

Children Circulating between the U.S. and Mexico: Fractured Schooling and Linguistic Ruptures

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This article provides insights into the linguistic transitions and ruptures of migrant children in Mexican schools. The analysis focuses on children's practices and perceptions of their own difficulties when reading and writing in Spanish after spending months in schools in the United States. Using in-depth interviews and sociolinguistic analysis, the article presents the particular case of children who endure seasonal migratory circulation between Mexico and the United States, and examines the linguistic disruptions these children experience during their journey from English to Spanish literacy every school year.

Este artículo presenta hallazgos en torno a las transiciones y rupturas lingüísticas de los niños migrantes en las escuelas mexicanas. El análisis se centra en las prácticas y percepciones de los niños acerca de sus propias dificultades al leer o escribir en español después de haber pasado periodos en las escuelas de Estados Unidos. Los datos que se presentan provienen de niños que participan año tras año de la migración circular de tipo estacional entre México y Estados Unidos. Mediante entrevistas a profundidad y análisis sociolingüísticos, se examinan las dislocaciones lingüísticas que estos niños experimentan mientras se están moviendo del inglés al español cada año escolar.

Key words: circular migration, return migration, migrant children, English/Spanish literacy, biliteracy.

Palabras clave: migración circular, migración de retorno, niños migrantes, lectoescritura inglés/español, bilingüismo.

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Laurie¹ is an outgoing 13-year-old girl with big brown eyes and long hair who enjoys spending time with her friends. In contrast, her 15-year-old brother, Julio, is more introverted, he enjoys listening to music, playing the accordion and riding the horse at his parents' ranch. We met them in the Fall of 2010, at their school, in a rural village of northern Nuevo León, Mexico. Laurie and Julio reside in a region where people have developed strong economic and social links with Texas for decades.² Northern Nuevo León is a cattle-raising and agricultural region located between the Monterrey metropolitan area and the U.S.-Mexico border. Julio and Laurie are fourth generation members of a circular transnational migrant family. The inhabitants of this region are often authorized migrants and dual nationals, which explains why they are known as *pasaporteados* (people with documents to cross the border) (Zúñiga and Reyes 2006, 105). Julio and Julie live in Los Ramones, Nuevo León, a small municipality (1,200 inhabitants) located in this region.

Laurie and Julio are circular transnational students, a term we used to refer to students who spend part of the school year in Mexico, and part in the United States, in a process that repeats every year (Zúñiga and Hamann 2011, 144–145). Unlike other types of transnational students, who begin their education in Mexico and then continue in the United States, or vice versa, students following a circular school trajectory have a particularly fragmented experience. Every year, their schooling is abruptly interrupted and then resumed in a different country and language, and in a separate educational system.

We spent numerous hours with Laurie and Julio, mostly inquiring about the difficulties they face when they are exposed to written Spanish. Laurie speaks Spanish fluently with her teachers and with her friends, but written Spanish “is a nightmare. I never seem to get things right, according to my teacher. They say I should go back to first grade and learn how to write.” Her brother, Julio, is terrified every time he has to read in Spanish: “letters and words don’t make sense. I speak Spanish, you know, but somehow, I cannot read . . . no matter how hard I try. My teacher thinks I have a problem . . . and maybe I do, I don’t know.”

Focusing on the experiences of Laurie and Julio, as voices of an entire community of students with the similar characteristics, this

1. The names of all participants have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities. The data for this article draws on research processes undertaken in accordance with international human subject research ethics.

2. After the implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

article seeks to shed light on the linguistic situation of migrant children in Mexican schools, the way they internalize these experiences as deficits, and the forms of school humiliation it entails. Going back and forth, or “ir pa’allá y venir pa’atras”, as they describe their lives, turns their schooling trajectory into a fragmented experience because schools and teachers—both in Mexico and the United States—are not aware of and do not respond to their circularity (Hamann 2001, 42–43).

The goal of this article is to analyze how children returning to Mexico are experiencing complex linguistic fractures as an essential part of return. The analysis mainly uses data obtained from reading and writing assessments but also includes the children’s perceptions of their difficulties when they return to Mexican schools and have to read and write in Spanish. This article is also about languages. In fact, it is about four languages: oral Spanish, oral English, written Spanish, and written English. As we show in the next section, all four represent different challenges and complexities, all four are unique in their form. These are the languages that Laurie and Julio have been dealing with since they entered school. This article is also about schools and teachers, both inculcating languages for the “good” of children.

The contexts of migrant children’s linguistic ruptures

In this section we define briefly the institutional contexts in which migrant children experience the linguistic transitions and ruptures that are the focus of our research. These contexts are constructed by politics, norms, practices, beliefs, educational tests, and goals that characterize the school systems in Mexico and the United States. Migrant children, like every student attending school, are subordinated actors during their educational trajectories (Dubet 1998, 44). Specifically, international migrant children enjoy minimal support from schools to make sense and interconnect their disruptive circumstances.

Language as a problem in U.S. schools

In 1997, a delegation of 24 teachers from two Georgia school districts visited an elementary school in a small town of Zacatecas, in north-central Mexico. During the school visit a conversation ensued between Georgian and Zacatecan teachers and principals. One of the Zacatecan teachers brought into question the fact that children returning from the United States to his school displayed very low levels

of academic performance. Teachers from Georgia responded that the underachievement of Mexican students in U.S. schools is explained by the “language barriers” and the “lack of bilingual educators” in the United States. The answer provided by the Georgia teachers reflects the most common stance held by U.S. educators, and school officials (Gándara and Contreras 2009). The rationale is simple: non-English speaking students must learn English first, and then use this language to learn substantive academic content and abilities (numeracy, science, history, literature, health) (Valdés, Capitelli, and Alvarez 2011). In other words, in order to develop the reading and writing competencies that are indispensable for academic achievement in the U.S., students have to be proficient in English, like their native English-speaking peers.

