LANGUAGE ISSUES FOR US-RAISED ‘RETURNNEES’ IN MEXICO

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the linguistic implications for policy makers and for social cohesion faced with the (re)integration of migrants, especially young people, who have returned to Mexico, either with their families or after their own failed efforts to settle long term in the US. Focusing on the general theme of this volume—to investigate and analyze Spanish as a minority/heritage language—the intention was initially to explore the impact of this return on youngsters with a heritage Spanish background. What has become increasingly evident during this research is the lack of awareness and the scarcity of studies into the impact of ‘return’ on language behaviour and attitudes. The language issues and experiences, therefore, of this particular group have needed to be uncovered and brought to the surface. Research is at an early stage with limited data to answer some of the questions about language practices of returnees at a micro level. Instead, I will focus on the macro issues of language interaction and attitudes.

A considerable volume of research is now available on the situation of returnee migrants from an economic, social, cultural, and even psychological point of view (Cassarino 2004; Dustmann 1996; Flores 2008; King et al. 2009; Levitt 2004), but very little exists about either their linguistic experiences or the linguistic implications for the ‘home’ country reintegrating their compatriots. Studies on the situation of returnees and their experiences of trying to integrate into Mexican society have increased recently, mirroring the increase in and awareness of the numbers of this group. For example, Anderson and Solis’ (2014) book presents the compelling experiences of 26 returnee migrants, and Kleyn, Perez, and Vásquez’s (2016) 30-minute documentary Una vida, dos países (www.unavidathefilm.com) debuted in Oaxaca and New York City to packed crowds. But significantly, language is relatively little spoken about in any public forum and remains largely a silent dimension of this integration. The role of the linguistic practices of these returnees is frequently implicit in the difficulties faced, especially those of young people entering the Mexican education system, and in the need for more support and public policies which, with few exceptions, are not analyzed explicitly.

In the sections that follow I will draw from some of these recent studies on return migration to Mexico, highlighting those that do start to raise questions about the linguistic situation of young returnees. I will use examples from a mixture of official surveys and reports and
qualitative case studies in various different regions of Mexico. My own research was carried out in the city of San Luis Potosí, where, through ethnographic observation and linguistic biographical interviews, a picture was built up of experiences formed by returnees as they attempt to integrate or assimilate into daily life, in education and work contexts. This will also include, as a case study, the story of one particular returnee family, comparing and contrasting the significant differences experienced by six siblings on their return to Mexico, attempting to understand the causes and implications of these differences which highlight the impact on their language practices of such factors as age, gender, and educational level.

The language issues will inevitably involve exploring returnees’ attitudes to and use of both Spanish and English, while some also come from communities that speak an indigenous language. Neither language represents a minority language for these speakers, given Spanish is Mexico’s dominant national language, and English is the global lingua franca. Nonetheless, for some returnees, English may represent a heritage language situation if they strive to maintain its use unsupported, and many of those that return, above all children, have recently lived in communities where Spanish will have been viewed as a heritage language.

The chapter will begin with a brief overview of the general field of return migration and, in particular, some definition of the concept ‘return.’ This will be followed by an account of recent return migration to Mexico specifically – the characteristics of the return experience that is unfolding, and its impact on the returnees and Mexican society more generally. The focus will be, above all, on young returnees and particularly their experiences in the Mexican education system, given this is likely to be the principal formative age for developing their language repertoires and resources. I will end the chapter by examining the experience of some older returnees to the city of San Luis Potosí who look back at their return experience, offering some comparison with then and now.

What is ‘return’ migration?

Modern migration is often better described as transnational migration (Levitt 2001), given how often the migrant moves from one place to a next, or in circular flows between ‘home’ and the ‘host’ destination. Moreover, the economic downturn globally over the years since the banking crisis of 2008 has meant that many countries formerly viewed as very attractive venues for migrants (e.g., the US, the UK, Spain, Germany) have ceased to be so, with an expected consequence being that migrants would return to their original homes. The former is not new and has marked migration now for many years, but as the latter is now happening on a greater scale than in the past, especially between the US and Mexico where more people are returning to Mexico than coming into the US (www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/), it is particularly important to understand the return phenomenon, including any linguistic implications.

