Self-efficacy Beliefs of EFL Teachers when Having Transnational Students in their Classroom

ABSTRACT

For many years, return migration from the United States to Mexico has been very present. According to Jacobo (2018), as cited in Despange and Manzano (2020), 1.5 million of these return migrants are school-aged children, meaning that every teacher will encounter at least one transnational student within their teaching career. Nonetheless, little do we know about how these transnational student teachers face the situation. The main objective of this study is to bring understanding to the self-efficacy beliefs EFL teachers present when receiving transnational students in their classes. For this purpose, a qualitative case study was conducted in which five EFL teachers at a public Mexican university were interviewed. Findings indicate that teachers' self-efficacy perception tends to be positive and enriching. Teachers reported not having problems when integrating these students into their classrooms. However, when facing obstacles, they have developed different strategies to overcome them. This brings forth new information that had not been presented before, with the intent of closing the gap in the transnational literature.

KEY WORDS:

Transnational, Teaching, Self-efficacy, Return migration

RESUMEN

Desde hace muchos años, la migración de retorno de Estados Unidos a México ha estado muy presente. Según Jacobo (2018), citado en Despange, Manzano (2020), 1.5 millones de estos migrantes de retorno son niños en edad escolar, lo que significa que cada maestro se encontrará con al menos un estudiante transnacional dentro de su carrera docente. Dicho esto, se espera mucho de los profesores que se encuentran con alumnos transnacionales en su aula. El objetivo principal de este proyecto de investigación es aportar comprensión a las creencias de autoeficacia que presentan los profesores de EFL cuando reciben estudiantes transnacionales en sus clases. Para ello, se llevó a cabo un estudio de caso cualitativo en el que se entrevistó a cinco profesores de EFL de una universidad pública mexicana. Se encontró que la percepción de autoeficacia que tienen los profesores con los estudiantes transnacionales tiende a ser positiva y...
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enriquecedora. Los profesores no presentan problemas a la hora de integrar a estos estudiantes en sus aulas y han desarrollado diferentes estrategias para superar estos obstáculos. Esto aporta nueva información que no se había presentado antes con la intención de cerrar la brecha en la literatura transnacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Transnacional, Enseñanza, Autoeficacia, Migración de retorno

Introduction

About 5% of the student population in Mexico has ties to the United States (Jacobo & Jensen, 2018). These students come with distinct linguistic gifts and cultural diversity. Hamann and Zuñiga (2021) mention that teachers who are brought upon transnational students must learn how to understand what these students already know and how to welcome them into their classrooms. Nevertheless, although the student is of high importance and should be led in the best way possible to ease their integration process, it is also important to understand how having these students in the classroom can affect the teacher’s perception of themselves during their class and their self-efficacy.

This investigation was a case study that was carried out through a qualitative approach under an interpretivist paradigm. The data collection instruments include semi-structured interviews while purposive sampling was used to choose the participants. There were 5 total participants who were teachers at a School of Languages who have had transnational students in their classrooms.

This research aimed to find answers to what factors affect teachers’ self-efficacy perception and create a better understanding for both students and teachers of the reasons why certain attitudes and actions take place within the classroom after having transnational students integrate. This information could bring forward the different aspects institutions should consider for their teachers or the schooling teachers might need before encountering transnational students. There is no information regarding the self-efficacy beliefs of EFL teachers when presented with transnational students. This is the first research project of its kind.

1.1 Justification

The return migration phenomenon has become inevitable with time. Whether visible or not, Mexican citizens are returning to their home country more and more through the years. With these returned migrants come their families, which include school-aged children. It is inevitable to take into consideration the factors that come along with this return migration process, with school being the main one. However, there is a lack of information regarding how teachers perceive this phenomenon on their end. Most researchers have focused their work on explaining how migrating between countries can be overwhelming for both adults and children (Galicia Ramos, 2016). Other projects focused on the information teachers should take into consideration when teaching these students or comparisons within the two school systems and acknowledge to attend to the educational needs of transnational students (Hamann & Zuñiga, 2021). Nevertheless, there was no information regarding the feelings of self-efficacy professors presented when teaching these students, and much less on EFL teachers’ beliefs. This led to an interest in being able to give these professors a voice, given that they were the ones at the forefront of this situation.
2. Literature review

