

<https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2603181>

Articles

Spanish vs. English, American or Mexican?: migration, language and identity in young returnees in Mexico

Español vs. inglés, ¿estadounidense o mexicano?: migración, idioma e identidad en jóvenes retornados en México

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between age at emigration, age at return, linguistic proficiency and identity among Mexican migrants returning from the United States. The study focuses on Veracruz and Puebla (2019-2021) and employs an exploratory quantitative design based on surveys of 26 university students from different migratory cohorts. The findings suggest that early emigration is associated with greater English proficiency without necessarily undermining Spanish, whereas later emigration and early return tend to promote stronger use of Spanish. Additionally, emigrating during adolescence is linked to the development of hybrid identities, although no clear association is found with age at return. The study's contribution lies in integrating a longitudinal perspective on migration trajectories, connecting timing of emigration and return with language proficiency and identity formation. However, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the population studied.

Keywords: return migration, generational cohort, linguistic proficiency, identity, age of return.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la relación entre edad de emigración, edad de retorno, competencias lingüísticas e identidad en migrantes mexicanos retornados de Estados Unidos. El estudio se sitúa en Veracruz y Puebla (2019-2021) y emplea un diseño cuantitativo exploratorio con encuestas a 26 estudiantes universitarios pertenecientes a distintas cohortes migratorias. Los hallazgos sugieren que la emigración temprana favorece el dominio del inglés (aunque sin detrimento del español), mientras que la emigración tardía promueve mayor uso del español, lo mismo que el retorno a edad temprana. Además,

Received on October 13, 2025

Accepted on March 24, 2026.

Published on March 27, 2026.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



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CITATION: Jacobo, M. (2026). Spanish vs. English, American or Mexican?: migration, language and identity in young returnees in Mexico. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 27, Article e181. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2603181>

emigrar durante la adolescencia se vincula con identidades híbridas, aunque no presenta una asociación clara con la edad de retorno. El valor del estudio radica en integrar una perspectiva longitudinal de la trayectoria migratoria, que vincula edad de emigración y retorno con competencia lingüística e identidad. El tamaño de la muestra, sin embargo, limita las inferencias a poblaciones distintas a la presentada. Palabras clave: migración de retorno, cohorte generacional, competencia lingüística, identidad, edad de retorno.

Introduction

International migration profoundly impacts the lives and biographies of those who experience it. Crossing geopolitical, cultural and linguistic borders—especially during childhood or adolescence—has long-term effects on migrants' socialization, language and identity. The mass emigration from Mexico to the United States, which has a history spanning more than a century, has generated a prolific field of scholarship. Nonetheless, it was the shift in migration patterns during the first decade of the 21st century that prompted extensive research in recent years. This period, referred to “the decade in which migration changed” (Escobar Latapí & Masferrer, 2023), was characterized by a decline in emigration to the United States, a return migration that exceeded outbound emigration, and the emergence of new groups among returnees, such as children and young people with educational experiences in both countries.

The anti-immigrant policies implemented during the administration of Donald Trump, along with the immigration restrictions implemented under Joe Biden and the strengthening of the deportation system during the presidency of Barack Obama, have contributed to an increase in forced returns and *de facto* expulsions of families with mixed immigration status, including U.S.-born children of Mexican parents (Hamilton et al., 2023). As a result, the presence of children, adolescents and young people with educational trajectories in the United States—whether born in Mexico or on U.S. soil—has become increasingly noticeable in Mexican schools, giving rise to a growing body of research on their experiences and their adaptation to the Mexican education system.

It is now well-established that migrant children and youth returning from the United States face multiple barriers in Mexico, including structural, cultural and social challenges (Despaigne & Jacobo Suárez, 2016; Jardón Hernández & Macías Suárez, 2024; Vargas Valle, 2022b). These range from cumbersome enrollment procedures to a lack of pedagogical support programs for teachers and the absence of initiatives designed to facilitate the linguistic transition between educational systems. Among the challenges, studies addressing linguistic and identity-related issues stand out. Research has shown that transnational educational experiences influence the formation of hybrid national affiliations (Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011), particularly among those who spend prolonged periods in the United States (Vargas Valle, 2025). There is also evidence that proficiency in Spanish and English influences the national identity and sense of belonging among child and youth returnees (Christiansen et al., 2018; Despaigne, 2024; Mora Vázquez et al., 2018; Ramírez, 2025; Rodríguez-Cruz, 2022; Sarabia, 2017).

The situation is particularly complex for transnational students who constantly navigate between the educational systems and cultural contexts of Mexico and the United States. These students must develop strategic bilingual skills: first, learning English upon entering U.S. schools; later, developing academic Spanish to integrate into school when they return to Mexico; and, finally, maintaining fluency in English in anticipation of the possibility of moving once again to the United States. In fact, various qualitative studies have documented the linguistic and identity-related tensions that transnational students face when reintegrating into Mexican schools.

Research focusing on school reintegration and access to upper secondary and higher education shows that the bilingual proficiency acquired in the United States is not always recognized by educational institutions (Tacelosky, 2018); that Spanish may function as a family language but not necessarily as a fully developed language of academic literacy; and that English, even when it has been the language of schooling, tends to lose formal domains of use after return (Cortez Román et al., 2015; Nava Nava et al., 2017; Navarro-Hernández et al., 2023). Similarly, studies in border contexts have found that English proficiency may deteriorate as the length of residence in Mexico increases, particularly when formal opportunities to use and certify the student's competence in the language disappear (Vargas Valle, 2022a). Collectively, these studies have been critical to understanding the immediate challenges of educational transition, processes of language shift and the renegotiation of identity in specific contexts of school integration.