Before looking at the experience of Mexican returnees, I will consider the range of definitions for ‘return’ migration, all of which may apply in different ways to some or all of those grouped together in the discussion that follows. In most basic terms, ‘return’ is used to describe ‘going home’ to the country of origin. But, as Levitt (2004) suggests, ‘home’ is a very shifting concept, and not all feel they have only one home. This is important to remember as it alerts us away from assuming that home will be a comfort zone where everything will fall immediately into its recognized place. Neither is a return to the country of origin necessarily a permanent return, and the experience of circular return is common. This is of course particularly the case for those who have been forced to return, due to, for example, ill health, family duties, or, above all, deportation. The willingness and motivation to reintegrate in such situations is likely...
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to be less strong. A specific form too of this circular return is that of regular visits that families make to their country of origin, some of which can be for extensive durations, such as up to a year. Unlike more general circular return, these tend to be planned, regular, and predictable, making any strong sense of reintegration even less likely.

There are also other kinds of connection to the country of origin that can well be described as a form of return. These include, for example, that of virtual return through constant links via social media and other technological interconnectivity (see Appadurai 2013; Guerra 1999). It is interesting too to consider what I term aspirational or imagined return: the dream that one day the migrant will ‘go home,’ which is very common in first-generation migrants. Both these two forms of return have an influence on language practices and attitudes, keeping the use of the ‘home’ language alive and passing it on to future generations, which may translate into something important in the case of actual physical return.

Finally, many of those we will be considering later in this chapter are in fact second-generation migrants, born in the US, and who have never lived (and sometimes not even visited) the land of their parents. Some would argue that these are not truly ‘returnees,’ but I will include them as such here, in agreement with the views of King et al. (2009):

The extensive literatures which now exist both on return migration and on transnationalism are, for the most part, resolutely focussed on the first generation. For return migration this might be semantically justified, for the second generation does not ‘return’ to a place it never came from (in terms of birthplace statistics). On the other hand, the affective connection to what is often regarded as the ‘home country’ may be very strong, so that the ‘return’ has ontological meaning even if it contravenes the logic of migration statistics.

King et al. 2009: 2, emphasis in the original

In the experiences I examine here, ‘affective’ connections are indeed important, if only, at times, because of the heavy expectations on children placed by their parents who believe they have nurtured an easy return to Mexico by keeping alive the idea that Mexico is their real ‘home.’ That this is not necessarily the actual outcome for many of these children is something we will see later on.

Return migration to Mexico

It is perhaps little surprise that significant contributions to the general literature on return migration are written from the perspective of the case of Mexico (e.g., Durand 2004; Smith 2005; Smith & Bakker 2008) as this is one of the areas where the phenomenon is most observed. In this section I will summarize information about the current situation as reported in official statistics and contemporary research. These will help us to understand how these trends are impacting on the Mexican returnee and on Mexican society, and whether there are official and public initiatives to support returnees’ integration, particularly from the language perspective.

Return migration, as we have noted, is not new to Mexico, and in particular temporary, circular migration has always been present. However, there has been a perceived increase in return migration since the late 2000s, and with it, more studies about the phenomenon (e.g., Montoya Arce et al. 2011; Rivera Sánchez 2013; Zúñiga 2013). The tightening of the immigrations laws in the US (including more deportations and greater difficulty to return again to the US) has certainly contributed to this. There is some disagreement about whether the global economic crisis of 2008 really did produce more return migration of Mexicans leaving the US (Rendall et al. 2011)
as expected. This is partly because of the difficulty of obtaining reliable statistics, linked to the complications produced by the differing definitions of ‘return.’ What is certain is that the flow of emigration from Mexico to the US has slowed (Passel et al. 2012), and that there are now more Mexicans leaving than entering the US (González-Barrera 2015). Also, those who are returning, were more likely to return for longer periods of time, or permanently. The latter characteristic is what has most significantly changed the nature of return migration to Mexico and prompted a greater awareness of what this brings and the support it should expect. In particular, the more recent trend in return migration has included more family units and young children (INEGI 2010) who will need to integrate into Mexican schools on their arrival. This increase in US born and raised children attending Mexican schools persuaded Kleyn (2015) to develop a guide for Mexican teachers who work with transborder students. The guide is divided into four sections: 1) their stories, 2) socio-emotional support, 3) Spanish pedagogy, and 4) English growth (https://tatyanakleyn.commons.gc.cuny.edu/files/2013/10/Guia-Final-3-18-16.pdf).

