characteristics are said to distinguish a transnational English teacher. Initially, a transnational English teacher is one who has engaged in transnational experiences him or herself (Petron, 2009; Petron & Greybeck, 2014). Engaging in transnational experiences may result in obtaining a particular linguistic competence in both the English and the Spanish language. Mora Pablo, Lengeling and Basurto Santos (2015) note that these transnationals possess a language skill that is being demanded by the Mexican educational system; these transnationals are perceived as having an advantage over other teachers, particularly in their English linguistic ability, classified and treated differently from their Mexican peers (*Ibid.*). The constant practice of their English, then, may help to maintain the reached level of proficiency in the language and continuously be recurred by others.

Also, transnational English teachers both linguistically and culturally, play an important role in the Americanization of their students; that is, they help their students become more familiar with the American culture and way of talking portrayed by their transnational English teachers (Brittain, 2002). This may be done so by the process of how English teachers, being familiar with more than one culture “bring... worldviews... shaped by the sociocultural and historical contexts of their lives” (Monzó & Rueda, 2003: 72), and enable them to address the linguistic, ideological, and social concerns of students from diverse communities (*Ibid.*). One can arrive to an understanding that transnational English teachers carry along with them their past lived experiences as transnationals, and are able to portray these through their teaching practice. As Weisman (2001) explains, this is highly important for the students as these teachers are viewed as role models “who can offer their students the opportunity to imagine possibilities for their future that do not negate their cultural worldview” (p. 222).

Petron (2009) argues that transnational English teachers most often rely on their transnational cultural capital, referred to as the linguistic and cultural knowledge acquired as a result of transnational experiences, to present such to their students.

Transnational English teachers may be signaled with regards to several particularities that differentiate them from others, such as engaging in transnational experiences, their English

language dominance and proficiency, their host of sociocultural knowledge and practices, and the implementation of such into their teaching practice. Not all transnational English teachers may be aware of or possess all of the previously-mentioned characteristics, and those who are aware of or possess some may result in being more perceptible than others.

A number of research projects have been carried out concerning the process of transnationals becoming and developing as English teachers (Menard-Warwick, 2008; Petron, 2003; Petron, 2009; Petron & Greybeck, 2014). However, it is important to note that these research projects have been carried out along the physical borderlands areas.

Relatively recent research aims to explore the transnationalism phenomena concerning those who engage in transnational experiences and return to Mexico to become incorporated into the educational system (Borjian, Muñoz de Cote, van Dijk & Houde, 2016; Núñez Asomoza, 2019; Tacosky, 2018a; Tacosky, 2018b), as well as those who opt to develop as English teachers in Mexico (Frausto Hernández, 2017a; Frausto Hernández, 2017-2018; Mora Pablo, Lengeling & Basurto Santos, 2015; Mora Pablo, Lengeling, Rivas Rivas, Basurto Santos & Villareal Ballestros, 2015; Mora Pablo, Rivas Rivas, Lengeling & Crawford, 2015; Mora Pablo, Frausto Hernández & Rangel Gamiño, 2016; Rivas Rivas, 2013; Serna-Gutiérrez & Mora-Pablo, 2018; Sidury Christiansen, Trejo Guzmán & Mora-Pablo, 2017; Trejo Guzmán, Mora Vázquez, Mora Pablo, Lengeling & Crawford, 2016; Villegas Torres & Mora Pablo, 2015). Large part of this research has been carried out in Guanajuato, as well as collaborating contexts within the central/northern region of Mexico.

2.5 Borderlands and borderlands epistemologies

Ernst-Slavit (2000) describes borderlands as “those unintentional, multicultural spaces where cultures meet” (p. 251) and where those submerged in these “discover similar shared beliefs and rituals and are able to construct new ones” (*Ibid.*: 251). It is noteworthy to mention that borderlands may extend beyond actual physical borders (Frausto Hernández, 2017b). Living amongst borderlands may lead to acquire a type of knowledge that may be referred to as borderlands epistemologies (Petron, 2003, 2009; Petron & Greybeck, 2014). Thus, it is these cultural spaces which lead the participants to develop their knowledge and awareness of how to rely on their migrating experiences as a way to go about in their daily lives.