Nevertheless, these studies focus on academic performance at specific points in the school-entry process and do not comparatively analyze how age at emigration and return shape differentiated linguistic trajectories, nor how these trajectories are articulated with national affiliations and cultural identities at later stages of life. In dialogue with this literature, this article broadens the analytical scope by adding a longitudinal perspective that considers the complete educational trajectory and the age of socialization in each country as a structuring axis. Starting from the premise that emigration is not the final stage of the migration trajectory, this study incorporates return migration as a key element that redefines linguistic and identity dynamics, depending on the life stage at which it occurs.

Specifically, the study examines how age at emigration and age at return—and, consequently, the degree of socialization in the country of origin or destination—differentially influence: *a*) the acquisition of English and the maintenance of Spanish; *b*) perceptions of national belonging; and, *c*) the formation of hybrid cultural identities. By incorporating a longitudinal perspective that examines the entire educational trajectory, this study enables the identification of descriptive trends among migration cohorts, self-perceived language proficiency, and reported identity.

The analysis brings together the theoretical frameworks of generational cohorts (Rumbaut, 1994, 2004); transnational students (Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011); and return migration and identity (Jacobó Suárez et al., 2022; Ramírez, 2025; Sarabia, 2017); together with studies on heritage language (Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Norton, 2013; Venturin, 2019) and the relationship between identity construction and language (Norton, 2013).

The contribution of this study lies in systematizing the variability of these experiences according to two key factors: 1) generational or migratory cohort, and 2) age of return. These elements are crucial for understanding the dynamics of linguistic and cultural identity that shape readaptation to the country of origin. Furthermore, this study contributes directly to the field of linguistic studies by highlighting the role of

language as a determining factor in educational inclusion or exclusion, specifically at a largely unexplored educational level: higher education.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework for analyzing the relations between migration trajectories, language and identity. It then discusses the literature on the return of children and youth to Mexico, particularly regarding the influence of return migration on language competence and self-perception of identity. Subsequently, the methodological and data collection decisions are explained, and the paper concludes with the analysis and discussion.

Migration, language and identity: theoretical and empirical perspectives

Migration studies, especially those focusing on the processes of incorporation and integration among children and youth, have been strongly influenced by the concept of generational cohorts coined by Rubén Rumbaut (1994, 1997, 2004). This theoretical framework emerged in response to the limitations of the traditional first/second-generation dichotomy, which proved insufficient to capture the diversity of migration experiences during childhood and adolescence. In response to this limitation, Rumbaut proposed a more granular typology that distinguishes three key subgroups: the generation 1.75, which includes preschool-aged children and those who arrive in the destination country in early childhood (ages 0 to 5); the generation 1.5, referring to those who emigrate between the ages of 6 and 12; and the generation 1.25, which refers to those who emigrate during adolescence (ages 13 to 17).

The generational cohort model facilitates the analysis of various aspects of the adaptation process, particularly those related to the development of linguistic abilities and the assimilation of cultural patterns, including the formation of senses of belonging and national identity (Venturin, 2019). It should be noted, however, that the age at arrival in the destination country (that is, the generational cohort) does not determine the differences in linguistic competence and cultural patterns. Rather, it is the process of formal schooling and the stage at which this occurs in the destination and origin countries that shapes language proficiency and acculturation. Berger and Luckmann (2008) conceptualize this primary socialization as the key formative process during childhood through which the basic elements necessary for societal integration are internalized.

Schools, as fundamental spaces for socialization, foster peer interaction while also shaping behavioral patterns, systems of value and identity frameworks. In other words, schools function as laboratories of identity where migrant children construct notions of belonging (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014) and where migrant students undergo a process of cultural transition through assimilation of social codes and institutional norms. In the United States, schools operate as spaces for linguistic acculturation where migrant children and youth adopt English as the dominant language and negotiate their long-term identity. That is, it is within the classroom where young people construct notions of what it means to “be Mexican” or “American” (Jacobó Suárez et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Cruz, 2022).

From the perspective of applied linguistics, the relation between migration and language has been extensively studied, particularly regarding the impact of the age at emigration on the maintenance or loss of the first language (L1). The work of Schmid (2008, 2013) conceptualizes L1 attrition as a process of progressive deterioration, observable primarily—though not exclusively—in bilingual individuals who are exposed for extended periods to environments where a language other than their mother language predominates. One example is Spanish-speaking migrant children who grow up and spend extended periods of time in the United States. Studies in this area show that: 1) age at migration serves as an important predictor of language attrition; and, 2) there is an inverse relationship between age at migration and the degree of language loss. Thus, those who migrate at an early age (before age eight) face a significant risk of accelerated loss of their mother language, while those who migrate later (at age 12 or older) are more likely to retain their native language even after prolonged residence in a context where another language is dominant (Köpke & Schmid, 2004, p. 10).

