

Transnational students in Mexico: A summer writing workshop as a way to improve English writing skills

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Transnational students, that is, those who have had one or more years of schooling in the US and are now in school in Mexico, make up a sizeable and growing population. For these students, the language of the home, Spanish, abruptly becomes the language of school and what was the language of school and socialization outside the home, English, is all but removed from their sphere. However, English is a language with which they identify. Further, in my interviews with them, transnational students express a desire to maintain English and express concern over lack of opportunities to do so. Thus, a writing workshop was offered for three weeks in the summer of 2015. The four member instructional team made up of US university students and a professor engaged the workshop participants in warm-up activities, mini-lessons, sustained writing periods and sharing of work. Some gains were found in the areas of mechanics, content and spelling, but the study's greater contribution is as a case study on which to design an improved workshop in the future.

Keywords: transnational students; English language; writing workshop; Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Kiara was born in Pasadena, CA, where she attended school from preschool through fifth grade. Her parents are both Mexican, but she had never been to their home country. The US was her home. Then, in the summer of 2012, when she was 11 years old, her mother told her that they were going to Mexico so that Kiara (not her real name but the name she asked me to use when I shared her story) could meet her grandmother. They made it just in time. The old woman's throat cancer prevented her from speaking to her granddaughter, but they did have a few days together before her grandmother passed away. However, because Kiara's mother did not have legal status in the US, she could not safely return. Kiara and her mom settled in Puebla, the south central state where Kiara's paternal grandparents reside. Her father remained in Pasadena. Kiara was enrolled in 6th grade in the local public school that August. She had never lived in Mexico, never attended school in Mexico and never used Spanish for any academic purpose. Yet Kiara, like other US born children of Mexican parents, was expected to read, write and function, without any special support, in a classroom where Spanish was the only language. Furthermore, and equally as important to Kiara, she desired to maintain her ability and identity as an English speaker with precious few prospects for how to do so.

According to the Pew Research Center Hispanic Studies “[f]rom 2009 to 2014, 1 million Mexicans and their families (including children born in the US) left the US for Mexico”

(González-Barrera, 2015). In almost every municipality in Mexico, the rate of return migration—mostly Mexicans who had been living in the US returning to their homeland—was up in 2010 when compared with 2003 (CONAPO, 2012). Approximately “500,000 U.S.-born children [younger than 15] resided in Mexico in 2010” (Alba, 2013).

Most, if not all, of these children are enrolled in school in Mexico upon arrival or soon thereafter. These transnational students, defined here as those who have had one or more years of schooling in the US and are now in school in Mexico, make up a sizeable group. In a survey that included the Mexican states of Zacatecas, Nuevo León, Jalisco and Puebla, an estimated 69,500 transnational students were found in the 1st through 9th grades (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2013, p. 174).

Research in the past 10–15 years has begun to recognize that children born of Mexican parents and educated in the US who now reside in Mexico “experience difficulties integrating into Mexican society and its education system” (Alba, 2013).

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES FOR TRANSNATIONAL YOUTH AND CHILDREN

Since Cummins (1979) first distinguished Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) from Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or even before (Bruner, 1975; Donaldson, 1978), the time and effort needed for learning language for school success has been acknowledged. Immigrant parents, even as they struggle with their own language acquisition, go to great lengths so that their children will learn well the primary language of school. They need not worry. Research suggests that the second generation prefers the language of their schoolmates and that in one or two generations the children of immigrants have learned the language of wider communication so well that they have all but forgotten the home language (López, 1996; Parameshwaran, 2014; Wong-Fillmore, 2000).

In the US, the imperative for children of international migrants to learn English well for school success is an enduring one. And the stakes are higher than ever with fewer jobs going to those with only a high school education (Luhby, 2016). So important is the relationship of language proficiency with school success, that Suárez-Orozco, Darbes, Dias, & Sutin (2011) call it the “defining element of mass migration in the era of globalization” (p. 314).