2.6 Professional identity

The concept of professional identity becomes pertinent for this research project as the participants not only become more aware of who they are within a working environment, but also restructure how they wish to present themselves in their professional field.

Hall (1987) made reference to professional identity as the set of attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills that are shared with others within a professional group. In this case, a professional identity may be mutually constructed amongst those involved in a professional group. Moreover, Day (1999) referred to professional identity as an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences lived within the labor field. The notion of the professional identity has recently been extended to a professional identity within the teaching field. It is vital to highlight several conceptions concerning the professional identity within the teaching field.

Tickle (2000) argues that professional identity not only refers to the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people, including broadly accepted images within the society about what a teacher should know and do, but this also refers to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on their experiences in practice along

with their personal backgrounds. A social and self-perspective become crucial in how the person is referred to within the professional academic field.

Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) refer to professional identity as how a person perceives him or herself as a teacher and the factors that contribute to these perceptions. As several factors may come into play, each individual's professional identity may be constructed differently than others. Similarly, Clandinin and Huber (2005) understand teacher's professional identity as "a unique embodiment of his/her stories to live by, stories shaped by the landscapes past and present in which she/he lives and works..." (p. 4). Furthermore, Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) believe that teachers' professional identities emerge through their social actions in which the teachers not only reflect on past events, but also consider how these past events may inform future events and activities. This may lead to a set of perceptions created by the teacher's teaching practice.

3. Methodology

To approach this research, a qualitative approach was followed. Merriam (2009) notes that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). In this sense, I am interested in understanding how the participants of this research project construct a sense of their professional identity upon their lived experiences.

Phenomenology reduces a human subject's experiences with a phenomenon to a description of its essence with the purpose of having a qualitative researcher identify a phenomenon as an object of human experience and give voice to it (Cresswell, 2007). Thus, the aim was to rely on phenomenology to aid in exploring the lived migration experiences of the participants to better understand how they develop as English teachers.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data from the participants. A semi-structured interview allows for the interviewer to be flexible in the questions he or she wishes to cover in the interview, with the purpose of understanding the topics under discussion and what is attempted to be conveyed by the interviewer (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

3.1 *Context and participants*

The participants involved in this study include eight transnational English student-teachers, four males (Oscar, Andrew, Armando, and Samuel) and four females (Yadira, Lorena, Gabriela, and Norma), between nineteen to forty years of age. The participants all lived a significant amount of time in the United States and became familiar with the lifestyles on either side of the border. For various reasons, the participants returned to Mexico. The participants had been living in Mexico between two and twelve years at the moment of the research. The participants were selected at random with the selection criteria of having lived in the United States a significant amount of years and become familiar with the migration experiences between both countries. This research was carried out at a large public university in central Mexico, where the participants were studying the BA TESOL and the MA in Applied Linguistics in ELT.

3.2 *Research Questions*

The research questions that guided this inquiry are the following:

1. How do the transnational experiences of the participants play a role in how they view themselves as English teachers in Mexico?
2. How are the participants viewed by their students and colleagues?

3.3 *Data collection and analysis*

The participants of this research project were identified as having engaged in transnational experiences thanks to their teachers and the coordinators of both the BA TESOL and the MA in Applied Linguistics in ELT. The students found themselves making reference to their lives spent in the U.S. while engaging in class dynamics. An initial informal conversation was held with each participant to determine that indeed, they all had become involved in transnational experiences.

A semi-structured interview was designed to elicit a set of questions that would also allow freedom for each participant to further elaborate on a given topic thanks to the use of follow-up questions. The interviews were transcribed in order to analyze the information and search for commonalities to create categories. A thematic analysis emerged. Barkhuizen (2013) notes that “thematic analysis follow the paradigmatic procedures of coding for themes, categorizing these and looking for patterns of associations among them” (p. 11).