While the age at emigration—or generational cohort—influences maintenance of the mother tongue, language may influence cultural identity or national affiliation. Weedon (1996) notes that identity is formed in and through language. Furthermore, language works as an important cultural marker in identity construction (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). For example, members of the 1.75 generation, because they migrated in early childhood, do not retain significant memories of their country of origin (París Pombo et al., 2019). Moreover, they acquire the local language with native-like pronunciation, while their acculturation process and identity formation begin very early, resulting in American or hybrid identities. By contrast, 1.5 generation migrants undergo initial literacy development in their mother language as they begin schooling in their country of origin, continuing their education in the destination country (Rumbaut, 2004). Linguistically, this group is typically characterized by sequential bilingualism, as they first develop literacy in Spanish before completing their education in English, especially in contexts such as the United States (Buitrón Hernández & Despaigne, 2023). Having attended school in both countries, they are likely to develop hybrid identities (Vargas Valle, 2025). Finally, members of the 1.25 generation, who migrated during adolescence, enter the secondary education system or the labor market directly in the receiving country. Their migration experiences and adaptive outcomes more closely resemble those of first-generation adult immigrants than those of the second generation born in the destination country (Buitrón Hernández & Despaigne, 2023). In other words, they tend to maintain cultural identities associated with their country of origin.

National identification may, in turn, influence proficiency in one's mother language. Schmid (2011) states that language loss may be a process driven, in part, by attitudes and identity. Rejection of one's native culture and country of origin can lead to rejection of one's mother tongue, accelerating its decline. For example, the hostile and increasingly anti-immigrant climate in the United States may push families to adopt strategies aimed at minimizing their children's use of Spanish and promoting the exclusive use of English as a strategy for protection and survival. Conversely, a positive ethnic identification functions as a protective factor in preserving the mother language, thereby delaying its loss in migration contexts. In other words, in contexts where migrant children of Mexican origin have developed a national identity tied to their country of origin and feel comfortable with it, they are more likely to retain proficiency in Spanish.

Along similar lines, studies on heritage language speakers and cultural identity have shown that proficiency in a heritage language is positively correlated with bicultural identification. In such cases, children are not simply a group seeking to “fit in” with any of the languages and cultures that make up their heritage and/or social environment, but also individuals with agency who inhabit multiple spaces and demand the world make an effort to understand these inherent complexities and interconnections (Little & Zhou, 2024).

From a poststructuralist perspective, identity is dynamically constructed and negotiated through language, with each linguistic interaction contributing to this ongoing process (Weedon, 1996). In other words, every speech act enables individuals to redefine their self-concept and social positioning (Norton, 2013, p. 4). From this perspective, identities are contingent, fluid and context-dependent. That is to say, identities are not simply imposed by social structures or assigned by others, but are also negotiated by agents seeking to position themselves socially. Consequently, it is important to recognize that the identities reported by migrant youth in the destination country will not necessarily be the same as those experienced in the country of birth and return. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how returning to the country of origin may influence both national identity and language proficiency.

The role of return migration in language proficiency and identity

Traditional migration research tends to assume unidirectional trajectories—from a country of origin to a permanent destination—thereby overlooking phenomena such as the influence of return migration on processes of identity formation, belonging and the maintenance of both the native language and acquired language (Spanish and English, in this study). In return contexts, schools once again play a key role in the experiences of migrant children and youth as spaces for socialization and identity formation, shaping processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

Ethnographic studies have shown that, within this process, the Mexican school system tends to assume a monolingual Spanish-speaking student and therefore, often renders previously acquired bilingual capital invisible, even when these include academic literacy in English (Navarro-Hernández et al., 2023; Tacelosky, 2018). In particular, return migration significantly impacts young people’s linguistic proficiency in Spanish and English. Upon reintegrating into the Mexican education system, Spanish becomes their primary tool for learning and social interaction (Despaigne, 2019; Rodríguez-Cruz, 2022). Although many can communicate orally in Spanish with their families, they often display deficiencies in reading and writing because they were primarily schooled in English, which hinders their academic adaptation (Despaigne & Jacobo Suárez, 2016). While Spanish may serve as the language of family socialization, it is not necessarily the language of established academic literacy, which creates disparities between oral and written proficiency that are particularly evident in upper secondary and higher education (Nava Nava et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Spanish fulfills not only a communicative function but also operates as a marker of identity. Fluency in “standard” Spanish is directly associated with belonging to a Mexican identity, whereas limited proficiency is often interpreted as a sign of “otherness”, which leads to marginalization and prejudice (Sarabia, 2017). As

Landa (PAMIR Universidad Veracruzana [UV] DGRI, 2025) states in his study on young returning migrants in higher education institutions, language not only communicates but also classifies, validates and excludes. Consequently, the educational environment, conceived as a space for integration, can become a source of frustration, insecurity or rejection. At times, these situations generate vulnerability and social suffering (Jardón Hernández & Macías Suárez, 2024), which contradicts the school's potential to integrate diversity.

On the other hand, young people who were educated in the United States often possess an advanced command of English. Nonetheless, research in border contexts indicates that this linguistic competence tends to deteriorate over time due to a lack of institutional support that encourages its use (Vargas Valle, 2022a) and the stigma associated with speaking it in public spaces. This rejection is deeply rooted in the ideology of racial mixing, which during the 19th and 20th centuries promoted a homogeneous cultural identity within the Mexican nation-state, and manifests itself in a linguistic puritanism present on both sides of the border, which affects these young people's sense of identity (Jacobó Suárez et al., 2022). In addition to language, other cultural markers such as clothing or tattoos are also subject to stigmatization, especially in small or rural communities that value social homogeneity (Rodríguez-Cruz, 2022; Silver, 2018).

Despite pressures to conform, returning migrant children and youth are not passive subjects; rather, they develop a remarkable capacity for agency to resist stigma and negotiate their sense of belonging. This agency manifests itself in everyday strategies, such as learning local vocabulary or adjusting their accent to avoid being questioned about their identity in Mexico. In extreme cases, this adaptation may involve deliberately concealing their proficiency in English, such as by giving incorrect answers in class or feigning a "poor" accent to camouflage their American cultural traits (Ramírez, 2025).