More recent return migration has also been present over a wider area of the country. Whereas previously, the coming and going of migrants was experienced above all in rural communities, in the western central zone of Mexico typically associated with being the greatest senders of migration to the US (e.g., Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Zacatecas), the current trend sees more returnees arriving into less traditional and more urban areas. Integrating these returnees sets a new challenge with pressures on social, economic, and cultural adaptation and acceptance. Rivera Sánchez (2013) has conducted a thorough investigation of the historic changes in the nature of return migration over the past century, concluding with important findings on the current situation. She warns of two common over-generalizations made: that returnees always return to their place of origin (noting instead a rise in internal migration within Mexico), and the danger of homogenizing the group as a single entity, rather than as individuals, when examining the characteristics of the return phenomenon. She writes as her aim in her research:

Se busca profundizar en el conocimiento de los retornados no como ‘un grupo’ o agregado, con atributos o formas de reinserción homogéneas o similares, sino como individuos de distintos lugares de origen, inmersos en redes y campos sociales diversos, y que comparten la experiencia de regresar de Estados Unidos . . . pero cuyas motivaciones para volver, su trayectoria migratoria y experiencia de retorno, así como sus procesos de reinserción laboral y social, diferien en cuanto a las consecuencias individuales/familiares y a su posible impacto social. En suma, los efectos del retorno también pueden ser variados, teniendo en cuenta el capital social, la posición en los campos sociales y la relación con los contextos y las condiciones que median su retorno (si se trata de devueltos, repatriados, deportados o ‘voluntarios’), entre otros factores de diferenciación social.

Rivera Sánchez 2013: 33

In the film Una vida, dos países (Kleyn et al. 2016), the focus is on two subsets of students: those brought to the US and those born in the US. Having papers makes a significant difference to their future opportunities. Additionally, the age of being (back) in Mexico also is significant for how students adapt to a relatively new country, education system, and language expectations. Throughout the following discussion of the impact of return migration, it is important to heed this warning that there are very many different factors that influence and determine the outcome of (re)integration into Mexican society. For this same reason the linguistic practices and experience of the returnees will vary considerably.
**The impact of return migration**

While bearing in mind the diversity of experiences and situations of returnees and the societies they return to, we can nonetheless make certain generalizations about the re-integration process. Commentators point to the difficulties that many migrants experience on returning in terms of social and cultural expectations, work opportunities, well-being, and language adaptation. Clearly these will depend on a range of factors, such as the age, gender, social class, and educational level of the returnees, as well as their familiarity with the venue to which they are returning and the extent of social and family networks they have to support them.

In terms of returnees’ experiences with language differences or challenges, these have been found in a range of situations, from job opportunities, to socializing, and, above all, for youngsters entering the education system.

As Santos Zavala et al. write:

> De la educación de la niñez depende en gran parte la cohesión social de un país. En México, la Constitución Política reconoce el derecho a la educación como un derecho social. Todos estos argumentos cobran mayor importancia cuando se trata de la educación de menores que han regresado al país luego de haber emigrado a otro, por la especial dificultad que genera convivir en dos culturas distintas, con diferencias en ideas religiosas, políticas, sociales, y muchas veces, con problemas de carácter económico. Para la sociedad, la educación de estos menores tiene una función importante, pues a través de ella entran en contacto con la cultura del país del cual estuvieron alejados y se incorporan a la sociedad nacional.

