

# **Returnees' Identity Construction at a BA TESOL Program in Mexico**

**Construcción de identidad de retornados en un pregrado en enseñanza del inglés para hablantes de otras lenguas en México**

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This article has at its core the unraveling of factors that have influenced the identity of those who have been caught in between two worlds (Mexico and The United States) and whom will be called pre- and in-service returnees from now on. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to delve deep into the participants' lived experiences through narrative inquiry which in turn aided in the discovery of the elements that have influenced their identity construction. The data suggest that those same elements have been crucial in the creation of a small culture among the participants at a teacher education program in teaching English to speakers of other languages at a Mexican university.

*Key words:* Identity, in-service returnees, narrative inquiry, pre-service returnees.

Este artículo se centra en aclarar algunos de los factores que influyen en la identidad de las personas que se han visto atrapadas entre dos "mundos" (Méjico y Estados Unidos), también conocidas como los "retornados". Se optó por un método cualitativo para ahondar en sus experiencias vividas mediante la indagación narrativa, la cual a su vez aportó al descubrimiento de elementos que influyen en la construcción de sus identidades. Los datos sugieren que esos mismos elementos son de suma importancia en la constitución de una pequeña cultura dentro de la licenciatura en la enseñanza de inglés a hablantes de otras lenguas, en una universidad mexicana.

*Palabras clave:* identidad, investigación narrativa, retornados en formación inicial, retornados en formación permanente.

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## Introduction

The objective of this research project had at its core the investigation of identity formation in students that have lived in The United States for a period of time and have come back to reside in Mexico. These are students that are currently undertaking the BA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at the University of Guanajuato. This work was part of a research project conducted by a teacher-researcher at the Language Department and I was invited to be part of it, first as a participant and then as a way to be able to develop my thesis project in order for me to complete the BA TESOL program at the University of Guanajuato.

Personally, it is very important to discover how other pre-service and in-service returnees have dealt with the constant migration between The United States and Mexico and how it has impacted their lives since I am myself one of many who emigrated as a child to The United States and have come back to reside in Mexico. Further, while living in both countries, I have experienced some form of discrimination from family, friends, and others based mostly on appearance, linguistic style, and linguistic choice. Since joining the BA program, I became aware that I am not the only one who has undergone these types of discrimination; therefore, an interest in this area was awakened in me.

I believe that by investigating this topic I will be able to better understand who I am and be better adept at finding a balance in my life and perhaps help those who are undergoing the difficult task of asking themselves who they are and how they are represented in the world that surrounds them. Further, I believe that the findings could also help the BA program in that it may allow the student body to integrate Mexican born and raised students with Mexican born-American raised ones in a smoother and faster manner.

The next segment will allow the reader to further understand how this project came about by relating some of the circumstances the researcher-participant has endured throughout his life.

## Background

Since I came back to Mexico in 2007, I have always considered myself different from almost everyone around me. One of the reasons is that I grew up in The United States with a more accepting ideology than most Mexicans. Further, when I had just arrived in Mexico, I did not consider myself Mexican because I had lived in The United States for 23 years and had acquired an American way of perceiving and interpreting life around me; therefore, I had a problem accepting some of the Mexican customs, norms, and mores. Another reason is that certain characteristics of my persona have always been pointed out to me both in The United States and Mexico. For example, the way I look, speak, and carry myself. While in The United States, those around me never fully accepted me as an American and while in Mexico, people never fully accepted me as a Mexican. This, in turn, has hindered my perception of who I am in this world.

When I had just arrived from The United States, I noticed that I tended to associate more with people whom I knew had an American background like myself. I believed we could relate more in terms of sports, tv shows, music, cartoons, and basically American culture. I also noticed that I felt more comfortable talking to them than I would with a Mexican. Nonetheless, as years went by, I noticed that I started feeling more Mexican than before thus questioning who I really was in this world. Hence, this is where my interest to research the identity of those who have had the experience of living both in The United States and in Mexico comes from. Fundamentally, trying to decipher the life experiences that have made us, returnees, different and how they

have aided in the development of a particular culture at the University of Guanajuato.

### **Literature Review**

This section encompasses salient concepts which were taken in order to give this project the framework needed for a clear delineation of parameters. First, an understanding of the nature of what it means to be a returnee is highlighted followed by the concept of identity. Last, the focus shifts to small cultures.