4. Results and discussion

Once analyzing the obtained data, several themes emerged such as: relying on their past migrating experiences to decide to be English teachers, bringing transnational epistemologies into the English classroom, and the portrayed linguistic abilities of a transnational English teacher.

4.1 *Relying on past migrating experiences to decide to be English teachers*

An initial theme that arose was how the participants relied on their past migrating experiences in making the decision to become English teachers. Oscar mentions his view about how his students become interested in his past:

... I guess it opens them up. It gives them a bigger point of view on what culture is, I guess. For example, they're always curious about me... where do you come from? Why do you speak English so well? And I tell them about my experience and I guess they have like this moment of ahhh, so that's why. And they start getting curious about it.

Oscar believes that his background helps his students become more aware of cultural aspects of the United States. Also, as Oscar believes, his students become more curious about his past once they are aware of the migrating experiences he lived and the reason of his proficiency in the English language.

For participants such as Andrew, his view towards communication in the classroom is a result of his past lived experiences. He considers:

... I think that the experience of having to talk with people from many different countries also helps you be more patient with the struggles that your students have, because it's not that simple... the final point is to communicate, if you can do that, you're good.

Andrew believes that his past experiences communicating with people from different countries opened up his view towards the struggles that his students may have. This, in turn, helped him better understand his students and give greater emphasis to the communication aspect within his classes.

Armando holds a similar stance considering that his past lived experiences play an important role in his teaching. He notes:

... because I had the experience of traveling, knowing places, of interacting with people. I had to become more outgoing, be able to express better, and that has helped me here in Mexico to somehow implement those experiences into my classroom as much as I can.

Similar to Andrew, Armando is aware of the importance of the communicative aspect. Having experienced the need to interact with others and having the need to express himself as best as possible, Armando believes that communication is rather important to promote in his classes.

As for the participants, there seemed to be a tendency to rely on their past migrating experiences to become English teachers. This was then portrayed through making reference to their transnational epistemologies within their English teaching practice.

4.2 Bringing transnational epistemologies into the English classroom

With regards to constructing a professional identity, some participants made recall relating to the United States culture, as well as their lived experiences as migrants between both cultures, when going about in their teaching. The recalling of their transnational epistemologies resulted in them being viewed in a particular manner by their students and colleagues.

Samuel believes that he plays an important role in bringing in his lived experiences into the classroom. He mentions:

I bring my examples of living in the States, we find a similar topic... I give personal experiences to implement examples for my students to understand what the book is trying to say...

Samuel comments that topics may be more facilitated towards his students if he is able to relate on a previous lived experiences to portray a lived example for his students to better understand a concept or lesson.

Andrew believes that expressing cultural aspects from the United States helps in preparing his students for when they are required to travel to the country. He recalls:

When students tell me... what can I expect about the school? I tell them about how the school system works there... or I have to talk to this person and he only speaks English because it's at work, how should I tell them?... we usually start with these phrases... they ask me how to write mails... the basic rules of what is proper in a mail or not, and what's expected mostly from American culture.

Andrew seems cognizant of the needs of his students. He may to rely on his lived experiences as wealth to inform his students. This is resembled in him approaching them in a certain manner to teach them aspects according to their needs.

Armando sustains that having the opportunity to be in direct contact with the American culture results in him being able to portray cultural aspects beyond what the material entails. He elaborates:

These experiences have helped me because, otherwise, I would not have known about these topics. Meeting new people, getting to know other places, I can explain or use those experiences that I have related to the context or the lessons that I'm teaching because I know what I'm talking about, not just what the book is saying, or what the syllabus says that we should cover.

Armando notices that having had direct contact with the United States culture helps him become more familiar with cultural aspects. This leads to him bringing in his own experiences and further explaining what the material is trying to say.

Yadira recalls making reference to festivities and holidays in the United States. Having the opportunity to implement her material, she decides to refer to United States culture. She mentions:

The festivals they celebrate in the U.S., there are some holidays that are not celebrated here [Mexico], but they do celebrate them in the U.S. So since in school we do a monthly portrait, there I mention the holidays from the U.S. Every month we do that.