The U.S. pedagogical stance - transforming English learners into fully competent English speakers - has, as a result, multiplied the number of teaching strategies and “effective” methodologies to teach English to English Learners, and often in the shortest time possible (Gándara 2002; Gándara and Contreras 2009; Ortega and Iberri-Shea 2005). In contrast to the vast resources spent developing strategies and programs for English Learners, teachers’ competencies and training to work with English Learners have received considerably less attention (August and Hakuta 1997).

In states like California, the popular belief that young children can acquire English in a single year (Valdés, Capitelli, and Alvarez 2011, 147) is also an official mandate. As Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2000, 13) pointed out: “. . . policies that assume rapid acquisition of English –the extreme case being Proposition 227³ that explicitly calls for ‘sheltered English immersion during a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year’- are wildly unrealistic.” In contrast to popular beliefs and political mandates, researchers on second language acquisition (Collier 1987; Cummins 1981) have distinguished two types of language proficiency: oral proficiency and academic language proficiency, i.e. being “fully competitive in oral or academic uses of English with their age-equivalent, native English-speaking peers” (Hakuta, Butler and Witt 2000, 1). Mitchell, Destino and Karam (1997) estimated that 10 or more years

3. California’s Proposition 227, also known as English Language in Public Schools Statue, was drafted by Ron Unz and Gloria Mata Tuchman and balloted in June 1998. As a result of this proposition, bilingual classes were eliminated in public schools of California. The proposition established that the main goal of all school programs is to make EL students fluent in English. The proposition also allows for certain circumstances under which EL students can receive instruction in their native language.

are necessary to attain the language proficiencies to be successful in school, while Hakuta and colleagues (2000) reached a more optimistic conclusion: “that even in districts that are considered the most successful in teaching English to EL students, oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take 4 to 7 years” (13).

In the process of acquiring English proficiency, languages other than English are not considered valuable (Rossell and Baker 1996) because the time schools use developing those languages does not support the academic achievement of English Learners. This general assumption follows what we suggest is the fallacious idea that time in one language takes away from time learning another. As a consequence, languages spoken by migrant children –or second generation children- at home, in the community and in their countries of origin, do not represent resources, but problems to be solved (Ruiz 1984, Zurer Pearson 2002).⁴

Language issues in Mexican schools

Spanish is not, legally speaking, Mexico’s official language. However, during most of the twentieth century, from about 1921 to 1980, the *castellanización* (or the imposition of Castilian Spanish) of children and adults who spoke languages other than Spanish was the country’s dominant language policy (Gamio 1916; Martínez 2011). Educators used officially sanctioned methods to transition children who spoke Indigenous languages to Spanish in order to integrate them into the nation (Villavicencio 2006). During this period, teaching and learning Spanish in Mexican schools became a matter of inculcating a *lengua nacional* (Heath 1972).

Today, the government’s official discourse recognizes that Mexicans speak multiple languages,⁵ which, at least in theory, can be taught in schools (Dietz, Mendoza, and Téllez 2008). These new politics and policy of language mean that Spanish is no longer portrayed as the “national language.” Instead, Spanish is used for the acquisition of

4. We acknowledge that our description of educational language policies in the United States simplify a complex reality, which includes long standing controversies on bilingual education, the diversity of school experiences at the state level, and the federal policies implemented over the past few decades. We also recognize that our discussion focuses mainly on the Californian experience. For a more nuanced perspective, see Johnson 2009, Crawford 2004, Valdés *et al.* 2011.

5. The law is known as “Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas” (http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/es/text.jsp?file_id=220918).

written language, along with other languages that should have a legitimate presence in schools.

The point we stress here is that the debate on the languages spoken and taught in Mexican schools today is apropos indigenous children and parents. That is to say: children who do not speak Spanish at home and who enroll in schools having low or very low proficiency in oral Spanish are explicitly the concern of official educational policy. Because they do not speak an Indigenous language and speak Spanish, children like Laurie and Julio do not fit this policy. Consequently, they are not deemed to represent an educational challenge, despite the fact that these children belong to a growing segment of the population of students in Mexican schools (Giorguli et al. 2013). In Mexico there are not explicit school language policies for migrant children circulating between U.S. and Mexican schools simply because these children speak Spanish. In other words, Mexico's language policies do not recognize the complexity of migrant children's transnational school experiences and, as a result, their educational needs remain invisible.

Written language versus oral language, working-class oral language versus middle-class oral language

Researchers of bilingual educational policy, Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009), call attention, albeit indirectly, to an issue that is often ignored in the Mexican and U.S. educational policy: the relationship between oral and written language. As they point out: "... the problem for many so-called English learners is not an inability to communicate orally in English, but an inability to pass grade-level tests in the use of the language in academic contexts" (139–140). Indeed, scholars often seem to assume that the written language is the mere graphic form of the oral language (the unproblematic transition from phonemes to graphemes) (Terrail 2004, 37).

Transnational students showed us unambiguously that speaking one language is not equivalent to writing it and that the process of becoming orally proficient in one language does not lead to writing proficiently in that language. To better clarify the complex transition from oral to written language, we refer to the contemporary discussion of sociology and sociolinguistic of education in France and England. On the one hand, the controversial work of Bernstein (1971) established the distinctiveness between oral language spoken by working-class people in England and that of middle-class professionals. The latter provides children with an "elaborate" oral linguistic code, while the former does not ("restricted" codes are characteristic

of working-class children). Elaborate codes are assets for children when entering school and assure their success in school. Restricted codes are the opposite. In pedagogical terms, “restricted codes” became the synonym of linguistic handicap. Based on the above reference typology, Laurie and Julio are children of working-class Mexicans born in rural areas, who speak rural Mexican Spanish. Following Bernstein, Laurie and Julio would be classified as children speaking “restricted codes”.