This capacity for negotiation extends to the school setting, where students confront the impositions of an educational system that promotes a mononational curriculum. Although the Mexican school system is generally centered on Spanish and an exclusively Mexican identity, research shows that transnational youth actively resist this process of assimilation. Hamann and Zúñiga (2011), for example, document that 42% of the elementary and middle school students in northern Mexico whom they interviewed identified with a hybrid (Mexican-American) or even exclusively American identity, challenging the notion of a single sense of belonging.

At the higher education level, returning to Mexico also emerges as a future-oriented strategy of agency. Far from being a simple readjustment, return migration can be a proactive move to construct "imagined" professional identities, in which bilingual proficiency is mobilized to gain access to educational opportunities that are limited in the United States (Cortez Román et al., 2015). This agency is reflected even in the choice of undergraduate degree in Mexico, which is driven not only by English proficiency but primarily by personal preference, thereby revealing a desire to build self-defined life projects beyond mere advantages associated with bilingualism (Jiménez Díaz & Montoya Zavala, 2022).

The construction of these hybrid or binational identities is deeply tied to transnational educational trajectories. School, as a space for socialization, plays a crucial role in shaping a sense of belonging. Vargas Valle (2025) finds that the length of residence in the United States is a determining factor: the longer the stay, the greater the identification with the destination country. Nevertheless, those who have the opportunity to study in

both educational systems are more likely to construct binational or hybrid identities. In short, the migratory experience, marked by the fragmentation of national and state identities, shapes the experiences of those who reintegrate into Mexico as “Americanized Mexicans” (Sarabia, 2017).

Taken together, the scholarly literature demonstrates that return migration challenges the notion of homogeneity within the nation-state. By introducing cultural and linguistic diversity, returning migrants call into question what it means to belong to a political community. Those who emigrated as children often forge their sense of belonging not in relation to their “official homeland” but within the host society in which they grow up. This is because language proficiency and cultural identity are dynamic and contextual social processes, not fixed attributes. Therefore, experiences of socialization and schooling on both sides of the border are fundamental for understanding the national identifications developed by these transnational youth (Zúñiga et al., 2008).

Methodology

Data collection

For this study, data were collected from college students with migration and educational experiences in the United States. Data collection took place at two different moments: in 2019 through in-person fieldwork, and in 2021 remotely due to the COVID-19 health contingency. In 2019, two public higher education institutions were visited, one in Puebla and the other in Veracruz. In 2021, additional data were collected from students at the same educational institution in Veracruz.¹ In both years, the same data collection instruments were used: a survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, which together explored the participants’ migration and educational trajectories, their perceptions of schooling experience in both countries, their proficiency in and use of Spanish and English, as well as their cultural identity or national affiliation.

Participants

The study was conducted in Puebla and Veracruz, states with well-established migration patterns and a significant presence of return migrants in the 21st century. Both states recorded an increase in returns during the first decade of the 2000s, followed by a gradual decline in this population between 2015 and 2020, and both also hosted families with mixed immigration statuses and children born in the United States (Masferrer, 2021). Within this regional context, the sample analyzed here consisted of young people who returned while of school age, mostly accompanied by their families, and who, at the time of the fieldwork, were pursuing university studies in various disciplines. Although the average profile of returnees in both regions tends to show

¹ In 2019, funding was obtained from Conacyt to conduct the fieldwork. In 2021, the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla provided financial support for the research.

lower levels of education and high rates of participation in the informal labor market, the cases analyzed correspond to a subgroup that successfully continued educational trajectories into higher education. This made it possible to examine identity formation among a specific segment of young returnees located in regional contexts characterized by active migration dynamics and distinct institutional frameworks.

The sample consisted of 26 participants recruited through intentional and convenience-based sampling. The inclusion criteria were: 1) having been born in Mexico; 2) having resided in and completed at least one year of school in the United States during childhood or adolescence; and, 3) being enrolled in higher education at the time of the study. Recruitment was conducted using two complementary strategies: with the support of university administrators and professors who identified potential transnational profiles and through open invitations on social media. The participants, most of whom did not know each other, were enrolled in various semesters and academic programs. Those who agreed to participate were invited to a focus group, after which they were given a survey. In addition, follow-up individual interviews were conducted with some participants; however, this analysis is based solely on survey data. Since the sample is limited to the university population, the trajectories presented here correspond to a specific subset within the broader universe of young returnees.

Theoretical questions and expectations

Drawing on the literature on migrant cohorts, heritage language maintenance and attrition, transnational schooling and cultural identity—particularly Rubén Rumbaut's contributions regarding the 1.75, 1.5 and 1.25 generations—this study does not seek to test hypotheses in a statistical sense or to establish causal relations between variables. Rather, its purpose is to explore possible patterns and configurations regarding linguistic competence and national identity among young returning migrant university students.

The analysis is guided by the following exploratory questions:

1. What patterns can be observed between migrant cohorts and self-perceived proficiency in Spanish and English?
2. How do self-reported national affiliations vary according to migration cohort?
3. What trends can be identified regarding age of return, linguistic competence and self-reported identity?

Although the study does not formulate testable hypotheses, the existing literature provides a series of theoretical expectations that guide the interpretation of the data.