### **Returnees**

An important element in this research project is defining what a returnee is. According to Mora (2011) a returnee is a person who was born in Mexico, spent any given number of years in The United States and comes back to reside in Mexico permanently for whatever reason. Moreover, the amount of years the person spent in The United States gave way to shape the person's identity. In this context, all of the participants are returnees since most of them were born in Mexico, migrated to The United States at an early age and have come back to reside in Mexico once again. For various reasons, they have ended up undertaking a BA TESOL program at the University of Guanajuato where the researcher has taken notice of their interaction patterns and how they stand out from their Mexican born and raised schoolmates. The researcher, being one of the participants himself, has noticed that there are some commonalities amongst them—through their life experiences—and these in turn help define their identity inside the BA. The following topic explains the term identity.

### **Identity**

According to Stets and Burke (2000), identity has at its core, "the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations of that role

and its performance" (p. 2). Moreover, identity can be taken as a term, "to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). A third stance states that identity encompasses, "one's conception of self in the world" (Mooney et al., 2011, p. 174). Further, it is claimed that in post-structural perspectives, identity is, "fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, in particular historical and cultural circumstances" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 419).

In this study, the returnees examined have all lived in The United States and have thus created an identity based on an Americanized cultural perspective. Nonetheless, throughout their lives they have been singled out because of their Mexican roots, because of their accent, because of their looks, or because of other reasons. When they arrive in Mexico to reside, they take on the challenge of engaging in an identity struggle between their American self and their rooted Mexican one often falling into a zone which is in the middle of both and which constantly shifts from one to the other depending on who they are with. When they find themselves in each other's presence, they seem to engage in feelings of nostalgia for their old country which Gans (1979) describes as symbolic identity. Moreover, they seem to bond with each other because of the language and because they have had similar experiences in life. Baker (2010) posits that language becomes a symbol of belongingness to a language group. Therefore, it is through language that these returnees bond.

### **Small Cultures**

The term culture, at first glance, usually has the connotation of a large entity, ethnicity, nationalism, or internationalism (Holliday, 1999). However, this term can also be applied to a smaller entity such as a

classroom, a family, or a small group of people (Holliday, 1999). To a further extent, there is a difference between a sub-culture and a small culture in that sub-cultures are, “social groups which are perceived to deviate from the normative ideals of adult communities” (Thornton as cited in Holliday, 1999, p. 237). Moreover, they are thought to be somewhat at odds with the large culture within which they exist.

A small culture, on the other hand, is one which can be created for short or long periods of time between a tourist and a local, a teacher and his or her pupils, language students and their native-speaker teachers, workers and their boss, etc. Moreover, a small culture has no relation to ethnicity, nationalism, or internationalism but to social groupings that are not subordinated by a large entity and which can also be used to interpret group behavior (Holliday, 1999).

The concept of small culture is of utmost importance in this study because the participants seem to create one within their BA program. It is a culture they create for as long as they are involved in university amongst themselves and their classmates. Moreover, it is defined by the concepts aforementioned and also, their bilingualism, their family, their language at home, their experiences with discrimination, their linguistic style, their linguistic choice, and their accent. All of these factors appear to have influenced the small culture they create at the BA program by giving them a salient status that can be noticed right away.

### **Research Question**

The research questions which are posed in this project include the following: (1) What are the factors that have influenced the identity of a group of pre- and in-service returnees? and (2) How have those factors helped them to construct a small culture in the BA in TESOL program? Consequently, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to be able to understand the participants’ personal anecdotes which shed light

on matters through a narrative inquiry stance. I will explain this in the following sections.

## **Method**

### **Research Site and Participants**

The research site is the University of Guanajuato’s Language Department, which is located at the heart of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Mexico. The participants undertake the BA which takes place on Fridays from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. and on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The participants taking part in this project include six males who are between the ages of 19 and 29. They were all born in Mexico and as young children migrated to The United States to different locations with their families for various reasons. Throughout their lives they have lived similar experiences both in school and in their communities, thus, when they come together in the BA program, they seem to create their own group bringing with them their linguistic style, dress code, behavioral patterns, and similar anecdotes, all of which are relevant to this study.

Furthermore, they have all had difficulties fully fitting into their social circles within their academic context as well as in their communities. One of the main reasons why they decided to join the BA program is because they feel as if they would like to exploit their language abilities and because of their sense of helping others somehow.