Contrary to Bernstein’s dichotomy, William Labov (1972) argued that working-class children and young people do not talk using a “restricted code”. According to him, the oral language that characterizes working-class children is as rich as other forms of speech. However, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1970) showed in their works, the speech of working-class people is systematically despised in school contexts. This disparagement is the source of symbolic violence suffered by children in schools, which explains the school inequalities and educational failures of poor children in various countries. The process is even more painful for children such as Laurie and Julio, who probably encountered in their Minnesota school the popular belief that “the only real Spanish is spoken in Spain”: a myth that is “widely propagated, even by language teachers and others who would never dare claim that ‘the only real English is spoken in England’” (Zentella 2002, 323).

Goody (2000) and Terrail (2004, 2009) proposed an alternative interpretation that enlightens the relations between social class, oral language and school itineraries. On the one hand, they emphasize the differences between oral and written languages. Even if children speak the societal language required by the school curriculum, they inevitably face, as all human beings do, the hard and long transit from oral to written language. Written language is the innovation of a new intellectual technology (Goody, 2000, 198–199) that involved new physical instruments (systems and competencies of writing), new means of stocking information (tablets, parchments, books, dictionaries, etc.) and, most important, distinct ways of organizing and formulating ideas (lists, tables, formalization of arguments, mathematical signs, etc.). On the other hand, these authors state that children who have been raised in families with parents attaining at least a high school education acquire a special relationship with oral language that becomes useful for transitioning from oral to written language. According to these authors, school success entails a special relation with oral language: a “particular attitude toward language” (Terrail 2009, 18). As these authors argue, the social inequalities of school achievement are explained by the social class’ differences in “handling” oral language:

a competency acquired during the early stages of children's lives. Instead of "restricted" or "elaborate" codes, these authors have found different forms of molding oral language. Some of these forms prepare children for better transitioning from oral to written language.

Julio and Laurie are not indigenous children. According to their teachers, they do not face a special linguistic challenge in school. As their peers in the classroom, they are members of the Mexican working class who speak the rural Spanish of the small towns of the country's northeastern region. They also speak English fluently, the oral language they learned in the schools of Minnesota, and they read and write this language too. But when they are back in school in Los Ramones, their teachers wrongly assume that if they speak Spanish fluently, like their parents, they can also read and write Spanish, as if the written language were a by-product of the spoken language.

This is the linguistic labyrinth in which the working-class children circulating between the United States and Mexico move. In U.S. schools, they are forced to learn English as soon as possible leaving aside their mother tongue. Once in school, they are immediately classified as English Learners. To be sure, they learn to speak, read and write English while their academic progress is slower than that of their native peers. When they return to Mexico and enroll in schools, they use their mother tongue but the schools do not offer special support because they already speak Spanish. From the perspective of teachers and principals in Mexico, these children do not face a special challenge as it is assumed that there is a "natural" connection between oral and written language. Upon return to Mexican schools, transnational students are once again academically disadvantaged.

It is important to point out that Julio and Laurie are not the most representative cases of children returnees because they circulate between the United States and Mexico yearly. The most common cases of international migrant children, with the corresponding dislocations, involve the following trajectories: a) children who were born in the United States, started their schooling in the United States and then moved (for the first time) to Mexico; b) children who were born in Mexico, began their schooling in Mexico and then moved to the United States, where they resumed their education in U.S. schools. Some in the latter category have returned to Mexico (returnees). This means that, in general, children experienced only one or two school transitions. Based on our surveys of representative samples of elementary and middle school students in several states in Mexico, we know that only 0.2 percent of migrant children circulated and changed schools every year (see Zúñiga and Hamann 2011, 145).

Clearly, Laurie and Julio do not represent the most common cases we found in our fieldwork. Instead, they are extreme cases of transnational students because they are permanent sojourners who regularly undergo linguistic fractures associated with their cyclical dislocations. Nonetheless, our observations showed that the most common cases (returnees or not) suffer varying linguistic ruptures (Hamann and Zúñiga 2011).

Methodology

In this study we used two methodological approaches. We conducted in-depth interviews with children aged 11–15 to gather data about their transnational life and schooling and about their perceptions of the difficulties they face when reading and writing. This method allowed us to describe and analyze the children's social context and school trajectories. We also assessed the children's reading and writing competencies in Spanish. The present analysis draws mostly from the data obtained through these assessments but it was complemented with information provided by the children during the interviews.

The selection of students and schools

We began our research project in an elementary school (*primaria*) in Los Ramones, Nuevo León where, according to the information obtained from the Departamento de Educación Migrante de la Secretaría de Educación of the State of Nuevo León, two pupils had just enrolled after having studied for a few months in the United States. Upon arriving to the *primaria* in Los Ramones, we realized that about half of all students attending the school were circular international migrants, that is, they were enrolled in the school in Mexico for about five or six months (generally from late October to late March or early April) to then relocate to the United States, where their parents work in agriculture during spring and summer.

The *primaria* has six grades (first through sixth) with one teacher assigned to each grade. All six teachers are monolingual and know that their students circulate between two school systems yearly. In response to our request, we were also granted access to the middle school (*secundaria*), near the *primaria*. There were only three teachers working at this other school, each one assigned to a grade (seventh through ninth); none of them spoke English. Twenty-seven out of the forty-three students enrolled in the *secundaria* during the 2010–2011 school year were circular transnational students.