Regarding age of emigration and linguistic competence, studies on heritage language attrition and maintenance suggest that those who emigrate during early childhood (generation 1.75) may demonstrate greater proficiency in English—as the language of initial schooling—and face a higher risk of decline in academic Spanish. In contrast, those who emigrate between the ages of 7 and 12 (generation 1.5), having begun their literacy education in Mexico, may develop more balanced bilingual

repertoires. Meanwhile, those who emigrated during adolescence (generation 1.25), after completing most of their schooling in Spanish, may demonstrate stronger consolidation of Spanish in comparison to English.

With respect to national identity and migration cohort, the literature on transnational students suggests that schooling in both educational systems may be associated with hybrid identity configurations. Thus, those who experience fragmented educational trajectories between Mexico and the United States—particularly generations 1.5 and 1.25—may express Mexican-American or binational affiliations. In contrast, very early or very late migration could be associated with identities more clearly anchored in one or the other national reference point, though not necessarily in a linear fashion.

Concerning the age of return, this study treats the timing of return as an analytical dimension that complements the migration cohort. While the cohort explains emigration and the nature of initial socialization in the United States, the age of return allows examination of reintegration into the Mexican educational system and the subsequent degree of exposure to Spanish as the language of instruction.

From this perspective, returning to Mexico during early childhood or elementary school could help consolidate Spanish as the dominant language in the student's future educational path, thereby facilitating socialization within the Mexican school system. In contrast, returning during adolescence—after having received most of one's education in English—could lead to more complex linguistic trajectories, including greater challenges in developing academic Spanish.

In terms of identity, the literature suggests that prolonged exposure to the U.S. educational system, followed by a return at a later stage, could be associated with hybrid configurations or tensions in national identity. Nonetheless, these potential trends are not assumed to be determinative, but rather configurations that require empirical examination. Taken together, these expectations aim to serve as an interpretive framework for analyzing the trends observed in the sample and generating hypotheses for future research with more comprehensive methodological designs.

Operationalization

To identify generational cohorts, this study uses educational trajectories as a proxy, reconstructing participants' educational history from elementary school through college, based on survey data. Analyzing the country in which each grade was completed determines two key aspects: the age of immigration to the United States—which defines the generational cohort—and the age of return to Mexico, indicated by re-entry into the Mexican education system.

According to Rumbaut's (1994, 2004) typology, categories 1.75, 1.5 and 1.25 capture differences in the stages of linguistic and academic socialization associated with age at emigration. These categories distinguish varying degrees of exposure to the U.S. educational system and, consequently, different stages of acquisition and consolidation of English and academic Spanish. Nonetheless, since these categories were originally developed to analyze predominantly one-way migration trajectories to the

United States, they do not explicitly account for return migration or re-enrollment in the education system of the country of origin.

For this reason, this study proposes supplementing the generational cohort with the age of return as an additional analytical dimension. While the cohort provides insight into the timing of departure and the nature of initial socialization in the destination country, the age of return enables analysis of reintegration in Mexico and the subsequent processes of linguistic and identity reconfiguration. The combination of both dimensions constitutes a more appropriate methodological and theoretical framework for the analysis of non-linear transnational trajectories.

Based on the reported educational history, the approximate length of stay in the United States was estimated, and basic information such as gender and academic program was collected. Nevertheless, no variables regarding the specific context of residence or schooling in that country, nor family socioeconomic indicators, were collected. Furthermore, by focusing exclusively on students who entered higher education, the experiences of young people whose educational trajectory was interrupted after their return are excluded.

Both language proficiency and identity were assessed via self-report at a specific point in time; therefore, the results may vary over time. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive associations that do not capture the full range of contextual factors influencing language and identity.

The following section presents an integrated analysis of migrant cohorts in relation to language proficiency and identity.

Analysis

Participant profile

This section examines the participants' migration history—age of emigration, age of return and years since return—and its correlation with self-perceived proficiency in Spanish and English and national identity.

Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the participants. Among the three generational cohorts, the majority arrived in the United States in early childhood (38%), followed by those who emigrated during adolescence (34%) and those who did so between the ages of 7 and 12 (27%). Regarding self-perceived linguistic competence, 61% reported having high proficiency in English, a higher proportion than those who consider themselves highly proficient in Spanish (54%). A smaller proportion perceived themselves as having moderate or intermediate proficiency in English (31%) and in Spanish (42%). Notably, participants generally reported higher English proficiency than Spanish proficiency, suggesting that even the maintenance and development of Spanish proficiency is not straightforward for those who migrate after completing several years of schooling in Mexico.

National identity, for its part, reveals two major trends: young people who identify exclusively as Mexican (42%) and those who report having a hybrid, Mexican-American identity (50%). It is noteworthy that although 60% of young people report a high level of English proficiency, none identified as exclusively American, underscoring the non-linear nature of the relation between language and identity, as previously

discussed. The transnational trajectories of these young people add an additional layer of complexity to linguistic and identity experiences that traditional studies of generational cohorts do not fully capture.