*Santos Zavala 2010: 3*

For much of the remainder of this chapter, therefore, I will concentrate, above all, on the issues facing young returnees when trying to integrate into the Mexican school system. The extent to which this is an alien and alienating experience, and the relative lack of understanding of the situation on the part of public authorities, heightens the difficulties that young returnees face, and frequently involves language issues.

Besides the enormous difficulty parents frequently face to collate all the necessary documents to enrol their children in schools, the experience is often a negative and unwelcoming one for the children too. There are many such experiences reported in the literature (e.g., Medina 2011; Zúñiga 2013) such as the following cited by Rodriguez McKeon (2013):

>[a]sí como allá les resultó difícil ser aceptados en su diferencia, ‘acá’ los niños y jóvenes que retornan sufren diversos tipos de discriminación de parte de los maestros mexicanos que sólo ven en ellos ‘influencias negativas’ para los demás alumnos por lo que rechazan su forma de hablar, de vestir y de conducirse culturalmente aprendidos en los Estados Unidos. A partir del diálogo con los maestros, identificamos que es común que los docentes no tienen disciplina escolar, que les cuesta adecuarse a las normas, que son irrespetuosos porque utilizan ciertos modos de relacionarse que no son bien aceptados por ellos como por ejemplo hablar de ‘tú’ a los maestros, porque visten diferente y se niegan a ponerse el uniforme o porque no observan ciertas prácticas de cortesía que son exigidas a los niños en la escuela, llegando a decir algunos que esos niños ‘ya no son mexicanos.’

*Rodriguez McKeon 2013: 7*
This lack of understanding of and intolerance towards returnee children by teachers is constantly mentioned. As described in this quotation, there are many ways in which the new arrival does not seem to fit into the Mexican school context, but surely one most obvious one is the linguistic shock for the children. Sometimes these students are viewed as under-performing because of a perceived lack of skills, rather than challenges with using Spanish for academic purposes brought on by their English monolingual education in the US. In the film *Una vida, dos países* (Kleyn et al., 2016) one of the students approaches a teacher to explain that English is his first language and asks for assistance. Even when they speak Spanish, they rarely have literacy skills in Spanish, and the Spanish they speak will have been influenced by their surroundings in the US, where for example, extensive and highly sophisticated Spanish-English codeswitching is often the norm, very different from the Spanish-dominant Mexican environment they now live in. And yet too often the schools and teachers do not recognize the difficulties these children have operating through Spanish for all their schoolwork. If their level of spoken Spanish is weak or non-existent, they are dismissed and laughed at by fellow students; little proper support to improve their Spanish skills is explicitly given, while the gap between their oral skills and written ‘academic’ Spanish is simply not recognized. As Zúñiga (2013) comments:

> Comunicar a maestros y directivos de las escuelas mexicanas que un alumno estudió en Estados Unidos es una expresión ambigua. Los educadores descubren primero que el alumno fue alfabetizado en inglés, aunque no siempre. El hecho de que los alumnos provenientes de Estados Unidos hablen con fluidez el español mexicano produce confusiones en muchos maestros y directores, porque asocian el habla con la lectoescritura y asumen la hipótesis de si habla, luego lee y escribe, lo cual es casi siempre falso. Cuando se les dice que algunos de sus alumnos estuvieron inscritos en escuelas de Estados Unidos, los alerta en relación con las diferencias de contenidos de las materias (en ocasiones, éstos son diametralmente diferentes, como en ciencias sociales, historia y geografía; esto no siempre es evidente para los maestros).