During the five months we spent in the field, we assessed fifteen transnational students and interviewed five teachers from both schools. In this article, we analyze the experiences of two adolescents who have been moving between the United States and Mexico since Kindergarten. We selected these cases because they represent extreme instances of the linguistic and schooling disruptions that international migrant students in Los Ramones experience throughout their educational careers. These extreme cases not only make visible the singular plight of transnational students but also showcase situations international migrant pupils might withstand in the course of their fractured school years. We visited these students twice every week during the entire time they were in Mexico, from their first week in school, until the day they left the country: Laurie, who was enrolled in the sixth grade in the *primaria*, and Julio, her older brother, who was enrolled in the ninth grade in the *secundaria*.

Data collection methods

Most of the fieldwork forming the empirical basis for this article was conducted from November, 2010, to March, 2011. In conducting interviews with students, we tried to capture their perceptions about their difficulties reading and writing Spanish. Other topics that emerged naturally during the interviews were life and school in Mexico and in the United States, their relationships to teachers and peers “here and there”, family dynamics and their views of the future. Laurie and Julio, as all the children we interviewed, are aware of the challenges they face when they come back to Mexico and enroll in school, and suddenly are expected to read and write in Spanish. When it comes to reading and writing, they are perfectly able of pointing out their troubles and the things they consider to be difficult.

We conducted the interviews in English and in Spanish, trying not to interfere with the students’ language of choice. Their answers often combined both languages, a phenomenon which is called translanguage, a common practice among bilinguals that should not be regarded as a deficient way of communicating, but as a strategy used to maximize communication by accessing various linguistic repertoires (Garcia and Wei, 2014).

At the same time, we applied reading and writing assessments in order to complete and corroborate the data obtained from the interviews. The assessments focused on the most basic forms of literacy – letter-sound correspondence, accent marks, word recognition accuracy and fluency, and vocabulary. In this article, we do not

analyze more complex issues related to reading and writing, such as grammar, syntax, and discourse structures.

The first dictation test we used, which included single words and complete sentences, was designed to identify common errors in Spanish spelling. The dictation tests did not cover all the possible problems in Spanish spelling, as stated by the Real Academia Española (1999; 2010), but included the main challenges regarding sound-letter correspondence and written accent marks:

- a) Graphemes that represent more than one phoneme (*polifonía de grafemas*). For example, the letter *c* can be phonetically represented as /k/ in *casa*; or as /s/ when followed by *e* or *i*, in words like *centro* or *cita*. The letter *g* also has multiple phonetic representations: /g/, when followed by *a*, *o*, or *u*, as in *gato*, and /h/, when combined with *e* or *i*, in words like *gemelo* or *gitano*.
- b) Phonemes represented by more than one grapheme (*poligrafía de fonemas*). The most common cases of polygraphs in Spanish are represented by the phoneme /s/ that can be written as *c* (*centro*, *cita*), *s* (*sana*, *silla*), *x* (*xilófono*) or *z* (*zona*, *zumó*); phoneme /b/ which can take the written form of *v*, *b*, or *w*; phoneme /k/ with its possible forms *c*, *k* or *qu*; etcetera.
- c) Digraphs (two letters used together to represent a single sound). These are quite common in Spanish: digraph *ll*, digraph *rr*, digraph *qu*, digraph *ch*.
- d) Silent letter: silent *h*, the only letter in the Spanish alphabet which is silent.
- e) Accent marks, which can be generally divided into accent marks used in order to differentiate between identically spelled words (no difference in pronunciation), and accents marks used to stress a syllable (they mark a difference in pronunciation). We briefly inquired about diacritic and prosodic accents, but no inquiries were made about more complex rules of accentuation as the ones applied to diphthongs, triphthongs, hiatus, and compound words.

We did not seek information about more complex issues, such as *heterografía de morfemas uniformes*,⁶ and the dieresis mark.

6. That is, unjustified variations in spelling of the same phoneme—i.e. the present form of the verb *sacar* and its past form *saqué*, in which the phoneme /k/ is represented by letter *c*, in the first form, and by the digraph *qu*, in the second.

We subsequently applied reading assessments. Choosing a test to find out more about the children's reading challenges was not an easy task. Standardized reading tests are unfit for diverse students, as such tests homogenize a heterogeneous reality (Moreno Olivos, 2010). We concluded that using a standardized test to assess the reading level of bilingual students, constantly moving between two schools' systems and languages, would not be appropriate. We decided that an informal assessment would work better, considering the students' profile and background. This type of assessment can provide more accurate and valid information about the students, as it is based on texts normally used in classroom. This kind of assessment also provides more flexibility in administration and allows the evaluator to observe the students' behavior, how they interact with the text and how they feel about reading process. The informal reading assessment may also provide a better understanding of the children's thinking and ways of constructing meaning. Following Richek et al. (2001), we inquired about the following areas in particular:

- a) Emergent literacy, focusing mainly on the students' knowledge of letter-sound correspondence and phonological awareness, which refers to the knowledge and correct manipulations of the individual sounds that make up a word (Ferreiro 2002a; 2002b; Richek et al. 2001). In order to be able to read, children need to identify and manipulate sounds and also associate these sounds to their corresponding letter.
- b) Word recognition accuracy refers to the ability to recognize words during the reading process. This ability is directly linked to the ability of manipulating phonemes. The following types of errors were considered and marked during the reading tests: insertion (of words that were not part of the text), substitution (of words in the text for different ones) and mispronunciation, repetition (of words in the texts), words correctly pronounced but with a hesitation, disregard for punctuation (not pausing, raising the voice, or the intonation, according to the punctuation marks), and corrections made by the student (Richek et al. 2001). These errors were marked during the tests and then counted, organized and displayed on a table.
- c) Fluency in word recognition. Besides recognizing the words while reading, the children must be able to do it quickly. If all the attention is focused on recognizing the words, then the general comprehension of the written text is compromised. The reading rate was determined by multiplying the total

number of words in each text used for the assessment by 60, and then dividing this number by the number of seconds each student took to read the text (Richek et al. 2001).