Understanding how displaced children handle the linguistic challenges of school is a topic where more study is needed. The research presented here is part of a longitudinal study initiated in 2010 that incorporates US-Mexico transnational students. In particular, I will report on the findings of a pilot writing workshop designed for transnational youth held in the summer of 2015. The following research question guided the planning, preparation and evaluation of the workshop:

How are transnational students who participate in a summer intensive writing workshop affected in terms of gains in writing ability as tested by a holistic rubric and revealed by written evaluation and interviews?

First, the linguistic reality of transnational students is set in context by examining both relevant research and the voices of transnational students.

Spanish

The long history of research on the teaching and learning of English in the US among students whose first language is not English has stressed “the importance of addressing the language barrier to effectively help children . . . navigate the educational system” (Plata-Potter & de Guzman, 2012). Only more recently have researchers begun to recognize the reality of the changing demographic in Mexico and the need for emphasis on Spanish for those who have been largely educated in English (Alba, 2013; Kral & Solano Castillo, 2013; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2013).

The importance of academic Spanish is paramount. Princeton social scientist, Marta Tienda asserts that the success of (return) migrants in transitioning (back) to Mexican life will depend on “language skills, school and family dynamics” (Cave, 2012). Students report challenges with Spanish, especially in the first days and months.

Research regarding immigrating to a country where one does not know the language “after eight years of age leads to variations in education attainment that influence how well children speak [the language] in adulthood” (Beck, Corak, & Tienda, 2012). Thus, even though many transnational students have been speaking Spanish in their homes their whole lives, it is the lack of formal education in Spanish that may cause difficulty upon (re)entry into Mexican schools. Like immigrants anywhere, school experiences vary widely, but age may be an important factor. For example, if a student arrives in Mexico under the age of eight or so, teachers’ expectations regarding reading and writing ability will likely be less stringent. Further, teachers might be more likely to help transnational students with difficulties in Spanish just as they are helping all of the children in that age group as they learn to read and write. However, a fourth or fifth grader who does not know how to read Spanish may be deemed slow or even lacking in intelligence and perhaps not ready to enter a certain grade, thus increasing the possibility of repeating a grade they already have completed in the US.

Some Mexican teachers report that transnational students have “weak Spanish” (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2006). Other research has found that students express linguistic difficulties as they transition to a school environment in Spanish. Students report that they have trouble understanding the Spanish of both teachers and other students when they go (back) to Mexico after having been schooled in the US (Tacelosky, 2013).

Although students report issues with the transition to schooling in Spanish, they also share strategies they use to cope. If they do not understand a word or an assignment, they ask a teacher or a peer to help them. They also get help from parents, grandparents, and other family members.

In some instances, transnational children and youth are forced to make difficult linguistic decisions, conscious or otherwise. A case study regarding transnational literacy practices on the US/Mexican border concluded that even “familial and transnational capital” could not prevent students from the conscious choice to stop speaking Spanish in a US school “that was much Americanized” (Brochin Ceballos, 2012). Transnational youth in Mexican schools may not want to stop speaking English, they just may not have anyone with whom to communicate in that language.

English

For transnational students who move to Mexico from the US, the language of the home, Spanish, suddenly becomes the language of school. Likewise, English, the language of

school and socialization outside the home, and one with which they identify is removed from their daily lives. One student told me that the conversation she was having with me during an interview was the first time she had spoken English since her arrival to Mexico three months before. This young woman (age 16) had lived in the US for 12 years.

For other students, English—the fact that they know it and how they use it—may be a private matter. One girl, who moved to Mexico when she was 11 and, at the time of our interview, was almost 15, reported that she read (for pleasure) almost exclusively in English, but that she did not like to watch movies in English. Even though the movies were originally made in English, she preferred to watch the versions dubbed in Spanish because when she was younger she watched with her parents who do not understand English well enough to enjoy a movie. Thus, she became accustomed to watching movies in Spanish. However, she did admit that during the movies, “usually in my head I’m thinking in English.”

Students have genuine concerns regarding maintaining English, “I’m like worried to forget the English because I’m like No! I’m not going to forget it . . . and the easy words I’m like uh, how do you say it? And I don’t remember.” If for immigrant children in the US, who have ample opportunity to speak to parents in the home in Spanish, the tendency is to switch to English by the second generation, it stands to reason that children of Mexican return migrants would be concerned that their English might get forgotten. Some children and youth have siblings or cousins with whom they speak English. But many have little or no place to practice, no one to talk to, nothing to read except possibly some old books brought from the US or textbooks. Some report watching movies or playing video games, but admit that these opportunities might be few and far between.

