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Mexicana nacida en el extranjero: Analyzing Ethnolinguistic Identity of Spanish Heritage Speakers Inhabiting the Borderlands

Mexicana nacida en el extranjero: analizando la identidad etnolingüística de hispanohablantes de herencia fronterizos

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the ethnolinguistic identities of Spanish heritage speakers who inhabit the borderlands in the San Diego-Tijuana international metropolitan area through critical discourse analysis of narratives written by students in an advanced university course for heritage Spanish speakers. The objective was to determine identities linguistically indexed through self-reported labels to develop better pedagogical practices in addressing ethnolinguistic identity in the heritage language classroom. Findings revealed that most participants recognized themselves as members of their ethnic group; a little more than a third identified solely with the heritage culture, but none identified solely as American. Additionally, bilingualism and biculturalism were included as part of their identity, and almost half mentioned that their heritage language was part of their identity; finally, the label most closely related to Spanglish and transnational practices was *Mexican*. Qualitative data is also presented and recommendations for better educational practices related to ethnolinguistic identity are given.

Keywords: 1. ethnolinguistic identity, 2. Spanish as a heritage language, 3. ethnic self-identification, 4. sociolinguistics, 5. United States-Mexico border.

RESUMEN

Se examinan identidades etnolingüísticas de hispanohablantes de herencia que habitan la región fronteriza del área metropolitana internacional de San Diego-Tijuana mediante el análisis crítico del discurso de narrativas escritas por estudiantes de un curso universitario avanzado. El objetivo fue determinar las identidades lingüísticamente indexadas mediante etiquetas auto-reportadas para desarrollar mejores prácticas pedagógicas que aborden la identidad etnolingüística en el aula de lengua heredada. Se encontró que la mayoría de los participantes se reconocían como miembros de su grupo étnico, poco más de un tercio se identificó únicamente con la cultura de herencia, y ninguno se identificó solo como estadounidense. Además, el bilingüismo y el biculturalismo se incluyeron como rasgo identitario, junto con la lengua heredada, reportada por casi la mitad. Finalmente, la etiqueta más relacionada con el *espanglish* y las prácticas transnacionales fue «mexicana/o». También se presentan datos cualitativos y recomendaciones para mejores prácticas educativas relacionadas con la identidad etnolingüística.

Palabras clave: 1. identidad etnolingüística, 2. español como lengua de herencia, 3. autoidentificación étnica, 4. sociolingüística, 5. frontera Estados Unidos-México.

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INTRODUCTION

Illustrating how well known some U.S. communities of Latin American origins are in the Spanish-speaking world, in 2020, the Mexican beer Indio® celebrated U.S. *Latinidad* by adorning its labels with U.S. Latino neighborhoods from coast to coast: Barrio Logan in San Diego; La Villita in Chicago; East End in Houston; Pueblayork in New York; and Mission District in San Francisco.[2] More than 60 million people—18.5% of the U.S. population—comprise the *Latina/o*[3] community (Alonzo, 2020). In 2020, 40.3% of the California population and 34.3% of the San Diego County population identified themselves as part of this demographic, constituting the largest ethnic group in the state (Data U.S., n.d.). This study was conducted in San Diego, California, a city that shares its border with Tijuana, Mexico. The location of San Diego on the borderland and the constant flux of people from Mexico make the San Diego-Tijuana international metropolitan area a suitable place to study ethnolinguistic identity.

Ethnolinguistic identity is a salient aspect of immigrants and their offspring, as it plays a role in how individuals perceive themselves as members of a society. At the same time, it contributes to shaping their feelings of inclusion or exclusion into the heritage and the mainstream cultural groups. Currently, many questions about the ethnolinguistic identity of minoritized groups in different social contexts remain unanswered, for example, how the preservation or loss of heritage languages are affected by identity attitudes in borderland contexts. Valdés defines a heritage learner/speaker as someone "who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken. The student may speak or merely understand the heritage language and be, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language" (Valdés, 2001, p. 1).

As there are no investigations that specifically examine the ethnolinguistic identities of Spanish heritage speakers (SHS) in San Diego, this study aims to analyze identities linguistically indexed through self-reported labels among SHS in this area, to better understand which identities they (do not) embrace and to be able to develop better practices in addressing ethnolinguistic identity in the heritage language (HL) classroom to improve curricular and teaching practices for these students.