Table 1. Profile of the participants in the sample

	Frequency	Percentage
Migrant cohort		
Generation 1.75	10	38.5
Generation 1.5	7	26.9
Generation 1.25	9	34.6
		100
Proficiency in Spanish		
High	14	53.9
Moderate	11	42.3
Low	1	3.8
		100
Proficiency in English		
High	16	61.5
Moderate	8	30.8
Low	2	7.7
		100
Cultural identity		
Mexican	11	42.4
American	0	0
Mexican-American	13	50
Latino(a)	1	3.8
None	1	3.8
Total	26	100

Source: created by the author

Generational cohort and language

When analyzing the relationship between the generational cohort and self-reported proficiency in Spanish and English in the study sample, Table 2 indicates that arrival in the destination country during early childhood (generation 1.75) did not necessarily imply the loss of Spanish as a first language, as some previous studies have suggested. Among the 1.75 generation interviewed, two reported maintaining a high level of

Spanish proficiency, while seven reported their competence as moderate. These findings point to the potential importance of non-school settings for the development of the heritage language, including the family environment and other socialization contexts. By contrast, for the young people interviewed, emigrating at an older age does appear to be associated with the maintenance of Spanish proficiency, suggesting the importance of prior schooling in that language. Most participants in generations 1.5 and 1.25 in the study reported high proficiency in Spanish.

Table 2. Language proficiency by generational cohort

Age of emigration	Proficiency in Spanish			Proficiency in English			Total
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low	
Ages 0-5 (Gen 1.75)	2	7	1	6	4	0	10
Ages 6-12 (Gen 1.5)	6	1	0	6	1	0	7
Ages 13-17 (Gen 1.25)	6	3	0	4	3	2	9
Total	14	11	1	16	8	2	26

Source: created by the author

Regarding the impact of the generational cohort on English proficiency, emigrating during early childhood was associated with a high competence in the language of the receiving society: six out of 10 young people in generation 1.75 reported high proficiency in English. It should be noted, however, that there are four young people whose English knowledge was only moderate despite their early emigration, suggesting that, in these cases, other factors may have influenced their language proficiency. In other words, a generational cohort alone does not provide a complete account of educational trajectories. Rather, it is through formal schooling that age of emigration may influence language proficiency, acculturation and feelings of belonging. It is possible that early arrival in the United States did not necessarily involve extended educational trajectories in that country, highlighting the importance of considering age of return and total length of residence in the United States for future studies with larger samples.

Among the participants in the generation 1.5, most retained high proficiency in English (six out of seven), while among those who arrived in the United States as teenagers, slightly fewer than half (four out of nine) reported a high competence in that language. This observed trend is consistent with the theoretical expectation that those who emigrate during or after adolescence would demonstrate greater proficiency in Spanish than in English, due to the challenges of acquiring a second language at an older age.

Generational cohort and national identity

An analysis of the relation between generational cohort and national identity in this exploratory sample reveals patterns that challenge common assumptions, as shown in Table 3. Among those who emigrated in early childhood, there is no predominance of either American or hybrid identities, suggesting that migration at a very young age does not necessarily lead to an affiliation with the destination country, as

might otherwise be expected. Among 1.5 generation, those who emigrated during elementary school, the number of young people identifying as Mexican was equal to the number adopting a hybrid identity. Only one individual opted for a pan-ethnic identification, identifying as Latino. For 1.25 generation, or those who emigrated during adolescence, Mexican-American identity was the most prevalent, with 5 of the 9 participants identifying this way.

These exploratory findings suggest that those who immigrated to the United States during early childhood did not necessarily adopt an American identity. Conversely, migration at a later age, particularly during adolescence, appears to be associated with the adoption of hybrid identities. This finding is consistent with having undergone schooling in both countries, a characteristic of the 1.5 and 1.25 generations.

Table 3. National identity by generational cohort

Arriving in the United States	National identity/affiliation					Total
	Mexican	American	Mexican-American	Latino(a)	None	
Ages 0–5 (Gen 1.75)	4	0	5	0	1	10
Ages 6–12 (Gen 1.5)	3	0	3	1	0	7
Ages 13–17 (Gen 1.25)	4	0	5	0	0	9
Total	11	0	13	1	1	26

Source: created by the author

Age of return and language

Despite the importance of generational cohorts as an analytical tool for studying processes of integration, acculturation and language acquisition, their usefulness is limited for transnational trajectories such as those of the participants in this study. In these cases, age at return to Mexico serves as a complementary indicator, as it allows for a better understanding of reintegration into the country of birth and its possible influence on levels of exposure to Spanish, as well as the process of reverse acculturation experienced upon entering an essentially mononational school system. In short, whereas the generational cohort helps characterize departure, age at return provides insight into the conditions surrounding return migration.

The theoretical expectations outlined earlier proposed that returning during childhood (early or primary socialization) would favor the adoption of Spanish as the primary language, thereby facilitating social and academic integration. This would result in a high proficiency in Spanish and, consequently, a strong Mexican identity. By contrast, returning during adolescence or young adulthood, after having been socialized in the destination country, would complicate adaptation to Spanish and, in turn, mononational identification with Mexico.

Table 4 shows that participants who returned during early childhood reported high levels of Spanish proficiency, while considering their knowledge of English to be low or moderate, both patterns being consistent with educational trajectories that were

completed entirely in Mexico. A moderate proficiency in English was more common among those who arrived in Mexico during middle and high school (the 13-17 age cohort) and among those who returned to Mexico after reaching adulthood. This trend suggests that the age at return may influence the retention or loss of English proficiency. At the same time, however, cases of young people were also identified within these age groups who maintained high levels of Spanish proficiency. This points to the presence of additional factors—beyond age at emigration and age at return—that influence the proficiency in the languages in which these young people have been schooled. For example, studies suggest the importance of the extended family in supporting the development of the linguistic repertoire of returning youth (Jacobo Suárez, 2023) and the presence of social networks that serve as communities of practice (Despagne, 2024).