Addressing the need

Zúñiga & Hamann (2013) observe that standardized schooling is not appropriate for transnational students. Although it is without doubt the responsibility of the public school system to offer “appropriate” schooling for all its students, until such an offering is made available, alternatives must be sought.

Appropriately meeting the educational needs of transnational students presents a challenge for Mexican schools. Teachers express an interest in helping but lack the knowledge (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2013). The Secretary of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública or SEP) has begun to pay attention to the issue. In 2008 they published a book, *Escuelas mexicanas frente a la globalización* (Mexican schools in the face of globalization) in which the issues of transnational students are recognized. More recently, a didactic guide was created to serve as a resource for teachers. However, it can still be argued that the realities and challenges of transnational students “aun no ha[n] sido . . . tratado suficientemente por parte de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (still have not been sufficiently dealt with by the SEP) (Kral & Solano Castillo, 2013, p. 2).

While it is imperative that the education of transnational students be included in teacher training programs and integrated into every public school, alternative programs can be considered. One way to address the needs of the transnational learning community is through specialized programs held outside the regular school year. Thus, a writing workshop was offered in the summer of 2015.

METHODS

Motivated by the idea that skill strengthening might contribute to transnational students' sense of selves as knowers and users of English, our purpose for offering the Writing Workshop was to help transnational students become better writers in English. A mixed method design was implemented: student writing samples were evaluated using a writing rubric (Butvilofsky & Sparrow, 2012; Reyes, 1990); the facilitators (college students and professor) reflected daily on strategy; and, at the conclusion of the workshop, participants were given an evaluation form to fill out in writing and we asked several of the participants, as part of a longer interview, what recommendations they had for a future writer's workshop—their answers were recorded and transcribed.

The study was found to be exempt from review and of minimal risk by the Lebanon Valley College Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants were recruited using the following criteria:

- have had one or more years of schooling in the US
- be currently enrolled in a Mexican public school

Thus the study consisted of a type of purposeful sampling—homogeneous sampling—that is warranted when the very people under study are sought for their commonalities (as opposed to a random sample). Such is often the case when the research question is examining the traits of a particular group and seeking depth of understanding (Palinkas et al., 2015).

A total of 10 students attended. They ranged in age from 10 to 22 years ($\bar{x} = 15$) and averaged nine years living in the US and about four and a half in Mexico. Six were born in the US, four in Mexico.

Comparing the Mexican and US school systems

In order to compare years of school attendance of workshop participants, it is necessary to understand mandatory schooling in the two countries. Mexico requires three years of *kinder*, roughly corresponding to ages three through six. In the US, there is only one year of mandatory kindergarten, which begins for children at age five. Thus, third year of *kinder* approximately compares to US kindergarten. In the US families may send their children to preschool, which is usually private and optional. In both countries, students start primary school, first grade, at around age six. Thus, for the purposes of comparison, years of school was counted from age five.

On average, students in the workshop had been in US schools for about five years and had been in Mexican schools for just under four years. It was not uncommon for students to move part way through the year. Nor was it uncommon to find that students started school in Mexico, went to the US and then returned to Mexico. The 22-year old participant had dropped out of school the year before, but we allowed her to attend. Table 1 summarizes participant details.

Table 1: Workshop participant details

Student*	Born	Age at start of 2015 workshop	Years in US school	Years in Mexican school	Years in US	Years in Mexico
Max	US	10	4	0.25	10	0.25
George	US	11	4	2	10	2
Arichel	US	13	3.5	4.5	9	4.5
Kiara	US	14	6	4	11	4
Joan	US	15	8	2	9	5
Ulysses	Mexico	15	2	6	2	13
Mickey	Mexico	16	3	6	3	13
Daniel	US	16	7.5	3.5	12	4
Luz	Mexico	19	8	4	8	10
Violeta	Mexico	22	7	4.0	8	14
Average		15.1	5.3	3.6	8.2	7

* Pseudonym chosen by the student

Description of the workshop

The workshop was held during a three-week period in July and August of 2015 during the summer break of the Mexican school calendar. There were two groups: one met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (MWF) and the other met Tuesday and Thursday (TTh). Each session lasted two and a half hours. The MWF group had two and a half hours more class time for the first two weeks, for an additional total of five hours. In the third week, both groups met three times because on the Friday we all met together for a closing ceremony, which included receiving certificates of completion and sharing, orally, samples of students' writing. Thus, in total the MWF group met for 22.5 hours, and the TTh group met for 17.5 hours.