Zúñiga 2013: 7–8

At the same time, these children’s English language skills are under-valued, and even on occasion seen as a threat to the English language competence of those Mexican teachers with a low level of English. Kleyn (2015) outlines ways that teachers could continue to grow these students’ English and also use them as a resource in the English language classroom. Medina (2011) conducted a study of returnee schoolchildren to a small town in the Estado de México where many parents spoke of their children’s unhappiness in schools where they could not communicate properly and were shunned by teachers and fellow-students. As she writes:

> [t]he language conversion was one of the greatest difficulties for children attending classes. Parents urged local municipality educators to have patience with their children because of their lack of Spanish skills. Nancy, a concerned mother, had gone to the extent of enrolling her son named Victor in Spanish tutoring prior to the start of the school year to ease her child’s transition. ‘Right now, I am sending him to Spanish classes because he does not know how to speak it, speak yes but write it no, but to write and read he does not know. So I am sending him to Spanish classes.’

Medina 2011: 36–37
Despite the significance of returnee children’s insufficient or total lack of the necessary language skills as a determining factor in their success and integration in Mexican schools, remarkably little has been written or reported on this topic (but see the ongoing work reported in Potowski 2013, and the work of Zúñiga, Hamann, & Sánchez García 2006). This is further impeded by the apparent lack of support in general for the integration of returnee children into the education system by the Mexican public authorities. As Santos Zavala et al. comment as a conclusion to an extensive study on the educational needs of returnee children in San Luis Potosí:

Con estos resultados se confirma que las necesidades educativas de los menores migrantes de retorno es un problema de invisibilidad, el cual no ha logrado llegar a la agenda gubernamental como política pública, sino solo como una demanda que requiere ser atendida de manera aislada, sin establecer acciones conjuntas intergubernamentales.

*Santos Zavala 2010: 49*

**Return, language, and identity in San Luis Potosí**

I will turn now to an examination in more detail of return migration, and specifically language experiences, from research in San Luis Potosí (henceforth SLP). In the report of the study mentioned earlier by Santos Zavala and his colleagues (2010), they conclude:

El idioma es un obstáculo oculto, ya que sólo el 13% lo reconoce como un problema en el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje, lo cual contrasta con el dato que se refiere al tiempo que estuvieron en el extranjero los alumnos migrantes de retorno . . . Este es un problema oculto y hay que resaltarlo, ya que las escuelas mexicanas no son bilingües y si bien estos menores no son mayoría, se trata de una población que merece atención diferente al resto del alumnado, pues el idioma es un elemento importante de la cultura, sin embargo, resulta que en el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje, el 69 % de los profesores otorga el mismo trato a todo los alumnos que tiene a su cargo.

*Santos Zavala 2010: 39–40*

We have seen that this is a common finding across the different studies conducted regarding returnee children’s integration into Mexican schools and the frequent lack of official support for them. Our research carried out in SLP reinforces the prevalence of the challenging and often unhappy encounter with school life for returnee children, but also illustrates that the situation is not new, and has probably been experienced as long as return migration has taken place. The majority of those we interviewed were adults whose linguistic biographies often recounted their experiences of their childhood return, including adaptation to school. For example, one of our SLP informants, Xamara, now in her thirties and working as an English teacher, tells of her return at the age of fourteen, having lived and gone to school exclusively in the US.

X: I had to get into school and then uh they I remember because they had to we have to apply . . . not apply, they give us an admission test or exam for school I went to a school the name was OTON and I remember one of my mother’s cousins said well she needs to prepare for the exam I said okay and uhm, he said she can come to my house and I’ll give
A: But you did?

X: I had to. I didn’t, I wasn’t admitted obviously but then another cousin another uncle spoke to the principal of another school private school and that’s where I was admitted.

A: You didn’t have to do a test?

X: I didn’t have to do a test and they were aware that I was coming from the States that I knew how to speak and I could read but, like, maybe first year elementary student you know.

This exchange highlights various issues that have recurred in the discussion: as a US-born returnee she did not feel that she could cope using Spanish to demonstrate her academic level. Nonetheless, she had to take a test she knew she would fail, which was a negative and dispiriting start to her integration into the Mexican school system. It also indicates the reliance on family networks to facilitate how to cope with return integration, as cousins and an uncle try to support her steps to be accepted in a school. Therefore, for those not returning to the place of their birth or family, as is now more frequently happening, this is likely to create further challenges. Significantly, too, it becomes clear that her best hope was to be accepted by a private school, which appeared to have a more realistic understanding of her situation. This is a finding that was repeated many times through our interviews, implying that only those who could afford to could help their children in this way, often at considerable sacrifice. It is a damning comment on the Mexican public sector education provision at the time, which is only partially improving today.