This study investigates how SHS perceive their HL and if they embrace bilingualism, biculturalism, and Spanglish[4] as elements that contribute to their ethnic identity. It also inquires if participants carried out transnational practices, which can play a role in shaping linguistic attitudes and social affinities. In the case of SHS, transnational practices contribute to the experience of the heritage culture (HC), adding, in turn, to linguistic identity.

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[2] For more on the beer marketing strategy, see Agencia Montalvo (2018).

[3] "Latinx" was the term originally used to encompass the group of individuals and communities addressed in this work, defined as "A person of Latin American origin or descent" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). As part of the editorial policy of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, the term "Latinx" is replaced by *Latina/o.*

[4] Zentella (1997) defines "Spanglish" as a systematic codeswitching practice among some bilinguals of inserting English words or phrases when speaking Spanish, and vice versa. In this research, Spanglish has no negative connotations.

Identity is a central topic in HL education because, for example, the attitudes towards the HL and HC can affect individual self-esteem and ethnic/family pride (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2013). Moreover, positive attitudes toward the HL and the HC can motivate individuals to (re)learn the HL and, possibly, transmit it to the next generation (Toribio, 1999, Kondo-Brown, 2000; Park y Sarkar, 2007; Rivera-Mills, 2012; Landsberry, 2017; Makarova et al., 2019), contributing to a linguistically diverse society. In contrast, "when individuals no longer identify with a specific culture, there may be less motivation to maintain a linguistic link to that culture" (Henderson et al., 2020, p. 29). An understanding of how the local sociocultural environment, in this case a border context, shapes SHS's identity allows instructors of Spanish as a heritage language to better understand and act in favor of their students' realities. Additionally, the ethnolinguistic identities of U.S. persons of Latin America descent are constructed in a society where power imbalances among different groups are present. Their displacement is not only physical but also psychological and cultural (Aparicio, 2004); in this sense, embracing the HL and the HC can be also a way to resist and not settle for these social imbalances.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. Do SHS address their ethnic identity in their writings? If so, what type of labels do they prefer to address their ethnic identity?
2. Do SHS address bilingualism and biculturalism as part of their identity?
3. Do SHS mention that they have a positive identification with their HL?
4. Do SHS mention that they use and have a positive identification with Spanglish?
5. Do SHS mention having transnational practices?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN U.S. LATIN AMERICAN DESCENDANTS

The study of ethnic identity in this communities are complex due to being minoritized and racialized in their social context and to the fact that they are a mixture of races and cultures. Ethnic identity, "a subjective feeling of belonging or affiliation with a social group that is defined in terms of a common ethnic ancestry and a common language variety" (Noels, 2017, p. 1), it is not static and can be expected to transform over time, intersecting with other aspects such as race, social stratum, gender, and country of origin. In multicultural settings, ethnic identification has the potential of becoming even more complex, and individuals can experience stages in which they go back and forth with positive or negative feelings towards their ethnic group, depending on, among other reasons, their age and (lack of) contact with (non-)members of their ethnic group.

In the poststructuralist approach of He (2006), identity is not the sum of static attributes but a "process of continual emerging and becoming" (p. 7), a conceptualization that the present study adopts, as individuals are dynamic, diverse, and ever-changing (Peirce, 1995). This is relevant, since most participants of this study, young individuals averaging 23 years of age, are constructing their identity in a multicultural setting, very different from their caregivers', who may have come to the

United States from "monolingual" Spanish-speaking countries—although it does not imply that first-generation individuals have less dynamic, complex, or static identities.

Identity is also shaped by individual circumstances and contexts (Keith & Pile, 1993), as well as temporality and space, including the social environment(s) the individual inhabits, has inhabited, or will inhabit (He, 2014). Identity is co-constructed individually (subjective) and socially through relations between "the self" and "the others" (Liebkind, 1995, p. 83); moreover, it is deeply influenced by societal belief systems, which allocates positions of power in unequal social configurations (Showstack, 2018), as is the case of U.S. persons of Latin America descent living in the borderlands, whose ethnic identity is also shaped by discrimination and prejudice.

These aspects "have proven to change how individuals see themselves, the world, and others" (Pabón Gautier 2016, p. 330). Therefore, identity is a social phenomenon and a social practice, as it is created by our performativity in different spaces, how we decide to express our physical appearance, and which groups we wish to affiliate or not (Escobar & Potowski, 2015). The ever-changing dynamics of identity reside in these interconnections between the self and its contexts. Thus, self-identification is a crucial aspect of ethnic identity, as people do not necessarily embrace their ethnic background as part of their personal identity.