There were four people on the teaching team: one university professor (the author) and three university students—a US university student with an education major/Spanish minor entering her senior year, an English major university student who had just completed his first year and who was a heritage speaker of Spanish, and a US university student who had German and music major, limited Spanish skills, and was entering his senior year.

Writing workshops have long been offered for budding and professional adult writers, but also have been part of elementary (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007), middle and high school classrooms (Atwell, 1998). The writing workshop in the school setting (Calkins, 1986) is centered on the process of pre-writing, writing and rewriting. Pre-writing includes warm-up activities, such as reading or watching a video related to the theme, and a mini-lesson. Then writing takes place for a sustained, often silent, period, and can include conferencing with facilitator/teacher and peers. Editing and revising are followed by rewriting. Other elements may be added, for example, starting the session with a status update (Peha, 1995) to hear what each person plans to accomplish in that session. Finally, writers are invited to share their work with the group.

Although our Writer's Workshop took place in a classroom, it was during summer break and students attended voluntarily. Furthermore, the participants did not know each other

and not all attended the same school. What they had in common was that they currently lived in Mexico and formerly had gone to school in the US. Thus, each day began with an icebreaker or game designed to develop group rapport, guide students' thinking to the theme of the day and serve as a pre-writing activity. For example, we made "Who am I?" collages before writing an autobiographical essay.

To address the specific needs of learners, workshop sessions also included mini-lessons. In some instances learners requested review of concepts or practices, in other cases instructors observed weaknesses in writing samples that then were addressed in the mini lessons. Topics of mini-lessons included specific grammatical structures, such as review of past tense, appropriate use of sequencing and transition words, and punctuation conventions, such as use of semi-colons.

Workshop participants were given writing prompts and then 30 minutes or so to engage in private writing. Due to the location that was provided to us by the collaborators, the MWF group had access to computers but the TTh group had only paper and pencil. In both groups, students were allowed to ask for assistance during the writing period, but were encouraged to forge ahead and do their best.

Perhaps the most lavish part of the writing workshop, for both groups, was the individualized attention afforded to participants during the process. The college students and professor were available to offer support by answering questions, pointing out errors and even engaging in detailed, personalized explanations to meet the specific needs of individual writers.

We held a closing ceremony in the final week of the workshop. Family, friends, teachers, school and local government officials attended. Participants shared excerpts from their best work (as selected by each author) and were granted certificates of completion. Some members of the audience did not know enough English to appreciate how well the students wrote and read, but there was pride on their faces none the less. Workshop participants, too, were rightly gratified with their accomplishments.

Data collection and measures of workshop success

Writing rubrics

In all, three to four written works were produced by each student, ranging considerably in length from 60 words to 250. The first and last writing sample of each participant was evaluated using a rubric that we adapted from existing rubrics designed by researchers who were evaluating the writing of bilingual learners in the US (Butvilofsky & Sparrow, 2012; Reyes, 1990).

Two of the researchers (the professor and the education major) independently evaluated writing samples. We measured mechanics (capitalization, verb tenses, paragraphing, syntactic style and variation; content (story development, time sequencing, etc.) and spelling (which included conventional spelling, approximating standard spelling, and notions of conventionality, spelling patterns and sounds represented by letters). Each of the categories was measured on a six-point scale.

We performed an interrater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic (Freelon, 2013) to determine consistency between raters. There was 81.8% agreement between the two researchers, when a .5 difference on a 6 point scale was allowed. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be $Kappa = 0.79$ ($p < .001$), 95% CI (0.504, 0.848).