Table 4. Language proficiency by age of return

Age of return	Proficiency in Spanish			Proficiency in English		
	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
Ages 0-5	0	0	4	2	2	0
Ages 6-12	0	1	2	0	3	0
Ages 13-17	0	8	5	0	6	7
18 or older	1	2	3	0	0	6
Total	1	11	14	2	11	13

Source: created by the author

Regarding English proficiency, a direct correlation was expected between age at return and knowledge of the language: the younger the age at return, the lower the individuals' English proficiency, due to more limited exposure to the language during their migration. Participants' experiences show trends that are consistent with this expectation. Those who returned during early childhood reported low to moderate English proficiency, a pattern similar to that observed among those who returned during elementary school. High levels of proficiency were reported both by young people who returned during adolescence (7 out of 13) and those who returned at age 18 or older (6 out of 6). However, there were also cases of young people who returned during adolescence and nevertheless reported only average proficiency. These results suggest the importance of investigating, in future studies using larger samples and mixed-methods designs, possible differences in educational experiences within this population to identify the causes of these varying outcomes.

Age of return and identity

Finally, self-reported identity was analyzed in relation to the age at return to Mexico, as presented in Table 5. Based on the literature, it was expected that those who returned during early childhood would exhibit a predominantly Mexican identity, while those with more prolonged exposure to the dominant culture and language in the United States would be more likely to develop hybrid or American identities. Nonetheless, in

this sample, the data do not reveal a clear association between the two variables. In other words, the age at return does not appear to be a determining factor in shaping participants' identity. For example, some young people developed hybrid identities despite relatively brief exposure to the United States, while others maintained an exclusively Mexican identity even after returning during adolescence or even adulthood.

Hybrid identities are found across all age groups among returnees. In addition, two notable cases were recorded: a young man who explicitly stated that he did not identify with any specific cultural identity, and another who adopted a pan-ethnic identity, identifying himself simply as Latino (see Table 5).

Table 5. Age of return and identity

Return to Mexico	National affiliation or identity					Total
	Mexican	American	Mexican-American	Latino(a)	None	
Ages 0-5	1	0	3	0	0	4
Ages 6-12	1	0	2	0	0	3
Ages 13-17	7	0	5	0	1	13
18 or older	2	0	3	1	0	6
Total	12	0	12	1	1	26

Source: created by the author

These findings underscore the importance of analyzing migratory and educational trajectories in their entirety, taking into account not only ages at arrival and return, but also the length of residence in each country in order to understand reintegration processes. The results likewise point to the existence of additional factors, beyond language proficiency and the duration of the migratory experience, that may influence the formation of identities and national affiliations. These include the communities in which young people are socialized, the maintenance of close ties with the destination country and the potential impact of anti-immigrant policies and a social climate hostile toward undocumented communities. These factors, which have been explored in previous research, could even influence the rejection of hybrid identities. Nevertheless, to confirm this, studies with larger samples and mixed-methods research designs capable of examining subjective experiences in greater depth.

Discussion and conclusions

This study revisits and expands the seminal work of Hamann and Zúñiga (2011) on the national affiliations of transnational students by incorporating an analysis of national identity segmented by migration cohorts and age of return. Unlike studies focused on basic education (Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011; Vargas Valle, 2025), this study examines complete educational trajectories through to higher education, thereby facilitating the observation of linguistic and identity configurations at a more advanced stage of the life course. The findings contribute to recent literature on return migration,

schooling and language in Mexico by incorporating the variables of migration cohort and age of return as structuring axes of differentiated trajectories.

Language: between migration cohort and school experience

From a linguistic perspective, the patterns observed partially confirm the propositions of Rumbaut's generational cohort model (1994, 2004): age at emigration influences the composition of linguistic repertoires, particularly in the consolidation of English among those who were socialized early in the United States and in the maintenance of Spanish among those who began their schooling in Mexico. Nonetheless, the findings also nuance both the assumptions of language attrition (Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2008) and the evidence documented by Nava Nava et al. (2017) regarding weaknesses in academic literacy in Spanish.

Among the university students in this sample, no uniform processes of Spanish erosion were observed between those who emigrated in early childhood, nor was there evidence of an inevitable loss of English upon return. Although some participants reported difficulties with academic writing in Spanish—consistent with the findings documented by Nava Nava and colleagues—several succeeded in strengthening both languages, suggesting more resilient linguistic trajectories than is typically assumed in studies focused on immediate school integration.

Furthermore, while Vargas Valle (2022a) documents the gradual decline of English proficiency in the absence of formal spaces for language use in Mexico, the data presented here show that this decline is not homogeneous. Some young people maintain high levels of English proficiency even after years of residence in Mexico. This qualifies the notion of linear language shift and reinforces the importance of considering individual agency in the management of bilingual repertoires.

Age at return and linguistic reconfiguration

Regarding the return to school, the results confirm that the age at return influences the relative consolidation of Spanish as an academic language, consistent with the arguments advanced by Despaigne and Jacobo Suárez (2016) and Rodríguez-Cruz (2022) concerning the role of Spanish as a requirement for school integration. Nevertheless, the results also show that linguistic competence does not depend exclusively on the age at return, but rather on compensatory strategies developed by the young people themselves. This finding broadens the discussion beyond the moment of insertion into elementary and upper secondary education, demonstrating that such strategies can be consolidated and redefined at the university level.