Our research in SLP was carried out between 2009–2011, during which we interviewed returnees; residents of SLP who had not emigrated and were ‘receiving’ back their compatriots; school and university teachers; officials of one of the schemes to support returning migrants (Operativo Paisano); and a representative of the local government (director of the Instituto del Migrante (SLP) at that time). San Luis Potosí is a medium-sized Mexican city (population of about 700,000) and capital of the large surrounding State of SLP, which is largely typical of central colonial Mexico, and is in the top eight states for sending migrants to the US. The aim was above all to explore the linguistic biographies of the returnees and to discover the role of language in the return experience, as well as how, if at all, language was viewed by the receiving society as a problem or an asset. To illustrate some significant patterns in our findings, especially in terms of the integration into Mexican schools, I will discuss below the biography of one family whose six children all returned to SLP and who have since finished their schooling there, found employment and family life, including having their own children. The life stories recounted to us by the members of this family (all of whose names have been anonymized) shine a light on the return experience, and how nearly forty years on, it still plays a part in their lives and has shaped their careers and sense of identity.

The Pizarro family: life on the language hyphen

Don Tonio, the patriarch of the family, emigrated to the US (to Chicago) in 1951, followed by his newly wed wife and their eldest daughter who had been born in Mexico. Five more
US-raised ‘returnees’ in Mexico

children were born in the US. The mother and the eldest three children returned for one year to live temporarily back in SLP. The family returned to SLP permanently in 1971, but Don Tonio went back shortly afterwards to work again in the US until his retirement in 2000. Don Tonio and his wife died (the latter prior to our interviews) in SLP, where the children have all continued to live.

Don Tonio had crossed illegally to the US and then returned to marry (in 1954) and take his wife and first daughter back (legally this time) to Chicago, where he worked in construction (as he talked to us he often pointed to the large photo of the Chicago skyline behind him and the buildings he had helped construct). Don Tonio acquired US citizenship, and also chose from the start not to live in a Mexican barrio in Chicago. This is likely to have influenced the speed and ability of him and his family to learn English, which he also studied at night school at first. He spoke Spanish at home in the US with the family, but usually English with his children on his regular visits back to SLP and at first during his retirement. However, his wife spoke little English, remained fiercely Mexican, and, according to Don Tonio, was ‘muy racista’ which impacted on the family’s decision to return. He died in 2012, aged 81, a few years after we interviewed him.

Elena is the eldest of Don Tonio’s children and the only one to be born in Mexico. There were no Hispanics in her school and she worked part-time from the age of fourteen, and so was entirely fluent in English, which she also spoke with her siblings at home when she cared for them whilst her parents were out at work. However, the family left Chicago when she was sixteen, as her mother did not want her to have non-Mexican boyfriends, in particular because she wrongly suspected Elena of dating an African American boy. Elena talks about the feelings of otherness she had on returning to SLP, including her way of dressing and independence, but particularly too for being teased for her dominant English and perceived weak Spanish. She claims she was made to feel ostracized by fellow students at first, and her English was ‘corrected’ by her English teachers. As a result, she tried to hide her English competence, as she says:

Yo creo que sí lo escondía . . . cuando no me podía expresar en español utilizaba la palabra en inglés entonces a mí a veces sí me molestaba que me decían no pues ahí viene la inglesita.

Having now been back in Mexico for forty years, with her own family and a good job teaching English, she says that Spanish is her mother tongue, but English ‘se me facilita más’ but chose to be interviewed in Spanish. She makes an interesting comment, which again highlights the desire returnees seem to have to keep their language skills invisible:

Me dice bueno dice igual tú como te consideras, eres bilingüe? No, le digo. Yo nada más sé hablar español e inglés hehe . . . yo no me considero ni bilingüe ni, ni nada por el estilo. Yo me considero una persona normal normal normal

The implication that being bilingual might not be ‘normal’ is a comment on the attitudes she encounters around her in Mexico to bilingual competence.