As much as Mexicans have been leaving their home country to explore the American dream, there have also been many of them returning to their communities of origin back in Mexico (Jacobo & Jensen, 2018). The return migration process began with the economic recession of 2009. During this time, it was noticed that the number of Mexican migrants returning to Mexico was exceeding the amount that was migrating to the United States (Hamann & Zuñiga, 2021). The people returning to Mexico were not only those adults who had initially moved to the United States. They now brought along US-schooled children who needed to not only integrate into a new country but also integrate into a new school system. These students, who were children of immigrants and had transitioned between both the Mexican and the United States education systems at least once, were referred to as Transnational Students by Despange and Jacobo (2019). This term is now used to define these children who were part of the return migration process.

2.1 Transnational students

Within the last two decades, hundreds of thousands of children enrolled in Mexican schools were either born in the United States or had some sort of previous education in US schools (Hamann, 2021). However, these students do not represent an average monolingual person. Transnational students are distinguished for having different linguistic abilities and knowledge (Hamann, 2021). These aspects allow these students to be easily detected. Hamman (2021) states that although transnational students’ linguistic gifts could be seen as an advantage, many times they are taken as a deficit. This may set the path to negative feelings for the transnational student who is trying to integrate into a Mexican classroom with little or no previous knowledge of the Mexican education system. All of these aspects are part of the problems these students present with integration.

2.1.1 Problems for integration

Despange and Jacobo (2019) mention an important aspect when speaking on the difficulties of integration for transnational students, and that is that they are part of such a recent phenomenon that teachers, and the Mexican school system in general, do not know how to effectively deal with the diversity they represent. Past research on return migration has demonstrated that feelings of frustration arise within the Mexican classroom for transnational students as they are made invisible by not understanding their specific stories or not recognizing the needs they present (Despange & Jacobo, 2019). The only way to facilitate their education needs is to receive proper instruction and attention on behalf of their teachers and school directives. This idea brings much pressure and expectation towards the main agents of change: teachers.

2.2 Expectations on teachers

Teachers are those who have the most direct communication and contact with these transnational students, and in some instances, they are very welcoming towards the different skills these students have. However, it is most commonly seen that teachers fear or ignore the linguistic abilities that these students possess (Hamann & Zuñiga, 2021). Hamann (2021) mentions that schooling cannot be the same for transnational students as it would be for mononational students. Jensen and Jacobo (2019) express that Mexican educators need to go beyond the “we are all equal” mindset in their classrooms, both for teaching and learning. Overall, the most important factors for successful teaching quality regarding these transnational students not only comes from the knowledge teachers possess and their abilities but also from the support and...
resources they offer (Jensen & Jacobo, 2019). However, the amount of preparation teachers have and receive is the key aspect to understanding why these factors are being addressed or not.

2.3 Teachers' preparation for transnational students

What has been done, and how well prepared are these professors to tackle the transnationalism phenomenon? Despange and Jacobo (2019) mention a key aspect: Mexico does not have integration programs or language teacher training the way they do in the United States. Galicia (2016) explains that there is a need for schools to reorganize their curriculum to take into account the specific needs these students possess. Sánchez (2021) states a similar matter, mentioning that teachers are not prepared to tackle diversity in their classrooms nor have they received any sort of training regarding transnationalism, and they lack information on how to work with heterogeneous groups in Mexican schools. This lack of information and burden of expectations could lead to a low sense of self-efficacy for teachers.

2.4 Defining self-efficacy

In order to understand the self-efficacy beliefs that teachers may present, it is important to know what self-efficacy is. Balci, Sanal and Durak (2019), define self-efficacy as the belief a person has regarding themselves. Mirmojarabian and Rezvani (2021) narrow it down to teachers by stating that a teacher’s self-efficacy belief is defined as how a teacher perceives their abilities to tackle tasks and challenges effectively in order to help their students learn. They add that these self-efficacy beliefs are attitudes teachers take regarding their abilities to support students’ learning. Shah and Bhattarai (2023) define teachers’ self-efficacy as their belief in how capable they are when handling work-related tasks successfully. Orakci, Yuregili and Karagoz (2023) define a teacher’s self-efficacy perception as how self-efficient teachers consider themselves when their teaching profession is taking action. Depending on how strong a teacher’s self-efficacy is, is the amount of effort they will bring to the table (Balci, Sanal & Durak, 2019). This means that a teacher’s perception of their self-efficacy can greatly influence the motivation and actions they take in their classrooms. That is why it is important to understand the effect high and low self-efficacy beliefs have on teachers’ performance.