### **Qualitative Research**

This research is to be qualitative in nature. According to Maycut and Morehouse (1994), “Qualitative research examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants” (p. 2). In this case, the participants are asked to retell their life accounts through autobiographical narratives which are then examined, thus binding this research to a qualitative philosophical approach.

Moreover, based on Coffey and Atkinson (1996), there are different approaches to analyzing data in qualitative research. The one which was taken into consideration consists of the researcher describing what has been found in the data and interpreting it based on his or her own views. Therefore, the researcher needs to intertwine selections from the data together with his or her own interpretations in order to recreate an understandable reality from the researcher's point of view for the reader to be able to grasp (Strauss & Corbin as cited in Maycut & Morehouse, 1994). In addition, reflexivity was crucial for this study. Reflexivity allows us to reflect on the past in order to give meaning to our present and future. Moreover, to be reflexive, "not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). Since the researcher is also a participant in this project, it seemed most appropriate for him to provide his own perspective since he has also lived many of the experiences the other participants have related.

### Narrative Inquiry

An element of utmost importance in this research is the personal narration of the participants' lived experiences through written autobiographies. Webster and Mertova (2007) state, "It provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories" (p. 1). To a further extent, this method of investigation was chosen, once again, due to the nature of the questions posed in this project which deal with the complexity of attempting to understand and highlight the factors which have influenced the participants' identities throughout their lives and at their present BA program and how these in turn have influenced the possible creation of a cultural phenomenon. Dyson

and Genishi (as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007) state that through our personal narratives we depict our cultural membership through the content of our personal stories. Therefore, in this project it was a very useful method since all of the participants related their life stories. Riessman (as cited in Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 54) points out that this method of obtaining data is, "doing research with first person accounts of experience."

### Data Gathering Tools

On a first instance, the participants were asked to write a short autobiography depicting their life across the Mexican-American border, their upbringing, their schooling, the difficulties they may have had with learning both English and Spanish, discrimination, and so forth. Second, they were told they would be interviewed and recorded based on questions which were deemed relevant in order to broaden the topics explored in the data analysis section. The reason why they were asked to write autobiographies was because it would provide a starting point into narrative inquiry. Having conducted the recorded interviews, we needed to transcribe the data in order to provide a textual representation which could be coded and analyzed. Moreover, the participants were codified by using a letter from their first names and the number 1 next to it in order to highlight the fact that they were the first candidates that participated in this research.

### Ethics

An ethical code was established prior to the project in order to ensure parameters which would protect the identity and integrity of the participants as well as the researcher. Warren (2001) states that "institutional boards and federal policy in various countries provide guidelines for the protection of subjects from physical or emotional harm" (p. 88). Consequently, the participants were given a letter of informed consent whereby they were informed of the

depth and scope of the research project, the possibility of publication, and the fact that all evidence of their persona would be changed so that they are not identified.

### **Findings**

After analyzing the results, there were many themes that emerged such as complex identity struggle, BA group culture, Spanish at home, family, accent and style, language choice, and discrimination. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on two: Identity and BA Group.

### **Identity**

When I joined this BA program, it was quite difficult for me to state whether I was American or Mexican. I had already been in Mexico for two years and I thought I was still an American; however, I noticed that people would remind me that I am Mexican everywhere I went. Consequently, I started thinking of myself as one but I would always retain some kind of allegiance to The United States due to my upbringing as a Mexican-American. In the following excerpt taken from participant M1, a similar stance is taken:

I didn't really feel American because I was actually raised you know like a Mexican I guess but you know since I have a lot of influences by school by friends by teachers you know. I mean they were all American you know I guess I mean that in a certain way was a part of me. But I mean at home you know I ate tortillas you know, frijoles and talk in Spanish so you know. I don't know... I thought I was Mexican but at the same time I was a bit American. And also because I have an American nationality too.