- d) Comprehension is essential to the reading process. If a child can read at an appropriate rate, but cannot answer at least 70 percent of the questions related to the text, then it can be inferred that there is a general comprehension problem (Richek et al. 2001).

The texts used for the assessment were carefully chosen from the textbooks the students use for their Spanish class –the official public school textbooks in Mexico- corresponding to the grade they were enrolled in at that moment. The reading tests were applied on March 2011, when the children had already spent five months in the Mexican school. The reading tests were recorded. Our observations on children’s behavior and reactions during the reading tests were also registered in a journal and incorporated into the final analysis.

Findings

Laurie’s and Julio’s school trajectories

Laurie started school in Minnesota. At the time we interviewed her, Laurie was enrolled in fourth grade in the United States and sixth grade in Mexico, a discrepancy that increases the gap between the academic objectives and skills that the student is expected to acquire: “It’s hard. When I come from over there, I know what I am doing over there, and I come over here . . . and they have different subjects. And I don’t know what they are doing here . . . and I have to start again . . . and I have to start doing what they’re doing . . . start breaking my mind . . . doing what they’re doing.”

Laurie’s brother, Julio, was fifteen years old when we interviewed him. He was born in Texas, just like her sister. He also started school in the United States. When we interviewed him, he was enrolled in eighth grade in Minnesota and in ninth grade in the *secundaria* in Los Ramones.

When they first enrolled in school in the United States, Laurie and Julio were treated as if they had lived their entire lives in the country. That is to say, the fact that their first language was not English was never addressed, so they had no special support at school. Both Laurie and Julio pointed out that during the first few years of school none of their teachers spoke Spanish. “It was difficult and I think it was unfair”, said Julio. But the same happened when Laurie and Julio

first attended school in Los Ramones: it was assumed they were Mexican and, since they managed to communicate in Spanish, they were treated as any other Mexican child that was acquiring literacy skills in Spanish. “Again, not fair”, said Julio. Just to clarify, these children had learned Spanish with their parents, friends and extended family during the months they had spent in Mexico each year. But because they started their formal education in the United States, they had never been formally taught how to write in Spanish. Again, the moment they enrolled in school in Mexico, Laurie and Julio were expected to seamlessly produce written texts.

Reading and writing in Spanish: Children’s perceptions

Laurie and Julio are perfectly aware of the problems they face when it comes to reading and writing in Spanish. They have a deep understanding of the difficult process of shifting from one language to another. They express that it is extremely frustrating for them to speak a language that they actually cannot read and write well. “You know, I cannot read in Spanish”, said Julio in one of the interviews. “Letters, words, just do not make sense sometimes . . . And it makes me angry because I speak Spanish, I talk to my teacher in Spanish, so he expects me to read as I speak. It doesn’t work that way.” Laurie says that finding herself in front of a textbook makes her feel “ashamed”, especially when the teacher makes her read in front of the whole class: “¿Por qué hace eso? ¿No sabe que no puedo leer muy bien? ¿Y que nosotros [referring to herself and her transnational peers] somos diferentes?” We conclude, based on these accounts, that these children are not only facing challenges when they try to read or write in Spanish, but they feel humiliated when teachers asked them to read or write. The school experience of these students in the United States visibly differs from the school experience in Mexico. In the United States they are classified as Second Language Learners (so, teachers understand they will make mistakes). In Mexico, they are not institutionally defined as Second Language Learners (so, if they make mistakes it is because they “no saben leer ni escribir”).

Furthermore, Laurie and Julio do not make a clear distinction between reading and writing. For them, reading and writing in Spanish is altogether a difficult process. The problems they clearly identify are related to spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Next, we analyze data on the most visible obstacles they face: letter-sound correspondences, accentuation, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Letter-sound correspondence

The first story Laurie shared with us about writing in Spanish was her experience writing the word *elefante*. She grabbed a pencil and she wrote “elephant.” And then she asked doubtfully: “Isn’t it right? Me regañó la maestra . . . que no lo escribí bien.” –here again, we observed the same form of humiliation. She seemed happy and embarrassed at the same time every time she talked about letters - happy because somebody was finally caring about her problems and embarrassed because she felt “dumb” (the word she used to refer to her ability to read and write in Spanish). Julio was equally willing to talk about the challenges he faces: “I have so many [problems] . . . and nobody seems to ever care. They just assume I know. But I don’t know.”

The silent *b* gives both students a lot of trouble. No wonder it is “annoying,” as Laurie said. In her notebook, every single *b* she had failed to spell is marked in red, as a constant reminder of her orthographic mistake. Julio also points to this letter as a source of stress: “How am I supposed to write it when I cannot hear it? If I spell it correctly, it’s not because I know. . . . it’s because I got lucky.”

Letters *b* and *v* are really puzzling for Julio: “You know, in English *b* is *b* and *v* is *v*. Here, they told me *v* is for cow, and *b* is for burro. But they sound alike. Viva, biba . . . burro, vaca. Don’t know.” Then he went on to explain that, again, it is a matter of luck to spell them correctly when needed. Laurie definitely hates *b* and *v*. She ashamedly showed us one of her notebooks: “See? Red *v*’s and *b*’s all over.”