2.4.1 Effects of self-efficacy

Balci, Sanal and Durak (2019) mention that the self-efficacy beliefs one has can affect different aspects. For example, they affect when and how a person initiates a certain behavior. This aspect also influences how much effort a person is willing to make as well as how long they have decided to maintain that effort when they find themselves facing a certain obstacle. When a teacher has high self-efficacy perceptions of themselves, their performance and motivation are both positively affected. In this matter, when they are faced with problems, they will have the capability to deal with the issues and develop new coping techniques (Orakci, Yuregili & Karagoz, 2023). Low self-efficacy beliefs lead to a negative impact within the teaching context. Those who have low self-efficacy perceptions tend to visualize scenarios where failure is the main component; this then affects their performance within their classrooms in a negative way (Balci, Sanal & Durak, 2019). Within the English Language Teaching (ELT) context, there could be a negative impact on teachers’ self-efficacy when they are non-native speakers and they are required to demonstrate competence within the language they are using to teach. On many occasions, small errors can be amplified, thus embarrassing the professor (Hoang & Wyatt, 2020). All of the factors mentioned above are the reason why teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are highly important and should be taken into account when researching what is taking place within the learning classroom.
burdening professors with all of the expectations they have of them, they must first consider how they are feeling and why they are acting the way they are.

2.5 EFL teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs

Teachers are known to be the most crucial actors when it comes to making enhancements to the quality of education that is made available to students. In order to create changes within the classroom dynamic and offer the correct orientation for those who are not motivated or even students who are hard to work with, a teacher’s self-efficacy belief is the ultimate aspect that determines success (Shah & Bhattarai, 2023). Institutions ask teachers to identify transnational students’ needs, treat them ethically, and offer safe spaces for them to receive a positive learning environment (Orakci, Yuregili and Karagoz, 2023); however, the main factor that is needed for that to take place is having teachers possess high self-efficacy levels. There is plenty of information on the transnationalism phenomenon and also on self-efficacy perceptions; however, information is scarce regarding EFL teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs when presented with transnational students. Balci, Sanal and Durak (2019) state: “In order to determine the way teachers understand and organize instruction, research on teachers’ beliefs, one of which is teachers’ sense of efficacy, is essential (p. 44).” This research aims to fill this gap of information, shedding light on the feelings that are presented by teachers when confronted with these students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm is known for opposing one single, objective truth. It instead argues that the social world and everything that is known about it are created through social construction (Takashi & Araujo, 2020). In this sense, researchers use the data they collect to interpret everything that is known because it is a product of human experience (Landi, 2022). For the interpretivism paradigm, the primary data sources are interpretations and perceptions, as well as meaning and understanding (Narvaez et al., 2017). Taking these aspects into consideration and understanding that, according to Loan Nguyen (2019), the interpretive paradigm allows researchers to understand the life experiences of teachers within their classrooms, it was found to be the most appropriate paradigm when analyzing teachers’ beliefs.

3.2 Research approach

The qualitative approach aims to research aspects in their natural settings. Through this, it aims to interpret phenomena through the meaning a person gives them and describe them through narration (Narváez et al., 2017; Dewi, 2021). Since the purpose of the inquiry is to provide detailed and extensive knowledge of how EFL teachers perceive themselves when they are confronted with transnational students in their classroom, in-depth interviews with five participants informed the study. Dewi (2021) mentions that data for qualitative studies is best collected through semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Research design

For the purpose of this study, a case study was chosen as they are known for exploring single or multiple cases and seeking an understanding of a phenomenon through its natural context in order to obtain rich, detailed data (Creswell, 2018). The cases to be taken into account would be those of the teachers at the school of languages at a public university.
3.4 Sampling

The sample for this research was chosen through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is defined by Narváez et al. (2017) as selecting a number of people who can offer information that is relevant to the study at hand. This means the participants are chosen on purpose, depending on the information that the researcher wishes to obtain. As this research focuses on the self-efficacy beliefs of EFL teachers with transnational students in their classrooms, the main characteristic that the participants were required to have was that they had had or had at the time of the investigation at least a transnational student in their class. These professors share different career paths, years of experience, or schooling; however, the main aspect to take into consideration is the experience they present with these specific types of students.