In the U.S., the stigmatization of Spanish, along with the racialization of Latina/o identities, may contribute to these communities' internal struggle or even alienation from their ethnic group, given the inequities of the social contexts, as they do not have the same opportunities that the hegemonic group has, and the social value of English is higher than that of Spanish. According to Umaña-Taylor et al. (2002), the study of ethnic identity of minoritized individuals in multicultural societies, from an acculturation perspective, considers three possibilities in relation to culture: *a)* ethnic identification: maintaining the ethnic values and not adopting the values of the mainstream group; *b)* bicultural identification: maintaining the ethnic values and adopting the values of the mainstream group; *c)* mainstream identification: not maintaining the ethnic values and adopting the values of the mainstream group.

Language, in addition to communicating, is also used to create and claim identities (Baker, 2006, as cited in Makoni, 2018). Also, identities, a central linguistic phenomenon, "are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy" (Bucholtz Hall, 2005, p. 597). Indirectly, languages and dialects operate as social differentiators and identity markers (Choi, 2015). In the U.S. context, when someone's first language is minoritized, maintaining it requires proactive effort and support from family and school personnel (Landsberry, 2017), even in the borderlands. Previous studies have identified language loyalty, intergenerational transmission, language use frequency, proficiency, and age of acquisition as variables in HL transmission (Rivera-Mills, 2012); also, that a link between bilingualism and identity often exists in minoritized individuals (Edwards, 2013). For example, Zentella (2016) found that bilingual *fronterizo* individuals living in San Diego-Tijuana recognized the importance of Spanish as part of their Mexican identity, regardless of their dominant

language, and that place of birth rarely determines participants' identity—similar to the discoveries of this study.

The following interrelated factors, discussed below, are relevant to the goals of this study as they also shape the identities of U.S. Latina/o groups: allocation of resources based on the concept of race, the minority/majority group dichotomy, language ideologies, efforts to eradicate languages other than English (LOTE), and linguistic purism. To begin with, race as a social construct contributes to both identity and social imbalances. Omi and Winant define racial formation as "historical and governmental processes by which various racial categories have been socially created and destroyed. The category of 'race' symbolizes social conflicts by referring to human physical characteristics, yet it is not fixed, but rather variable over time" (Omi & Winant, 1994, as cited in Feagin, 2006, p. 6).

For his part, Feagin has identified that, in the United States, the traditional analysis of race obscures the institutional power and wealth hierarchies that privilege whites and impoverish subordinated groups (2006). Therefore, the concept of race hinders identity formation among the members of U.S. Latin American descendants, as these individuals' identities are perceived as less desirable than white's. This is the result of certain ideologies and attitudes in the U.S. and not a random outcome. Additionally, in the U.S., minoritized ethnic groups are understood as deviating from the mainstream/majoritarian group, which usually sets the tone for the norm in the macro-social context holding most of the social, political, and economic power. Additionally, the category of "majority" is associated with a status of legitimacy, placing minoritized individuals outside that status (Liebkind, 1995, p. 85); this may cause U.S. Latinas/os to perceive themselves as illegitimate or less legitimate Americans.

According to social identity theory, members of underrepresented groups can experience negative psychological effects if they develop a "negative social identity" (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moreover, individuals who identify with two different groups having conflicting values may face difficulties in forging a bicultural identity (Tajfel, 1978). Also, identity does not necessarily conform to geopolitical borders or ethnic barriers (He, 2014). The physical space a person inhabits is only one determinant of the life experiences and circumstances that shapes individual and social identities. For example, some individuals inhabiting the borderlands may live on one side of the border and study and/or work on the other side. These transnational experiences add to their identities.

In multiethnic/multilinguistic regions, individuals integrate to different degrees, with some experiencing subordination and exclusion (Velasco Ortiz & Contreras, 2014) due to stigmatization of identities that deviate from the norm. Additionally, people living in multilingual environments make a great effort to balance their identification with and differentiation from certain languages (Parra, 2016), therefore, the identities of bilingual/multilingual speakers should not be compared with those of monolingual speakers (Bakić & Škifić, 2017), because their contexts and the variables involved in identity formation are very different. Still, as Liebkind argues, "raising the social identity of subordinated minority groups is a revolutionary act, because it induces these minorities to see injustice in a new light" (1995, p. 86).