Yadira denotes making reference to festivities, particularly holidays from the United States to complete a task every month. She has the freedom to use the desired material, and she opts for referring to festivities and holidays related to the American culture.

Lorena also claims to talk about the United States culture within her teaching practice. She believes to give a broader perspective about the habitual American culture towards her students. She describes:

We talk about the perspective of some people in the U.S., the concept they have of studying, of learning, how they set certain objectives, and they always search for the way to compete amongst them and reach that objective. So when we talk about those type of things, that is when I make reference to what I lived the time I was over there.

Occasionally, the topics that arose during class allowed for Lorena to reminisce her livings in the United States. She seems to have a set ideology of the people whom she lived amongst. This allows for her to portray this ideology towards her students.

Several participants recalled making reference to their experiences as transnationals while going about in their teaching. This played an important role in how the participants were able to portray themselves towards their students. Whether it was making reference to certain practices carried out in the United States, or whether it was portraying their beliefs and ideologies towards their students, the participants relied on their own perspectives derived from lived experiences.

As the participants make reference to their lived experiences, their way of using the English language also becomes notorious. The following section makes reference to how the participants are viewed when performing in the English language.

4.3 The portrayed linguistic abilities of a transnational English teacher

Developing as English teachers, it was vital for the participants to make use of their linguistic competence in order to perform in the English language. When doing so, the students and colleagues of the participants became aware of the linguistic richness that these people have. As the participants were signaled out by the society according to their linguistic abilities, this characteristic also seemed to play an important role in them being viewed in a certain manner by their students and colleagues in their work area developing as professionals. Several instances were mentioned in which the linguistic performance of the participants was highlighted by their peers and students.

Yadira believes that her language usage has a role in how she is viewed by her students and colleagues. She comments the following:

I've noticed that some tell me, you've been to the U.S., or oh! I like your accent...

Yadira believes that her students and colleagues relate her accent when using the English language to her being in the United States. It seems that there is something her students can hear and make a connection to with someone who has lived in the United States.

Similar to Yadira, Gabriela believes that her language usage also plays a role in how she is viewed by her colleagues and students. When questioned about which aspects she is viewed to have different than other teachers, Gabriela responds:

Maybe how I pronounce, maybe it's my accent. It's sometimes different, but I guess that comes with any type of learning. Some people have different accents, but other students or teachers have commented that I have a good accent, that it sounds American. I guess that's the only thing that would probably make me different than other teachers, that they say that I speak it [English] very well.

Gabriela believes that her accent plays an important role in her being viewed in a certain manner compared to other English teachers. She becomes aware of such accent because of her students and colleagues making it explicit for her. This results in Gabriela sounding "American" because of the accent she is able to portray in her speech.

Andrew has also been signaled out by his students because of his accent. When questioned how others perceived his accent, Andrew provides the following:

...it sounds a little bit American, and I have compared myself with native speakers and I don't sound like them, but for students, they can't really tell that difference. They just say it sounds different... so they like that.

Andrew believes that his students view his accent being similar to an American accent. Although his accent is perceived to be somewhat different than that of a native speaker, he believes that his students enjoy this difference.

Samuel notes that he is seen as a more experienced teacher who brings in cultural knowledge and argues to facilitate the learning process to his students. When questioned about how he is viewed by his colleagues and students, Samuel recalls:

...they view me as somebody that has experience with the language as opposed to a teacher learning the language here in Mexico, and then just teaching it... I bring the cultural knowledge of the language, examples... I know how to facilitate the language towards my learners.

Samuel believes to be noticed due to his developed language usage, compared to a person who learned the language here in Mexico. His experiences migrating to the United States allow him to provide an array of cultural examples leading to the language learning process being more facilitated towards his students.