When Laurie and Julio delved into specific difficulties, the phoneme /s/ and its possible written forms *s* or *z* often came up: “I hear /s/ but it’s not *s*. It’s . . . *z*. Or . . . I don’t know. It’s confusing”, said Laurie. Her notebook is full of this kind of mistakes, which are not difficult to notice because the teacher marked them all with a red pen. “Just for me to remember”, explained Laurie. Julio agrees with his sister: “It’s like with the *v* and the *b*. They are the same. And in English, you know, *z* is *z* and *s* is *s*. They don’t sound alike. When I hear /s/ I always write *s*. And that’s it. I am never sure if I am wrong or right.”

The phoneme /k/ was identified by Julio as a source of confusion, as he does not know when he is supposed to write a *c* or a *k*. Moreover, the digraph “*ch* is a mystery”, as Julio describes it. He refers to the fact when he writes *character* in English the two letters are pronounced /k/, so many times he applies the same rule to Spanish words, “but in Spanish *ch* is read in a different way, so I don’t know.” We thus infer that it must be even more difficult for him to choose the right phoneme when the letter *c* is followed by *e* or *i* and should be read /s/.

When they talk about *ll*, they always laugh about it: “That’s a double *l*, not a *ye* . . . or however they call it,” Julio explained. He also complains about certain vowels: “A in English can be /æ/ . . . or /ɔ:/ or I don’t know. . . . so which one is it in Spanish? I don’t know.” He also says that “La *i* is *ai* . . . over there [in the United States]. That pisses me off. I cannot spell a word. It gets so complicated sometimes. Over here you call it *e*. I can put an *i*. I go over there, I put an *a* [he pronounced /ei/] and it is supposed to be an *i* [he pronounced /ai/].”

The vibrant /r/ and multiple vibrant phoneme /rr/, characteristic of Spanish but not of English, is a constant source of stress for Julio. He does not know when he is supposed to write *r* or *rr*: “My teacher always complains that I don’t pronounce it right. It’s because, for me, it sounds the same. No difference.”

To be sure, non-migrant children also face similar challenges when acquiring writing skills in Spanish. However, it is important to clarify that the difference between migrant children and non-migrant is that the former expect aural cues to distinguish “v” and “b” and “s” and “z” –as it happens when they spell words in English–, while the latter know they simply have to memorize the correct spelling.

Accentuation

Julio always talks about the accent marks as a great difficulty: “I don’t put that thing you’re supposed to have . . . el acento. I don’t like it. No accents in English. Y cuando llegas aquí tienes que escribir en español y muchas veces no los pongo.”

Nobody ever taught Julio what accents are used for and why he has to use them. Laurie does not even bother to use this orthographic mark either, because the teacher does all the work for her, using the same red pen, which comes as a constant reminder of her spelling errors.

Comprehension and vocabulary

“I don’t understand many of the words in that book,” said Laurie pointing to one of her textbooks. Clearly, spoken Spanish does not require the same kind of vocabulary knowledge written Spanish does. Julio emphasizes this distinction: “You know . . . many of the words in the books [referring to his textbooks] . . . are difficult to understand. Parecen de otro idioma (They seem to be from another language).” Once again, academic words are also challenging for non-migrant children. However, migrant children seem to internalize these challenges as a “proof” of their deficit in Spanish comprehension.

Writing and reading tests

We decided to apply writing and reading tests in order to complement and corroborate the data gathered through the interviews with students. These tests allowed us to observe how children act when they are exposed directly to a text. Their reactions and emotions are indicators of what they experience every day in school.

Writing tests

These tests were not meant to exhaustively identify each and every single deviation from the universal phonemic principle (one grapheme for each phoneme and vice-versa) in Spanish. Nonetheless, the results of these tests reinforce what the students themselves were able to point out as “difficult” when writing in Spanish. We carefully chose the words and phrases for the writing tests so as to assess knowledge and manipulation of certain phonemes that can be represented by various letters (*poligrafía de fonemas*), certain graphemes with more than one phonemic assignment (*polifonía de grafemas*), digraphs (represented by one single phoneme), and silent h. The writing test shows how often Julio and Laurie made “mistakes.” For instance, Laurie wrote “veserito” instead of *becerrito*; “Oajaka” instead of Oaxaca; “aser” instead of *hacer*, while Julio wrote “sero” instead of *cerro*; “vacero” instead of *vaquero*; “yorar” instead of *llorar*, and so on. Certainly, not all the words used in these tests were misspelled, but as Julio reminded constantly us, spelling a word correctly is a “matter of luck”, and it does not prove solid knowledge of Spanish orthography.

The linguistic dimension of Julio and Laurie’s migratory journeys leads to another important issue. When we asked Julio to write Monterrey, his answer was “Monteray”. This is a clear case of feed-backward activation, a process that refers to a phonological code that relates to multiple graphical codes. Bilingual students, when exposed to a language, may activate phonological and graphical representations from both languages (Hino, Lupker, and Pexman 2002; Schwartz, Kroll, and Díaz 2007). So, when we asked him to write Monterrey, Julio probably associated the phonemes /ei/ with its possible written forms in English, like *ay*, as in *bay*; or *ey*, as in *they*. Therefore, the written form of the word, according to Julio, was “Monteray.”⁷

7. More research is needed to better comprehend how the feed-backward activation process occurs in the case of these students.

The writing tests reinforced what students told us about the written accent marks: they do not know how and when to use them. We noted the absolute lack of both prosodic and diacritic accents in the texts they produced. No further inquiries were made about accentuation rules in diphthongs, triphthongs, hiatus, and compound words.

Lastly, even if capitalization and punctuation marks are not an exclusive characteristic of Spanish spelling, they significantly affect the adequacy of a written text. Although we did not seek to assess the use of capitalization and punctuation marks, the poor handling of these two elements was evident in the writing tests applied to Laurie and Julio.