This participant mentioned that he did not really feel American because he was brought up as a Mexican at home even when he lived in The United States. Nonetheless, the influence he had over time in school from friends and teachers compelled him to have an

American identity even to this day. Participant M1 still feels a bit American due to his upbringing in an American context, just as is my case. Even outside of The United States we feel the need or even desire to be part of that old country which is related to West's definition of identity, "the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation and the desire for security and safety" (as cited in Norton, 2000, p. 78). Gans (1979) describes this as symbolic allegiance, which means that the country one once lived in is nostalgically remembered. Participant N1 expresses the same nostalgia having arrived in Mexico three years prior to the interview:

I feel much more Mexican than American. I feel like just... just the inside a little bit of my inside is American just uh...to music preference to show preference is American I prefer uh... American media to Spanish media but...I believe my culture, my way of thinking is mostly Mexican just a just a little bit of American influence in there.

Participant N1 appears to have the need or desire to feel a little bit American. He appears not to be able to let go of his upbringing in the old country which is notable when he says that a bit of him is still American.

To a further extent, participant R1 adamantly discusses his American identity after having returned to Mexico for a number of years, "I don't want to deny my American culture because my American culture marks who I am today I'm a professional English teacher." Participant R1 relates yet another example in the following excerpt, except this time it occurs through both of his languages.

I'd say kind of both. Here at the BA well I...since we are all speaking English I feel kind of like at home speaking English and when we leave the school I tend to be Mexican since I need my Spanish to get around.

Again we find that the participant still retains his American identity at the BA program through

speaking English after which he is quickly able to change to his Mexican one by speaking Spanish, depending on where he finds himself. Moreover, it seems as though all of the participants are able to do this. Apparently, having been in Mexico for years now, they find it is not as difficult for them to change their identity depending on who they are with, where they find themselves or even how long they have been outside The United States. Participant N1 mentioned how he now feels Mexican, however, he explains that when he had just arrived in Mexico he felt American, "inside I wasn't Mexican, I was more American." Nowadays, he will not hesitate to mention that he is actually Mexican. Participant L1 exemplifies how time has enabled him to shift more to his Mexican identity:

Five years ago I would say English 100%, I thought myself as an American, thought of myself as an American I mean I enjoy baseball games, I love barbecues, barbecue sauce I mean I like American culture a lot and uh...but then little by little as the years have gone by and I'm in Mexico I feel a lot more Mexican now.

Participant L1 had been in Mexico for nearly six years at the time of the interview and was cognizant of the fact that as time went by, his identity had slowly shifted. Five years ago he would have said he was American because it was fresh in his mind. Nonetheless, as the years went by, he moved away from it into a more Mexican mode. Of particular interest with participant L1 is the fact that he is able to notice that he is neither American nor Mexican and actually falls into what he calls a "gray area:"

It makes me...first of all it makes me feel really proud you know. Not too many people, I recently noticed that not too many people fall, I'm going to call it that gray area but I think I'm right in the middle sometimes I speak perfect Spanish, I speak perfect English I can understand both exactly the same but uh I mean I feel very happy and when I had just gotten here from the United States I mean I was proud my ego was really boosted because people knew I wasn't from here.

Through participant L1's insight, it seems as though none of the participants really have a defined identity; it is more of an area that is neither from The United States nor Mexico, the "gray area." Furthermore, it seems that they are aware of both identities and as time goes by, they seem to be slowly shifting away from the American identity into their Mexican one without wanting to let go of their American past.

It appears as though the participants have lived in an identity crisis since childhood. Through the use of their narratives, they can relate recollections of this. For example, participant L1 expresses how his circle of friends never fully accepted him as Mexican:

I didn't have an identity because you know my friends accepted me in the States, they knew who I was they knew about me and stuff but I was always the Mexican with them you know, they were mostly white.

The participant exemplifies how he was not fully accepted by his friends in middle school. Even though he had been around his "white" friends for some time, they would always single him out as being Mexican. To a further extent, he feels that the color of his skin made him a salient character in his circle:

They would call me by my name and everything but everyone knew I was I was Mexican you know I mean I'm the only brown person there so I was like Fez in That 70's Show.

Seemingly, in this case it was the color of his skin which had an impact on his identity and he was and is able to notice it. Not only was the color of skin a factor which singled many of the participants out as being Mexican in their American context, but it was also pressure from their parents which enabled them to live in between two identities. In the following excerpt, participant S1 relates the following:

Well my mom, she was very strict and she was always like constantly reminding us like "Don't forget where you are from."

Don't forget you're Mexican. And like don't try to adapt fully to this culture because we are not from this culture.