Moreover, language ideologies "are the systems of values and beliefs surrounding language, language varieties, and languages" (Leeman, 2018, p. 438). For many SHS, the decision to communicate in the HL or the mainstream language (English) might depend on, among other factors, the unequal value of English and Spanish in their social space. Also, language ideologies restructure and distort the relationship between linguistic forms (index) and the social group indexed (Milroy, 2004). Hegemonic language ideologies tend to stigmatize LOTE and to conceptualize them as threats to U.S. national identity (Leeman, 2018). For example, the choice to communicate in one's HL can be interpreted as an unwillingness to assimilate to American ways, a pressure that on U.S. Spanish-speakers contributes to language loss. In contrast, positive attitudes toward HLs and HCs correlate with HL proficiency and maintenance (Kondo-Brown, 2000; Bradley, 2013; Henderson et al., 2020) and may contribute to a stronger sense of identity (Henderson et al., 2020), and, as Mejías et al. (2003) found, if a language is socially valued, its social importance is elevated.

Furthermore, actions to eradicate Spanish in the United States and the ideal of linguistic purism are especially challenging for SHS. On one hand, beginning in 1983, the English-only movement sought to establish English as the U.S. official language (Showstack, 2018). This movement is still present, given that some of the laws promoted by it are still in force, such as the officialization of English in several states, including California. English-only education fosters assimilation and acculturation, rapidly discouraging the use of HLs and, consequently, disrupting ethnolinguistic identity formation. It also constitutes "symbolic violence as well as educational malpractice, given the well-documented educational benefits of bilingual and mother tongue schooling" (Leeman, 2018, p. 347). Moreover, this ideology perpetuates the stigmatization of Spanish and the racialization of U.S. communities of Latin American origin; for example, it relates speaking Spanish to poverty and academic failure and portrays bilingualism as a source of psychological deficit (Zentella, 2002). Because of this, Spanish speakers are being discriminated against in the U.S. and even fined or detained for using this language in states like Texas or Montana (Baron, 2009; Chappelle, 2019).

On the other hand, many monolinguals in Spanish have a purist view of Spanish and denigrate SHS as *pochos* or *mochos* who do not know it properly. The legitimacy of SHS's identity is undermined by the misconceptions that they lack command of both languages, and that speaking English is a sign of assimilation (Zentella 2007). Therefore, language standardization and purist ideologies are far from being unproblematic (Milroy, 2004). Flores and Rosa (2023) suggest a raciolinguistic frame to challenge the efforts focused on modifying the linguistic behaviors of racialized subjects.

At the borderlands, federal and state-wide laws affect the educational and linguistic practices of bilinguals and SHS living on both sides of the borders (Zentella, 2016), such as the prohibition of bilingual education in California from 1998 to 2016 (Mongeau Hughes, 2016). There is also a misconception of borderland individuals having "static and disparaged linguistic codes" (Zentella, 1997, p. 13). However, from the insider perspective, the linguistic practices used on both sides of the border are different. Therefore, what seems to be a linguistically homogeneous area is a heterogeneous dialect area (Martínez, 2003). The educational culture in the borderlands is oriented to resist the presence of Spanish and Mexican culture (Garza, 2007). Beaudrie and Vergara Wilson (2022) propose that the

development of critical language awareness (CLA) be included as a goal of HL education and that the current goals for HL education be reframed within the CLA framework. CLA allows students to develop awareness of, among other things, the dynamics of language and power, the (un)privileging of languages and dialects, and dominant language ideologies (Beaudrie & Vergara Wilson, 2022).

Therefore, there is a need of critical pedagogical practices, such as the CLA approach and the border pedagogy, which supports educators to link political, ideological and social issues with the particular realities of schools (Beyer, 2001): "The experiential dimension of Border Pedagogy involved students in cross-cultural and bi-national interactions that frequently exposed their own conceptual borders in the form of perceptions and assumptions" (Garza, 2007, p. 4). These pedagogical approaches can facilitate the discussion of ethnolinguistic identity topics in the HL classroom. Finally, other factors also shape the identities of U.S. Latinas/os, such as the historical presence of their communities, their current status as the largest underrepresented group, the vitality of Spanish, and the preservation of their cultural values, among others, not elaborated given the extension of this article.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 37 Spanish heritage speakers living in the San Diego-Tijuana international metropolitan area, a convenience sample of university students enrolled in an elective advanced Spanish as a heritage language course, fulfilling the language requirement and Spanish minor requirements for SHS. This method was used due to time and budget restrictions. All participants were English/Spanish bilinguals of Latin America origin or heritage, although some participants may have been commuters, while others resided in San Diego; however, access to these data was not available. The average age was 23.7 years (range: 19-35 years). Twelve participants reported growing up in Mexico, 10 in the U.S., and one in both countries (14 did not disclose). The Mexican-born participants (two from Tijuana city, two from Mexico City, one from the state of Zacatecas, and one more from Michoacán) immigrated to the U.S. between the ages of 4 and 17. Table 1 presents the participants' birthplaces.[5]

Table 1. Participants' Birthplace

Birthplace	No.
California	22
Other U.S. states	6
Mexico	6
Not disclosed	3
Total	37

Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

[5] This information was found in the compositions.