Reading tests

The reading tests were applied individually to each student, after they had spent more than five months in school in Mexico. The main purpose of this assessment was to obtain more information about the students' reading abilities. We also obtained data regarding word recognition accuracy and fluency in word recognition that could be expressed and described numerically. In addition to generating a quantitative indicator, we were able to observe the children's reactions when exposed to the text.

We quickly noticed that reading in Spanish is not easy for Laurie and Julio. Laurie said that she likes to read but she would really like to have a greater understanding of the content. As Laurie put it: "I don't understand much." She seemed very agitated and worried before the test, not because she was afraid of the evaluation itself, but because she was ashamed. "Ashamed of what?" we asked. "Porque no leo bien y me da mucha pena . . . They always make fun of me. Yo hablo español . . . but reading . . . is something else," she explained. Indeed, reading is something else, and it has nothing to do with her ability to communicate in Spanish. The written Spanish Laurie is expected to read is not the mere graphic representation of the language she speaks. The written Spanish she is expected to read every day in class is a complex system in which formal and cultural aspects of the language prevail over the informality of the spoken language. The written Spanish in Laurie's textbook is standardized language, a sort of pan regional language that lacks the typical variations of the oral language. It exposes differences that do not exist in the spoken language, like the *v* and the *b*, that cause so many problems to these children. The written language involves grammar, punctuation and accent marks, and a different vocabulary, needed to correctly convey the message (Ferreiro 2002a; 2002b; Terrail 2004).

Julio was also very stressed before and especially during the reading test. He definitely hates reading: “it’s like . . . a lot of letters that sometimes just don’t make sense. I hate it.” He does not like reading out loud because when he does, “they laugh at me.” “They” references anyone who is not a transnational student. “Only the people who are like me understand how difficult it is. And they don’t laugh. You know . . . voy pa’allá y regreso pa’atrás todos los años. Back and forth. I don’t think it’s funny that sometimes I speak *mochó*, and I read like a gringo.”

Emergent literacy

In the area of emergent literacy, we focused on the students’ knowledge of letter-sound correspondence and phonological awareness, which refers to the knowledge and correct manipulation of the individual sounds that make up a word (Ferreiro 2002a; 2002b; Richek et al. 2001). During the reading tests, it was clear that the children lack solid knowledge of individual sounds. Their reading process demonstrated hesitation, especially when confronted with unknown words. “I have to think a lot . . . para saber cómo se leen esas palabras”, explained Julio after he finished reading. He gets confused with the letters and their phonetic representations: “I am supposed to read in Spanish, and I always think of that word in English”, says Julio. Again, we interpret this confusion as a consequence of his bilingual repertoire of phonological and graphical representations, which triggers transfers from L2 (English) to L1 (Spanish). When an orthographic code relates to multiple phonological codes, cross-language transfer may occur. In this case, an instance of feed-forward activation, we refer to the activation of two phonological codes that relate to one grapheme (Hino et al. 2002; Schwartz et al. 2007). We identified an example of feed-forward activation during Julio’s reading test, when he read *tres* instead of the preposition *tras*. The grapheme *a* probably triggered the activation of all its phonological variations in English, which may be, among others, /æ/, as in ham, cat, or hammer; /a/, as in spa, car, or part; or /ɔ/ as in halt, walk, or tall. However, we consider that more research is needed to fully understand both feed-backward and feed-forward activation processes.

Word recognition accuracy

This component of the reading acquisition process is directly linked to the ability of manipulating phonemes, which is essential for the recognition of complete words when reading a text. Following Richek

et al. (2001), we identified and marked certain types of errors during the reading tests: insertion (of words that were not part of the text), substitution (of words in the text for different ones) or mispronunciation, repetition (of words in the texts), words correctly pronounced but with hesitation, disregard for punctuation (not pausing, raising the voice, and changing intonation, according to the punctuation marks), and corrections made by the student. In the following table (Table 1), we present the number of errors for each category. To obtain the general score, we divided the number of correct words by the total number of words in each text, and then multiplied it by 100. The score represents the level of word recognition accuracy.

Table 1. Results of word recognition accuracy exam for Laurie and Julio; this includes the type of errors each student made, the number of errors, and the general test score they received.

Type of error	Laurie	Julio
Omission	0	0
Insertion	0	0
Substitution or mispronunciation	6	19
Repetition	0	0
Words correctly pronounced but with hesitation	13	25
Disregard for punctuation	4	1
Corrections made by the student	0	5
Total number of the words in the text	131	192
Total of errors	23	50
General score	82%	74%

For both Laurie and Julio, the largest number of mistakes is related to the words pronounced correctly but with hesitation, a problem directly related to the correct manipulation of graphemes and phonemes. Both students hesitated when they were facing long words that contained many letters. Laurie had difficulties with words like *familiarizado*, *indagar*, *parientes*, *extranjero*, *comunicativa*, *timbres*, *modalidad*, and Julio with words like *disputaron*, *guerreros*, *augmentar*, *desterrado*, *legendario*, and *invencible*. These are words that are not very likely to be used in every day communication. As Julio asked: “What is *desterrado* (exiled)? Never heard it before.”

The substitutions and errors of pronunciation represent another problematic area. Specifically, the substitution of a word with another one similar in form generates confusion and impedes the comprehension of the written text. In Julio’s case, this type of mistake represents almost 10 percent of the total of 192 words in the text. We

infer that substituting a word with another one similar in form brings about a change in lexical category, as follows: movement from pronoun to preposition (*se – de*), from preposition to conjunction (*a – y*), from noun to interrogative or demonstrative pronoun (*cuenta – cuanta*), from verb to noun (*ganan – general, vencer – veces*), from preposition to numeral (*tras – tres*), and so on.