Participant R1 was also influenced by his father:

Well, one of the main things that my father always taught me was to be proud of my heritage so I used to always stand highly stand up for my country even though I knew very little about it and I had no background knowledge of what my country was but I would never deny my nationality.

From the previous excerpts it is notable that many of the participants may have been in a constant struggle with identity since childhood. Norton (2000) describes identity as being a site of struggle because it is not permanent; thus, anyone can have a sense of mobility with identity shifting back and forth between them given the circumstances. Such is the case with the previous recollections from the participants. They appear to have been in constant identity movement throughout their lives. When they were in The United States, they were not perceived as Americans and many of them said that in Mexico they were not perceived as Mexicans, as R1 mentions:

I feel I don't have an identity in a sense that in the States, I'm not Mexican to the Mexican people and I'm not American obviously and in Mexico I'm not Mexican.

The previous excerpt shows how complex identity can be and the difficulties that participants have faced when trying to fit into their context. However, they have found a place where they can be comfortable; this will be discussed in the following theme.

### BA Group

The returnees in the BA program seem to find each other quite quickly and naturally. They seem to approach someone they think or know is a returnee and who has some common ground. Participant N1 relates the following:

Since the first day since we took the second day of testing in order to enter this school we quickly found each other. We found our little group and it's like "oh you're from here" and ever since then we just we just clicked together automatically.

Seemingly, the returnees in the BA program establish a group as soon as they find others who come from The United States. One commonality that is found in many of the participants is that they appear to bond with each other due to their past experiences in The United States. Participant M1 mentions how he feels that he shares some common things with the rest of the returnees such as knowing "how it is" in the old country, perhaps referring to the lifestyle in The United States:

Well, yeah we share some common things. Well, I share some common things you know with others...for example you know there is a couple of things you know, we lived in the States you know. We know how it is...you know and you know that's basically what makes us makes some of us you know a little bit similar because well you know well you know how every...how everything is in The States you know and we know what each one of us goes through and then when we come here you know I mean in that sense you know we share you know some you know some things similar things.

Participant N1 adds the following, "in my case I try to find someone who I can feel comfortable talking to who I can relate to in some way who maybe has lived something similar to what I've lived has gone through something similar I've gone through." When the participant was questioned further about which experiences he believes are similar he stated:

For example, a similarity could be maybe growing up maybe in a certain area for example in my case, it was pretty troublesome where I grew up and maybe a classmate or someone else from the BA also grew up in the same place so I feel good talking about maybe making it out and that person may also feel good talking about how they were able to make it out so it's those types of similarities that maybe form a close relationship amongst us and

that maybe gives us confidence to be able to interact better with each other.

Participant S1 corroborated what participant 11 stated above. He mentions how he also looks for those who have had similar past experiences in The United States and how that helps them bond with each other. Participant L1 relates the following concerning those commonalities:

I mean N1 and I can identify because we grew up kinda in the same areas and stuff and uh we would talk about uh LA culture, you know the Hip Hop, the uh the gangbangers over there and I mean all kinds of crazy things.

It appears as though many of the returnees grew up in rough neighborhoods in The United States and the myriad of experiences they went through in those areas allows them to feel safe and comfortable when they find others with shared experiences in the BA. By sharing their experiences and coming together, they create, possibly, a unique small culture in the BA program since they are individuals who decide to remain together based on their experiences and their command of English. The participants do have friends who have never been in The United States in the program; however, the ones who have been in The USA can be found in each other's presence more often than with the others. For example, it is far more likely for returnees to become good friends with each other than with a student raised solely in Mexico.

Concerning their role in the BA, most participants seem to be aware of the fact that they are not just there to study but also to help others. Participant S1 relates the following, "my initial role is a student and but not only a student but also a classmate be there for classmates when they need it." Participant M1 also relates something similar:

My role here is I guess you know is a student but I don't know I'm also here to help others you know cause I know there's I got classmates who I don't know probably need help I don't...I guess

in different things I'm not really sure what but you know if I'm able to help somebody too I don't know I'm kind of like innate.