Most participants (75.7%) were children of immigrants: four reported their mothers were born in the U.S., 24 in Mexico, and one in El Salvador (eight did not disclose). The fathers of two participants were born in the U.S. and 26 in Mexico (nine did not disclose). Regarding language acquisition, Spanish was the first language of 25 participants, while English was reported as such by two participants (10 did not disclose).

Compositions

A total of 74 creative writing compositions were analyzed. The compositions were an autobiography and a poem. Participants wrote them as part of their coursework to advance their literacy skills in their HL. The autobiography was two pages long and written in Spanish, while the poem was at least half a page and was written in Spanglish, as indicated in the assignments' instructions. The goal of the autobiography was for students to reflect on their linguistic and cultural repertoires. The recommended topic for the poem was their experiences as U.S. Latinas/os. At the end of the semester, the author requested voluntary informed consent from students to use their compositions for research purposes, and the recruited participants were compensated with extra credit for participating in this study.

Writing about identity was not a requirement for any of the compositions, though the topics selected by students did indirectly relate to identity issues. The sociocultural topics read about and discussed in class may have also shaped the compositions. Issues of colorism and racism in Latin America and the U.S. were covered both before and after the students turned in their compositions. These topics opened conversations on ethnicity, bilingualism, and ethnolinguistic discrimination. In addition, students examined inequity and discrimination based on ethnic origin, skin color, and socioeconomic status, as well as immigration and lack of opportunities. In class, students discussed the deportation of undocumented immigrants from California and some consequences of deportation (e.g., homelessness, unemployment). They also analyzed characteristics of U.S. Spanish dialects, reflected on how minoritized languages are often stigmatized, explored how linguistic discrimination connects to ethnic discrimination, and discussed ethnicity in relation to Spanish as an HL.

Data Analysis

Each composition was analyzed performing critical discourse analysis (CDA), a technique that includes breaking down information and coding it. CDA is a research tool that links discourse with social structure (Fairclough, 1992; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2020), and therefore, "can often be used to reveal power relationships, and how certain groups can be marginalised" (Adolphus, n.d., par. 34). Topics related to identity and self-reported labels of ethnolinguistic identity were searched, that is, "the ethnic label that one uses for oneself" (Phinney 1990, p. 503), which is an essential element in the examination of ethnic identity (Tajfel, 1981).

Because narratives allow working with "natural" language in context, compositions written by SHS were preferred over asking the participants about the studied topics. The advantage of analyzing complete texts, instead of isolated terminology, is that "narrative has been employed to signify that qualitative inquiries are concerned essentially with every day or natural linguistic expressions, not with decontextualized short phrases or with abstracted counts designed for use in computational analysis" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 6). The compositions were read seeking patterns that answered the research questions. Then, the data was classified into similar or equal indexed identity labels and topics to quantify it. Additionally, relevant examples were selected to present qualitative data.

RESULTS

Some of the themes that emerged in the autobiography were students' problematization of their ethnolinguistic identities, struggle with English acquisition, mockery of their English and Spanish, language and cultural shift versus maintenance, devaluation of their Spanish variety, racial discrimination, having fewer opportunities than non- Latin America origin White people, cultural shock, and the adaptation process of moving to or studying in a different country. The themes evident in the poem included growing up bilingual, resistance to being minoritized individuals, diglossia, and linguistic insecurities.

Interest in Addressing Ethnic Identity

Of the 37 participants, 30 (81.7%) mentioned ethnic identity an average of two times (range 1-5) in their compositions. There was a total of 62 self-reported ethnic identity labels, including nine pan-ethnic (*Latina/o*),[6] 26 ethnic (*Mexican*), four regional (*tijuanense*, *sinaloense*, *chilanga*, and *Hawaiian*), and one local (*fronterizo*).[7] One participant described not identifying with either their ethnic group or the mainstream culture, declaring himself as "neither Mexican nor American," and another embraced a "fluid identity." Of the ethnic identification labels, 44 appeared in the autobiography and the remaining 18 in the poem. Table 2 shows these results.