Participants' evaluation of the writing workshop

Workshop participants were asked to evaluate the workshop in writing by answering the open-ended questions: "What did you learn regarding writing in English?" and "Did the workshop help you improve your speaking ability in English?" if so, "How?" Additionally, they were asked to rate activities from the workshop, including icebreakers, games and essays. Each student rated each item according to how much they enjoyed the activities: a lot, so-so, a little or not at all.

Toward the end of the three weeks, some, but not all, of the participants participated in an interview which included the question: "What would you do to improve the workshop if it were offered again?"

Reflections and observations of teaching team

We (the university students and the professor) held a reflection session at the conclusion of the workshop. We discussed logistics, topics, location and length of the workshop.

RESULTS

Writing rubrics

When drop-outs were excluded, there were six students with first and last writing samples. Four students improved in all areas—mechanics, content and spelling—from first writing sample to last. The other two students showed small gains in one area each (mechanics for one, spelling for the other) and no gains or minor losses in the other areas.

Participants in the group that met three days a week showed improvements in their writing. It is worth noting that this group had some advantages. First, they meet a total of five hours more than the other group. Second, because of the location assigned to us by our colleagues in Mexico, the Monday/Wednesday/Friday group had computers (no Internet, just word-processing software) available for their use. These participants were taught to use spellcheckers and grammar checkers, which undoubtedly had some effect on their writing, at least in the areas of spelling and possibly mechanics. In addition to meeting fewer hours and having limited resources, the Tuesday/Thursday group had a higher dropout and absentee rate.

Participants' evaluation of the writing workshop

When students were asked what they learned about writing better in English several referred to the value of the mini-lessons. Of particular help to them was reviewing the past and present tenses and other "basics." Some more general comments included how to use ellipses, "making sentences" and "writing words better." One girl apparently benefitted from the editing and rewriting process: "Since I had not been practicing my writing in English, I made errors such as spelling . . . In general it helped me a lot to correct my writing in English."

Although improving speaking ability in English was not a stated goal of the workshop, we used English almost exclusively with each other. It should be noted, however, that language use was neither prescribed nor prohibited. Spanish, English and Spanglish were welcome. When asked if they felt that their speaking skills improved from having attended the workshop, several participants mentioned what they had been forgetting:

“pronunciations that I was forgetting;” “Teachers speaking English all the time really helped me remember many things;” “remembering words that I had forgotten.”

Further, workshop participants expressed an interest in reading books at home and discussing them together. Another suggestion included talking more about the writing topics so that “we won’t lose our spoken English.” One of the younger participants suggested “some games like duck, duck, goose.”

One of the advantages of the workshop was that the participants had the opportunity to meet people who had shared a similar experience. The participants shared with us that often they feel isolated in their experience of having been partially or wholly educated in the US before coming to Mexico. An experience like a writing workshop crosses school boundaries such that students get to know others that do not attend the same school in a different, non-school environment. One participant, when responding to a question about her first impressions of the workshop, liked that we could speak English the entire time and thus “sentirnos a gusto” (*feel comfortable*).

Reflections and observations of teaching team

The teaching team agreed that if a future occasion for such a workshop exists, we would seek out ways to have technological support (computers and Internet access) for all workshop participants. Spell checkers and other digital tools, when used appropriately and not distracting, can help students with their writing. An online dictionary and thesaurus can also help students remember and enhance vocabulary.

The major change we would make would be to meet for a longer time. By the time we waited for late arrivals, warmed up our bodies (the mornings in Puebla are chilly in July and August) and our brains, the actual time for the writing process was reduced to under two hours. Ideally, we would have two teams of instructors in two locations so that each group could meet five days a week for two to three hours. Although one truthful participant did warn, “Not too long because [people] will lose interest.”

The writing topics regarding school experience, identity and comparison of aspects of life in Mexico and the US were deemed appropriate and valuable by the instructional team. However, like some of the workshop participants, we agreed that including a reading component would be helpful. With additional hours, we would be able to include guided reading related to the topics.