Once again we find a different participant feeling the need to help others in the BA. Saying that he is "innate" when helping others, there seems to be a hint of his goodwill to be of assistance to the rest and this is perhaps a factor which has influenced his decision of becoming a language instructor. Nic Craith (2012) posits that in dual language environments where children have to assist their parents in day to day communication due to the fact that their parents were not fluent enough in the target language, there was a source of pride in some of the participants in her study since, "they imagined themselves as teachers" (p. 103). The salient feature in this case could be that it is not only him but most of the participants who share his view of being helpful. When asked how they could help others, participant 11 replied the following:

Yeah for example maybe being in The States helped me have maybe a little better pronunciation than some of my classmates. Maybe the education I received was different than they received it and is maybe the type of education I have is what the teachers maybe ask for and want so I know I can help them in some sense and they can help they can feel helped from me um...identifying the differences they don't know of.

Moreover, participant S1 relates similar thoughts, "sharing some...the pronunciation, we understand a little bit more vocabulary than our friends here at the BA." Participant L1 wanted others to know that he had a very good level of English and also wanted to cash in on his skill:

I used to sell my assignments and my help to my classmates in the first and second semesters if they needed help I would charge them, "hey buy me lunch, give me 20 pesos" or something because I wanted to make a buck to you know make profit off of my skill.

However, after a few semesters into the program he read an article which changed his mind about

charging his classmates and instead decided to help them, “after this uh this chapter that we read in sociolinguistics I didn’t do that anymore and I would help them a lot more” (L1).

Thus far, there seems to be a pattern in the participant’s identity formation concerning their friends in the BA. It seems as though they look for people with similar backgrounds in order to perhaps feel that they are not the only ones who come from The United States. Participant N1 relates the following:

We felt...personally I felt I was like oh my god I’m going to be the only one. I don’t know who I’m going to hang out . . . I was anxious I was like I’m going to be the only one. I was anxious, I was worried. I didn’t know how was...I didn’t know who I was going to fit in with because in high school I never fitted in with the rest of the group.

As mentioned before, the participants seem to have had many experiences battling with their identity. They seem to always have a hard time fitting in one place or another. N1 mentioned that he had a hard time fitting in in high school and as he entered the BA program, he did not want to be “the only one” referring to the status of returnee. Therefore, it seems that they all want to find others who have shared the experience of having lived in The United States.

## Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data, there seem to be common traits in the returnees within the BA program at the University of Guanajuato which appear to facilitate the creation of a small culture amongst themselves. Firstly, it appears as though they do not have a well-defined identity but can move from one to the other (American or Mexican) based on who they are with. Since childhood they may have felt exclusion from social circles due to their inability to speak English or the accepted linguistic variety which are sources of an identity crisis in their upbringing in The United States. Moreover, once in Mexico,

they were also excluded from social circles again because of their linguistic variety in Spanish. This opened the doors to discrimination since childhood, consequently, leading to feelings of alienation and not being fully accepted in their social circles.

Furthermore, there seems to have been a struggle with language in their homes when they were children. All of the participants were either not allowed to speak English in their home or their parents were shy about it. Therefore, the language spoken in their home has always been Spanish which may have served the purpose of keeping the participants rooted in the Mexican culture and, consequently, not allowing them to fully immerse themselves in an American identity. Moreover, their extended family was also a factor in their struggle with identity. They were always singled out as being the “cousin” from The United States. All of these instances of alienation seem to find some sort of meeting point in the BA when they come into contact with other returnees. Apparently, there are two binding forces between them, the first is language and the second is their past. Furthermore, they seem to enjoy talking to each other about their past experiences in The United States and how they “made out.” Being in the BA seems to provide them with a safe-haven by allowing socialization with individuals who have undergone a similar upbringing. This reality, in turn, seems to create a culture of returnees.

We can postulate that being a returnee perhaps means living a life of discrimination both in The United States and in Mexico. As participant R1 mentioned, in The United States he was not American and in Mexico he is not Mexican. Therefore, returnees seem to live in what participant L1 claims to be the “gray area.” In the BA however, they immediately create bonds with each other because they feel comfortable talking about their lives amongst themselves. Perhaps in the BA they forget that they are in that “gray area” and perhaps they all feel at ease in their newly found environment culture.

## Conclusion

First, the answer to the question of how the BA in TESOL pre- and in-service returnees construct their identity may lie in the lived experiences which have shaped the returnees in their quest through The United States and Mexico. Within these lived experiences we find salient factors which may have paved the way for an identity which is neither American nor Mexican but one which stands in between and which they bring about depending on who they find themselves with. Factors such as the language they spoke at home and in public, family relationships, accent, linguistic style, choice, and discrimination seem to have shaped their identity today. Moreover, all of these factors play an important role in that they help the returnees discern how to behave when they are with one person or another. Further, their identity appears to have been a constant battle because throughout their lives they have not been able to fit entirely into their context since they have always been singled out, more often than not in a discriminatory manner.