We present the transcription of the reading form given to the following text: *Desterrado, él y sus seguidores deben luchar en tierras bajo dominio del Islam, donde su talento militar y conducta honorable le ganan el nombre de mío Cid.*

Julio read: *Desterrado* [hesitation], *él y sus seguidores . . . seguidores* [correction made by the student] *deben luchar en tierras bajo dominio del* [hesitation] *Islam, donde su talento militar y conducta honorable* [hesitation] *el general* [mistake] *el nombre de mío* [hesitation] *Cid.*

The general score in word recognition accuracy backs up Julio's opinion of his reading skills. A score of 74 percent places him at frustration reading level which, according to Richek et al. (2001), is the level at which texts are too difficult for the students to successfully engage. Laurie's score is higher (82 percent) but it still places her at frustration reading level. Any pedagogical intervention should seek to produce an optimum reading level, which requires at least 95 to 98 percent of accuracy in word recognition. Most educational actions are likely to have a very limited effect with students functioning at frustration reading levels.

Word recognition fluency

Word recognition fluency refers to the ability to automatically recognize the words during the reading process. If students spend too much time trying to decipher a word, they lose focus on the comprehension of the written message (Richek et al. 2001). Word recognition fluency is calculated in words per minute and is determined by multiplying the total number of words in each text by 60, and then dividing the result by the number of seconds each student took to read the text (Richek et al. 2001). Table 2 shows the appropriate fluency rate according to the corresponding grade and the results students obtained in the reading test.

Unfortunately, both children are far away from what is expected from them. Their reading process is marked by hesitation, repetitions, and long pauses. The siblings and their teachers are aware of the fact that they cannot read well. As one of the teachers commented, "No saben leer bien." Laurie and Julio are constantly reminded of that fact.

Table 2. Word recognition fluency and appropriate fluency rate according to the corresponding grade and the results Laurie and Julio obtained in the reading test.

	Reading rate (words per minute)	Reading rate recommended for the instructional reading level
Laurie	71.54 words per minute	Between 113 and 165 words per minute
Julio	36.68 words per minute	

“I cannot learn anything. I don’t understand the words . . . sometimes I don’t even know how to read them. Y se supone que debo pasar mis exámenes”, said Julio after the reading test.

Comprehension and Vocabulary Problems

Julio’s words also speak to the issue of comprehension. As Julio put it, “I don’t understand the words . . . sometimes I don’t even know how to read them.” When the reader does not accurately recognize words and the reading rate is low, comprehension of the written message is seriously affected. Neither Laurie nor Julio was able to answer most questions about the text. According to them, these challenges also occur when reading any other elaborate text in their textbooks.

Conclusions

The findings of this study do not account for all the linguistic challenges migrant children face when they return to Mexico and enroll in school after having studied in the United States. Our observations did not take into consideration the more complex dimensions of language, such as grammar, syntax, and discourse structures. Nonetheless, the results of this study offer insights into what these children, as main actors of a very complex process, experience during their yearly “transition” to written Spanish.

As many other transnational students, Laurie and Julio speak Spanish, a language they learned with their family and during the months they spend in Mexico every year. However, a significant portion of their literacy acquisition process has occurred in English in U.S. schools. Consequently, Laurie and Julio are challenged every time they read and write in Spanish. Transnational students go through an intricate process, which presupposes a transition from oral L1 (oral Spanish) to written L2 (written English), once they start

the literacy process in the United States. When they return to Mexico and they enroll in school, they move from written L2 (written English) to written L1 (written Spanish), and simultaneously they switch from oral L2 (oral English) to oral L2 (oral Spanish), while socializing with their peers outside the classroom. We have demonstrated that these series of shifts cannot simply be called transitions as they represent deep ruptures.

It might be argued that the problems international migrant children returning to Mexico face are no different than the problems any other monolingual student encounters when exposed to written Spanish. Nonetheless, the phonological and graphical repertoire of transnational students is broader than that of a monolingual Spanish-speaker. Without the solid foundation of literacy and without any proper help in either school system, the children face a linguistic disruption that affects the acquisition of basic academic skills, essential to school success. Furthermore, without the basic skills and knowledge they need in order to successfully finish their studies in one or both school systems, these children find themselves in a vulnerable situation instead of capitalizing on the richness of their school experiences.

As we argue in this article, the main goal of U.S. schools with respect to non-English speaking children is to inculcate oral and written English, because the acquisition of the societal language is the problem to be solved. When these children return to their country of origin (or the parents' country of origin), they speak, read and write English. In Mexican schools, their linguistic competencies are not recognized; instead their linguistic performance becomes a problem. As Mexican teachers say: "no saben leer bien."

While the oral Spanish of these working-class migrant students is not valued in Mexican schools, the school system fails to acknowledge what migrant students do possess: the ability to cope with the linguistic reality of two cultures and a wider literacy repertoire than monolingual students. Migrant students also possess knowledge of different cultural processes and school systems and the ability to move between and become familiar with two different social and cultural spaces. Under more favorable circumstances, they could develop multiple literacies and mental flexibility as valuable life-long resources.

Mexican schools and teachers are facing a new and fascinating challenge: children are moving from the United States to Mexico and they are attending Mexican schools. They are bilingual, and they can develop biliteracy skills if institutions and educators support them. In order to achieve this goal, Mexican schools have to build biliteracy

programs that acknowledge the rich experiences and potential of migrant children, facilitate connections across languages and develop their metalinguistic awareness (Beeman and Urow, 2012; Escamilla *et al.* 2013).

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