Betty is the second sibling in the Pizarro family, and like all but Elena, was born in the US and has US citizenship. By the time the family returned to Mexico, she says she felt Chicago was ‘home.’ In contrast to Elena, Betty said she was more comfortable being interviewed in and using English, but that ‘Spanish is my language.’ Like Elena, she had to have private Spanish classes on returning to Mexico in order to be allowed to enter the private school they attended. She commented on how she (and the other elder siblings) stopped speaking English with each other, which she explains to a great extent as being due to the youngest two not being able
to speak English, and to avoid what was becoming a situation of competitiveness amongst the family as to who could speak better English. She too works in English language teaching with a prestigious post at a local university.

The eldest son, Tonio Jr., left Chicago at the age of eleven. He has US citizenship and claims he still feels American at times – as he says, ‘nos enseñaron a ser muy patriotas allí.’ Significantly, unlike his sisters, on return he describes how at school he actually acquired status because of his competence in English, and he settled into and was well-received there immediately. Again, unlike his sisters, Tonio Jr. returned to Chicago on various occasions to visit his father. He hugely values his English which has got him a good job in a company with strong US ties, which he stresses he was given not because of his good university degree but simply because of his fluent English. The competence in the language rather than having lived in and knowing about US culture was what his employers were solely looking for.

Maria, the fourth sibling is also an English language teacher and, until recently and unlike the others, has been living and working in Mexico City. The youngest two are notably different in terms of their linguistic skills. Enrique, for example left Chicago at five having started to speak English, but lost it quickly. Betty and Tonio Jr. both refer to how his lack of English has prevented him from gaining good employment compared with them (despite a good degree). Maite, the youngest, left Chicago as a baby and never learned English. When we spoke to her, she was very aware of her difference from the rest of the siblings because she did not have the US experience or the English competence of the elder ones.

Despite the long lapse in time since the family’s return, the significance of both their US life and the return experience is still very important to the identity of both the individual members and the Pizarro family as a unit. All have US citizenship (even Enrique and Maite who do not speak English) and an ambivalent sense of patriotism. Tonio Jr., for example, claims to support the US in sports (such as the US Olympics team, as well as its soccer team). He also prefers to listen to music in English, whilst Betty likes reading in English, and all the family celebrate US holidays and commemorations like Thanksgiving. They all respect and appreciate their father’s original ‘dream’ – to buy a car; buy a house back ‘home’; improve his children’s opportunities in education and finding good jobs – that have resulted ultimately in a comfortable return to SLP. At the same time, they commented that they did not feel encouraged to maintain their sense of dual identity, with assimilation enforced from the start of their return, and no local associations to join to share the US experiences.

Throughout the conversations with this family – the individual interviews and various joint family reunions – language skills were constantly mentioned in ways that resonate with other studies undertaken of more recent returnees: the ambiguity of the language and identity relationship (of both Spanish and English), including the contrasting sense of English competence being both (for Tonio) a status symbol and (for the girls) an embarrassment; the choice of language amongst the siblings was constantly mentioned and was also clearly a shifting relationship; the enormous advantage for job opportunities was stressed by the elder siblings at the same time as recognizing the loss of such opportunities for the youngest two. Some comment, also, was made about the future use of language amongst the next generation – Don Tonio’s grandchildren – who in the most part had not been raised bilingually but were expected to progress in English and, where possible, to have some university education in the US or the UK.