The previous points are the main factors that have influenced the returnees' identities in this study. These were important to highlight before moving on to answer the question regarding how these factors have helped them construct a small culture in the BA TESOL program. Fundamentally, having all lived similar experiences with not being able to fit in entirely into their contexts, some returnees appear to find themselves questioning who they are going to be socializing with when they enter the program. As they perceive different people speaking English, a language they have nostalgia for, they are quick to identify those who come from The United States through their accent. Therefore, their keen sense of English language deviations appears to be a factor that helps them find each other in the program. Moreover, returnees seem to be sensitive to educational settings because it is here where they have suffered the most discrimination. Once they find others who speak English with a near

native accent, they tend to become relaxed in their environment and establish bonds with each other through their life stories. Returnees share these stories with each other and find that most of them have had to cross the border or have lived in similar places under similar circumstances. Moreover, they appear to carry themselves with a sense of pride because of the high level of English they have, compared to their Mexican born and raised classmates.

Another characteristic which apparently binds them is the American culture they were immersed in. They bond with each other through American music, sports, comedy, movies, neighborhoods, and the food they remember in their old homes. Therefore, they are more prone to be found in each other's presence than with others because they can reminisce about their upbringing.

These were the factors that may have helped the participants shape their identity and create a small culture within the BA program. The following segment will posit the socio-cultural implications within the program.

## Implications

The implications which ensued from this research project for the BA program are the following. First, from a socio-cultural stance, it is vital for there to be an understanding of the fact that there is a small culture taking place within the program with returnees at center stage. As I have already mentioned, returnees tend to be seen in each other's presence more often than in the presence of non-returnees. Moreover, they can understand each other better because of their life experiences which they will often be heard talking about. Returnees also hold themselves in high regard within the program because of the confidence they place in their language abilities, because of the way they dress, because of the things they talk about, and because of their bicultural knowledge. They are a group of people that stands out from the rest because

they are much closer to the American way of life and the language they are trying to teach.

Second, this project can help to better understand what can be seen as a social divide between those who learned English in The United States and those who learned it in Mexico. Through the careful orientation of the student body prior to the commencement of classes, this point can be highlighted in order to avoid what could be negative feelings towards returnees because of their proficiency and cultural knowledge. Moreover, it can also help returnees to be less critical of accents when their Mexican classmates speak English; it would help to integrate students in a much smoother manner.

Third, returnees can assist as a helping force for the advancement in the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the English language and The United States. Since the program is made for those venturing into English language pedagogy, it is important for the students who have not really been exposed to the target language country to become culturally aware of their social practices, amongst other factors. In addition, returnees can be taken as native language models both in spoken and written discourse. By integrating returnees with students who do not have a high proficiency or articulation of the English language phonetic system, those students have a higher chance of improving their accent and vocabulary. To a further extent, it is known that writing in English and Spanish is different. Returnees and Mexican students could perhaps mutually benefit from each other concerning writing conventions both in English and in Spanish.

### **Further Research**

One area which can be explored to a further extent would be the critical incidents which defined the course of the identity of the returnees. I believe that by analyzing specific moments which impacted their lives, a greater understanding may arise. A second area of study can be a more in depth analysis

of the feelings involved in the shaping of the returnees' identity. From infancy to adulthood, what are the different stages of feelings which returnees undergo after they cross the border? Also, how do those feelings influence their representation in this world? Finally, having established that there is a small separate culture taking place, it would be important to analyze whether returnees are their own ethnicity.

This research project had at its core the identification of factors involved in the construction of identity in returnees. As a researcher participant, it was absolutely personal and important to establish the factors that have influenced me throughout my life in order to help others like myself to embrace the life we have had to endure. Personally, it has been necessary to uncover the enigmas surrounding my persona in order to be better adept at representing myself in this world. In essence, it has helped me find a balance in my life and my hope is that others may also find it through this research enterprise. Once one knows who he or she is, then it is difficult to become unbalanced which to my belief allows for a better world of understanding and acceptance.

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