Similar to Samuel, Armando makes reference to being viewed in a certain manner due to his experiences migrating to the United States, along with his experiences as a teacher. When questioned about how he is viewed by his students and colleagues, Armando responds:

They can see that I have more experience, more knowledge... I'm not just person that is teaching because he speaks English. I speak English, but I also can tell you about specific places, I can tell you about the life, some aspects of the culture; I can tell you how to go about things in a certain situation... so that's interesting for them.

Armando believes to be viewed as a more experienced teacher in terms of his professional and migrating experiences. He believes to be viewed in a certain manner because he is able to rely on his past experiences in which he was able to be in direct contact with the target culture to provide cultural information for his students, which they view as interesting in the sense of being presented as a more knowledgeable teacher.

Gabriela holds a position that her students find it more interesting for her to have learned English in the United States. She notes:

...I guess they use you as an example of how it is. Students find it more exciting that you've actually been there [in the United States] and you can actually give them like more detail of how the language is.

Gabriela concludes that her students find it more exciting that the teacher learns the English language in an English-speaking country. She infers that this acquisition process is related to being able to give further detail of how the language works. Gabriela also believes that acquiring the English language in the United States and using it more constantly are advantages for her. She adds:

I think the experience of actually using the language 24-7. Here [Mexico]... it's very rare that they speak it with other teachers. I guess over there [in the U.S.] you have to be speaking it all the time, so it gives you an advantage against teachers that only learn it for a foreign language, not when you're bilingual.

Gabriela seems to believe that acquiring the language in the United States and using the language more frequently gives transnational English teachers an advantage over those English teachers who learned English outside an English-speaking country.

Similarly, Norma also believes that her English usage is different. She mentions that her students are able to identify her pronunciation and link it with knowing the language. When questioned if her students view her differently than other English teachers, she suggests the following:

I think that is resembled especially in the pronunciation maybe, because when my students hear me speak, they're like, you really know English, and maybe that's because they say it, because they listen to my pronunciation, and it's not that bad.

Norma is aware that her pronunciation showed through her speech seems to be an important factor for her students to notice. They seem to view it as a pronunciation similar to a person who knows more knowledge of the English language.

As discussed, for some participants, their linguistic abilities were able to be recognized by their students and colleagues. Whether the students noticed a difference in how the language was used, whether the students find it interesting that their teacher learned the language in the United States and use the language frequently, or whether the students notice a marked pronunciation by their teacher, certainly the abilities that the participants had when using the language helped them be viewed in a certain manner by their peers and students while developing as professionals in the field of English teaching.

5. Conclusion

Transnational migration indicates continuous migration amongst and between two different nation-states, such as Mexico and the United States. Not only does this entail physical migration, but it also carries along mental and emotional changes in which one shall adapt to new practices.

Transnationalism is closely linked to the process of constructing and reconstructing one's identity depending on a given location and whom one interacts with. Having engaged in transnational experiences, several factors may arise in how an individual constructs and/or reconstructs his or her professional identity within the ELT (English Language Teaching) field (relying on past migrating experiences to decide to become English teachers, having the opportunity to embed their transnational epistemologies into their ELT practice, and being distinguished differently upon a particular resemblance of the English language). These factors allowed for the participants to construct/ reconstruct their professional identity, allowing for them to be viewed in a particular manner by their students and colleagues, and ultimately allowed for

each of them to be more knowledgeable of who they are as teachers, as they develop as English teachers throughout central Mexico. The knowledge acquired from both cultures allowed for the participants to rely on their migrating experiences to retell their livings and share their perspectives with their students and colleagues. This allows for others for others to become aware of the cultural and linguistic richness that these people possess, and how they can competently develop as English teachers by integrating vast cultural knowledge gained from their transnational migrating practices into the classroom.

6. Further research

Future research may be carried out by analyzing a possible connection of transnationals with third culture kids, and how they develop in a third space (Pollock, 1988; Pollock & Van Reken, 1999; Useem, Donoghue & Useem, 1963). It would also be prominent to explore varying degrees of transnationalism and how attachment and detachment to a given culture may lead to acculturation practices.

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