At the institutional level, the findings also complicate the observations made by Taelosky (2018) and Navarro-Hernández et al. (2023) regarding the invisibilization of bilingual capital in Mexican schools. Some interviewees were able to maintain a high level of proficiency in both English and Spanish simultaneously, particularly those who returned after the age of 13. This suggests that, although monolingual structures continue to prevail in the education system, students can exercise their individual agency and develop strategies to maintain competence in both languages.

Identity: nonlinear dynamics beyond cohorts

With regards to identity, the results support poststructuralist approaches (Norton, 2013) by revealing nonlinear configurations. Early migration does not automatically lead to a U.S. identity, nor does returning during adolescence necessarily produce hybrid identities. While a greater presence of binational identities is observed among those who completed part of their schooling in both countries—in line with Hamann and Zúñiga (2011) and Vargas Valle (2025)—cases also emerge that challenge predictable patterns.

This finding is particularly relevant in light of Sarabia (2017), who posits the figure of the “Americanized Mexican” as a socially constructed category among returnees. The data suggest that this category is not internalized uniformly, implying that young people actively negotiate their identities according to institutional contexts and school experiences.

Taken together, the findings confirm that the age at emigration and age at return constitute important dimensions for understanding differentiated linguistic and identity configurations. Nonetheless, they also show that these variables do not operate deterministically; rather, the observed trajectories emerge from the interaction between school socialization and possibly other variables in both countries.

Thus, this study not only engages with the existing literature on children and youth returning to Mexico, but also nuances it by incorporating the university level and a longitudinal perspective that makes it possible to observe how linguistic and identity configurations evolve beyond the moment of school reintegration.

Scope, limitations and research agenda

This study is grounded in a central premise in contemporary migration studies: return does not mark the end of a migratory journey, but rather represents yet another phase within mobility processes that are inherently circular, unequal and structurally conditioned. From this perspective, the findings challenge the notion of return as mere “reintegration” and instead underscore its transformative nature across the domains of language, education and identity.

The principal contribution of this study lies in highlighting the analytical relevance of the age of emigration and the age of return as complementary dimensions for understanding the linguistic and identity trajectories of young return migrants. At the same time, the results demonstrate that these variables alone cannot account for the diversity of patterns observed. Rather than producing homogeneous outcomes, the transnational experience appears to give rise to differentiated trajectories that challenge linear interpretations of linguistic integration and national identity. Instead of uncritically applying the cohort typology developed for one-way migration to the United States, the study proposes adapting it to the context of return migration in Mexico by incorporating the age of return as a complementary dimension. This combination makes it possible to capture both the initial phase of socialization in the destination country and subsequent reintegration processes, thereby offering a more suitable framework for analyzing complex transnational trajectories.

Furthermore, the study broadens the discussion to include higher education, a relatively underexplored area in the literature on return migration, which has largely focused on basic education. By reconstructing complete trajectories that integrate emigration, schooling in the United States, return migration and university enrollment in Mexico, the study provides a longitudinal perspective that enables the observation of processes of consolidation, reframing or erosion of linguistic proficiency over time. Although the sample is small, the richness of this temporal reconstruction constitutes an important contribution to the field.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged, however. Given the exploratory nature of the research design and the small sample size ($N = 26$)—which is non-probabilistic and composed exclusively of young people who were able to access higher education—the results should be understood as patterns specific to this particular group rather than as representative of returning youth more broadly. By focusing exclusively on university students, the study excludes the trajectories of those who interrupted their schooling after returning. Consequently, it remains unclear what occurs among young people who face greater structural barriers and do not continue their studies in Mexico, introducing a bias toward experiences of greater educational continuity.

Another limitation is that language proficiency and identity were self-assessed at a specific point in the participants' life course, without standardized instruments to verify those levels. Nevertheless, even as self-reported indicators, the findings identify areas in which targeted support may be necessary, particularly with regard to strengthening academic Spanish and maintaining English as an educational and professional resource. Replicating a basic survey using this indicator—even if it is self-reported—is highly useful for assessing the needs of the returning student population.

Third, the analysis does not systematically incorporate other dimensions that are highly relevant in migration studies, such as family language policies or the impact of socioeconomic status on the ability to translate bilingualism into educational and occupational advantages. Incorporating these variables would provide a more structural understanding of the inequalities that shape return trajectories.

Furthermore, although the broader research project includes a substantial qualitative component, this article intentionally adopts an initial descriptive approach to the quantitative data. As a result, the analysis does not include an in-depth examination of subjective narratives regarding identity, belonging and agency, which will be explored in subsequent studies.

Looking ahead, this article opens multiple avenues for further research on returnee populations. Future research could examine, through larger samples and mixed-methods designs, issues not addressed here, such as the development of inclusive educational resources, the relation between language proficiency and academic performance, or the impact of identity constructs on social integration. In addition, there is an opportunity to broaden the analysis to include trajectories of greater vulnerability—such as those of young people who discontinue their schooling after returning—and to incorporate factors such as socioeconomic status and family language policies to better understand how bilingual proficiency is unevenly distributed. Finally, these findings encourage educational and higher education institutions to develop teaching resources and curricular content that recognize and value the diversity of this population, thereby facilitating transitions between educational systems and strengthening pedagogical practices.

Taken together, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of return migration in the Mexico-United States context. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, it proposes an analytical framework that integrates age at emigration, age at return, and the longitudinal reconstruction of trajectories as useful tools for the study of transnational mobility. In contexts characterized by ongoing circulation, understanding return as a process—rather than as a final event—is critical to advancing knowledge of how linguistic competencies and national identifications are shaped and reshaped over time.

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