3.5 Participants and context

For this research, five EFL teachers who currently work at the site of the investigation were chosen. These five professors were advised of the recording of their interviews beforehand so as to protect their rights. They also received a debriefing regarding what the interview was about and a definition of transnationalism, in case they were not aware of the term. When the transcriptions were made and the data analysis was presented, each participant received a pseudonym so as to protect their identity.

3.6 Data analysis

Once all the interviews were recorded and transcribed, the data analysis process was conducted through open coding. Open coding was used as it allows the researcher to describe what is happening within the data while creating categories (Albine & Korstiens, 2018). During the coding process, different categories arose within the data. Those categories were then used as topics and subtopics. Regarding the validity and reliability of the information, peer debriefing was implemented in order to assure that the inquiry was taking place in an objective manner.

4. Findings

4.1 Detecting transnationals

When it comes to having transnational students, the first part of the process is being aware that they are there. When teachers have the ability to detect transnational students, it facilitates the entire integration process. Through the various participations, it became clear that some people have an easier time detecting transnational status than others. Teachers mentioned being able to detect these students due to their accents, the proficiency they demonstrated in their classwork, or simply because their students wanted to express their status to them. In this respect, Rosa mentions: “The accent… the accent, the fluency, like… the speed? No, the speed rate.” This allows to understand that most teachers are aware of these students’ situation and their existence within the classroom. In this sense, teachers are also able to detect where these students may need more help.

4.2 Difficulties transnational students face

When taking English courses, it may be easy to assume transnational students will not present any problems as they are considered to be most proficient in that language. Many of these students might even have English as their first language. However, that is not always the case.
On many occasions, transnational students lack certain aspects that may be important for their professional development, and teachers detect the areas in which they might need assistance. The participants of this research mentioned that among the main difficulties they perceived were both Spanish and English grammar. Spanish grammar became difficult as they were not used to it; however, they also did not present a high command of English grammar and did poorly in written exams. Gustavo states:

“Yeah, for speaking I guess obviously not, because that’s the first thing you learn how to do, like even like Spanish speakers, but for grammar, sometimes they’ve had, like, I remember one student, he had a very good level of spoken English, but I gave him an exam and he did very poorly.”

Another limitation that was mentioned was the feeling of awkwardness they presented regarding the way schools worked in general in Mexico in comparison to the United States. Finally, it was mentioned that these students tend to participate less in class as they do not want to be seen as showoffs by their classmates. Through these participations, it is possible to identify that teachers notice the different problems these transnational students are having. However, there are also advantages to having these students in class.

4.3 Advantages of having transnational students

The participants of this research mentioned finding advantages such as seeing these students as cultural and linguistic resources, helping assist in the class, or simply finding no type of advantage to their presence in the classroom. As cultural and linguistic resources, these students present an advantage as they have lived the customs, traditions, holidays, or cultural aspects of the United States firsthand. They can give their testimony to the different topics that are being taught by the teacher. Laura mentions:

“Well, for anecdotes. I have this because I like to tell the students like some kind of cultural aspects, so they have like this vision or wide vision about some customs or traditions (...) so I asked them to talk about, a little bit about the things that they used to do over there.”

Linguistically, these students represent an advantage in class as they can help assist the class, have their classmates listen to them and how they speak, or be paired with those who are less proficient in order for them to help those who need it the most. There were also occasions in which teachers preferred not to get involved with their students, for reasons they may find pertinent, and they did not find these advantages for their class.