Finally, we discussed the number of participants. The team was delighted to be able to offer personal attention due to the low student/instructor ratio and felt that, as a result, we became acquainted with each other as learners and as friends. However, for a future workshop we would attempt to attract more participants.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study lacked sufficient numerical power to attempt any statistical analysis. However, it does have value as a case study and offers some lessons regarding the need for and value of short-term language workshops such as these for transnational students.

Although some transnational learners may move easily between real and imagined linguistic boundaries through social media and other digital communications, many of the transnational students interviewed worry that they do not have enough encounters with English to feel like they can maintain or improve their skills. Over the years, students

have expressed a concern over losing or forgetting their English. They may engage in “trans-idiomatic practices [that are] both local and distant” (Jacquemet, 2005, p. 264–265), such as texting, chatting or gaming with English-speaking friends and family far away, but the students who attended this workshop may feel very much alone in their experiences, linguistic and otherwise, which in turn may be very isolating, as the following examples illustrate:

I guess that sounds kind of weird, but like whenever I’m reading something in Spanish I try to translate it to English so I won’t lose it but like I don’t talk about it. But I can read it, and I feel I’m going well, but when I start talking I’m like ok I kind of get nervous. (Interview with Kiara, age 14)

When I first got to the US, it was pretty difficult. I can still remember how I could not understand a word they said. . . . When I got back [to Mexico and] started school it was difficult because I didn’t know how to write [Spanish] and I kind of understood it. (Writing sample from Joan, age 15)

My first day in school [in Mexico] was not that fun because I didn’t know how to speak too much Spanish . . . I went to my class and everyone was staring at me; it was very ridiculous . . . During recess, I ate a sandwich alone. (Writing sample from Aricel, age 13)

Transnational children are a subcategory of migrants, twice disempowered. Once because they do not have a say (voice) in their current circumstances as parents or other authority figures usually decide when and where they will go to school. And secondly because they worry that their skills and identities as English-speakers are slipping away. As exemplified in some of the quotes above and to their very great credit, they engage in strategies to maintain their linguistic repertoire. The workshop described in this article offered students a place not only to refresh their language skills and learn new ones but also to grapple with their place in the world and how they relate to it.

In the weeks we spent together, students were able to interact with others who had had similar experiences. The essay topics: Who am I?; A comparison of life in the US and Mexico; Sharing school experiences, etc., were carefully crafted to encourage reflection on their shared experiences. This space “in which one no longer needs to rely on the binaries of home or host countries” (Darvin & Norton, 2014, p. 59) offered learners a safe environment for interaction and self-expression.

Application of the study to other contexts

The world’s people are on the move. From 1960 to 2015, there has been a 200% increase in the number of international migrants, having gone from 79 million to 250 million (Connor, 2016). Lack of food, limited employment opportunities and war have forced over a million and a half people to leave their homes in South Sudan (UNHCR reports crisis, 2016; Wachiaya, 2017), Syria (Connor, 2016) and Afghanistan (Zirack, 2016), among others. Many of these refugees are school-aged, the number having grown by over half a million from 2010-2016 and increased 30% in 2014 alone (UNHCR reports crisis, 2016).

The education of children and youth who temporarily or permanently settle in a country other than the one they were born in is becoming a worldwide concern (Le Blond, 2016; Solis, 2016). Displaced people from war-ravaged countries are vulnerable and their opportunities often depend on the good will of agencies and others who might help them.

Refugee camps sometimes set up schools, but language challenges may marginalize further groups that are already at risk. Thus, this workshop could serve as a basis on which to build culturally and linguistically appropriate educational offerings to students who might be temporarily living in an area, such as refugees, or who are transitioning to a setting for a longer period. As Tobin, Boulmier, Zhu, Hancock, & Muennig (2015) note, “Given the instability and trauma they face, refugee children are in great need of educational interventions that promote both academic achievement and positive child development” (p. 146).

Students whose lives include back and forth movement between countries and school systems face significant challenges, linguistic and otherwise. Usually without consulting them, their parents or other adults make decisions that affect their daily lives. The transnational students in this study express concern and even worry about losing the part of themselves that is associated with English. They show interest and willingness in maintaining English. This workshop was a step in the direction of meeting their linguistic and identity-related needs and could serve as a foundation on which to build future, similar workshops.

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