**Conclusions**

The patterns and findings encountered during the SLP research confirm much of what is reported in other studies on Mexican return migration. In this section, therefore, I will both
summarize the conclusions reached to date on our SLP research, as well as provide more general overall conclusions. What emerges strongly throughout is that language is an issue for return, but one that is often ignored or pushed aside. It is also the case that ‘language’ is very often an issue of English – its retention or loss, its value to the returnee. Issues relating to Spanish were recounted almost entirely only in terms of the many cases of young school children lacking Spanish literacy skills and sometimes using inappropriate Spanish for their new Mexican environment. The lack of Spanish language skills has not been claimed as the likely principal cause of long-term difficulties of re-integration, although it most certainly is an initial obstacle for schoolchildren, which can, of course, have a lasting impact on their educational success.

As mentioned at the start, it is essential to recognize that returnees vary considerably; their socio-economic, educational, regional, gender profile will all differently impact on their experience of return and will also influence their linguistic repertoires and skills. For example, their knowledge of English on return is inevitably affected by their opportunities to learn it in the US, reflecting their level of education, work exposure, length of time spent there, and the presence and influence of Spanish-speaking family and friends, amongst other factors. However, we can generalize that the majority of children returnees have developed solid levels of competence in English, often including literacy skills learnt at school.

Regardless of their level of competence in English, many migrants return with a sense of bringing with them, to a greater or lesser extent, a useful commodity – English – which is variably valued by themselves and the receiving society. As we have seen, this is often negatively valued in the education system, whilst it is more likely to be seen as an asset for gaining employment (both for adults returning and for returnee children when they are older). Many jobs require some knowledge of English, giving some returnees an advantage in the job market. However, there are also stories of being discriminated against, seen as undependable when applying for jobs, likely to return again to the US. Work can also be difficult to find for adult returnees, as tight social networks back ‘home’ in Mexico have been dislodged by emigrating originally.

Despite the apparent lack of awareness of the influence of returnees’ language practices, and above all their English skills, we can argue that returnees reinforce the linguistic landscape and linguistic practices back home, and this in turn can offer opportunities for retaining their English language skills if they are aware of this linguistic environment. For returnee children this would not only allow them to develop as bilingual speakers but would also encourage them to feel more confident in the use of the two languages, rather than the more common habit of hiding their linguistic skills.

To date, Mexico (and specifically SLP) has not explicitly valued the linguistic capital of returnees in terms of their likely bilingualism and consequent greater language sensitivity, or specifically their English language skills, despite a chronic lack of English language teachers, for example, and a stated intent by the national government to improve the level of English throughout the country.

As we have noted, there is very little support and policy at national or state level. Organizations and schemes do exist, particularly in states with higher levels of emigration as well as return migration, to ease the returnee experience, particularly in terms of basic welfare, sorting out necessary legal documents, and registration. In particular, the government initiatives of Programa Paisano and Grupos Beta offer some support of this nature whilst principally aimed at Mexicans emigrating (Lothar Weiss & López Chaltelt 2011). Neither scheme, nor the wider public policy statement that supported the establishment of these, tackles the issues of language for returnees.

Above all, there is a lack of resources and investment in the awareness raising and training needed to prepare Mexican schoolteachers in how to receive and welcome returnee children.
in such a way as to celebrate the different attributes they can bring to their classroom. There are signs of some change, such as a scheme in Zacatecas to give schoolteachers a crash course in English to help them appreciate the needs of the returnee children. Workshops to train the teacher trainers about such issues are increasingly offered, and some materials’ development is taking place (see Zúñiga, Hamann, & Sánchez García 2008). However, in the main, the language issues attached to return migration, and especially that of schoolchildren, remain the ignored ‘elephant in the room.’

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Further reading

See Levitt (2001) for an excellent discussion of transnational migration, while Smith and Bakkar (2008) apply related concepts to the US-Mexico border. The work by V. Zúñiga (Monterrey), E. T. Hamann (Lincoln), and J. Sánchez García (Nuevo León), such as Zúñiga (2013) and Zúñiga et al. (2006, 2008), leads research on migration, education, and return in Mexico. Santos Zavala et al. (2010) is an excellent report on the themes of this chapter as investigated in San Luis Potosí.

References

US-raised 'returnees' in Mexico