4.4 Making changes in classes

Once teachers are aware of transnational students’ existence in their classroom and their difficulties as well as their virtues are detected, they can then decide whether they want to make changes to their lesson plans or their classes. When asked if they made any changes or special arrangements, all of the participants mentioned they made none. Some teachers made no changes as their lessons were already personalized; others mentioned no changes were made as they always assumed all of the students were on the same level. All five participants responded that their institutions had not asked them to make any changes for these students. They also stated they were impressed that many institutions or directives had no idea of the presence of these students, as there were too many to keep track of those who presented different profiles. Laura expresses: “No, actually and I think that they, well, I don’t know, but I have the perception that they had not detected this type of student.”
An important factor to take into consideration regarding the aspects that are requested from the teachers that have transnational students in their classes is that many of them if not all, have not had any type of formal training or instruction to teach this type of student. It is not commonly seen that institutions dedicate teacher training courses to help those professors who may encounter transnational students in their classrooms. This means that, although teachers do want to help these students, on many occasions they do not know how to do it or that they will even have them there. The participants of this study mentioned having no previous training for these types of students and that they would have liked to at least be told beforehand of their presence in their classes. Rosa shares: “I would have liked to be told that I was going to have these students because it was like suddenly I had them. Like I wasn’t ready, maybe prepared, to have them there.”

4.6 Transnational students and EFL teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs

When asked about their self-efficacy beliefs when having transnational students in their classroom, all of the participants stated there have only been positive experiences and feelings. They expressed that they have never felt negative intentions from the students towards them, and there has never been a situation in which they have tried to belittle them, intimidate them, or have a negative attitude toward their classes. Through the different interviews, it was possible to notice how the five participants in this study mentioned that their self-efficacy beliefs were affected only in positive ways. They mention learning from the different transnational students they have encountered and feeling much more prepared for them now compared to when they had their first student of this sort. They also mentioned feeling humbled, and understanding they were not going to be the most proficient speaker in the room all the time. Angel shares:

“I always tell them, you know more things than I do in some aspects, so we gotta work together of course, and when they know that you have this... mentality, this perspective of the way they have learned, there is greater communication and I really like that.”

Others also mentioned that their confidence is what allows their self-efficacy perceptions to be high, as they simply try to be the best teacher they can. Finally, participants mentioned that these students have never made them lose face or tried to embarrass them in front of other students. Contrary to what the literature implies, these teachers present no negative self-efficacy perceptions because of these students. They express having nothing but positive outcomes and feelings in their classes.

5. Main limitations

A number of important limitations need to be considered. First, the number of participants was limited because, contrary to what was expected, there are a number of teachers who have not had transnational students or have not been able to detect them. This reduced the number of possible participants for the study. Secondly, this study only presented participants who are in the higher education field. The participants of this study mentioned that the transnational students they encountered were mainly at the university. It may be possible that in basic education, with younger students, there might be greater difficulties for teachers, as teaching adults is much different than teaching children. These, along with the lack of availability on behalf of the professors to provide an interview, were the main limitations of this study.
6. Main application and impact of the research

This research was found to be important as it fills a gap in the literature on transnational investigations. Although there is much information on the cultural impact of return migration and transnational education, there is no information regarding how this process affects teachers. As mentioned before, teachers are one of the main components of this process, and there was no information on how they perceive this phenomenon. It is now possible to understand their perspectives and create empathy from parents, transnational students, and administrators towards them. This research could also be part of a larger project where a comparison is made between the perception teachers have and the perception students have of what is happening in the classroom. In conclusion, this could provide a better image of how this return migration process is being tackled within the education sector and what changes are still to be made.

7. Conclusions

The evidence of this study suggests that transnational students are not invisible to teachers, and teachers are not always intimidated and made less by these students. Although it might be considered that transnational students could be difficult to teach when the class revolves around a language that they already know and use, these students are very respectful towards their teachers. This does not suggest that there are no problematic students of this kind; however, it contrasts with what the literature suggests. The literature also suggests that the reason for teachers not making the necessary changes to their classes for these students is due to a lack of recognition of their presence. Nevertheless, the findings of this research indicate that the problem does not come from a lack of knowledge on behalf of the teachers, as they are very aware of the presence of these students. The problem comes from a lack of knowledge on behalf of the schools and a lack of support for these teachers. It is important to develop courses on how to ease the integration process for transnationals and give comparisons between American and Mexican school systems. It may be highly beneficial for teachers to understand how these students have been taught, what information they possess, and also what information they lack. Although this information and support have been missing, teachers have been able to find strategies on their own to cope with the welcoming of these students, and they have tried to find ways to have them involved.

References


Hamann, E. T., & Zúñiga, V. (2021). What educators in Mexico and in the United States need to know and acknowledge to attend to the educational needs of transnational students. Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education, 99–117. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/448


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