[6] In California, *Latina/o* is preferred over Hispanic, and the two terms have different connotations.

[7] Individuals who live in the borderlands usually have cultural practices from two cultures. However, they are also a cohesive group with a unique cultural amalgam.

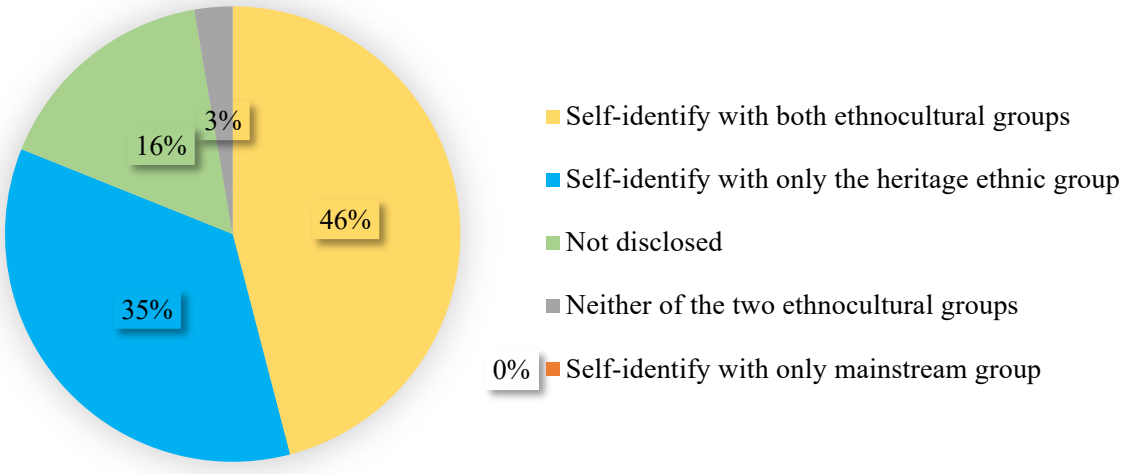
Table 2. Ethnic Self-Identification Labels Encountered in Both Compositions

Label	No.	%
Mexican	26	41.9
Latina/o	9	14.5
American	7	11.3
Mexican American	6	9.7
Chicana/o	6	9.7
Hispana/o	1	1.6
Regional	4	6.5
Fronterizo	1	1.6
Neither Mexican nor American	1	1.6
Fluid identity	1	1.6
Total	62	100

Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

Most participants indexed their identities with ethnic labels, followed by pan-ethnics. This is interpreted as the embracement of their HC and their *Latinidad*, instead of their birth or host country's culture. It would be interesting to know what the participants understand by "*Latina/o*", "*Hispana/o*" and "*Chicana/o*," but unfortunately, that information remains pending. However, as Graph 1 shows, 17 participants (45.9%) self-identified with both Latin American origin and mainstream cultures; 13 only (35.1%) mentioned identifying with the Latina/o group (in one case, *Latina/o* and *Hawaiian*); and one (2.7%) did not identify with either group; no participant declared identifying only with the mainstream ethnic group; finally, six (16.2%) did not disclose any ethnic identification.

Graph 1. Self-Identification with Ethnocultural Groups



Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

Although most participants identified with both ethnocultural groups, overall, most of them (81%) embraced their heritage group. This means that the participants feel that they belong more or are more loyal to their HC. The following are examples of how some participants addressed their identity:[8]

(1)

a) Yo me identifico como una *chicana*[9] y tal cual como el titulo lo dice una *mexicana* nacida en el extranjero. (autobiography, 107)

b) And to show that I am proud to be *mexicana*. (poem, 116)

c) Being bilingual and a *latina* what a chingona.
[…] Al fin del día I am proud to be a *latina* who knows Spanish. (poem, 130)

d) Cuando aprendí más sobre mi familia, mi cultura *mexicana*, y la historia de México, empecé a sentirme conectada a mis antepasados y a tener orgullo en mi identidad. (autobiography, 115)

e) Me enorgullece mi origen étnico […] nuestras raíces, al contrario, es poder compartir y adquirir conocimiento de otra cultura y porque [*sic*] no, hacer una nueva combinación de ambas. Por esta razón, me encanta seguir practicando mi lengua. (autobiography, 135)

In contrast to the examples 1a-d, the latest (1e) mentions this idea of belonging to two worlds, a feeling that can be very common in bilingual/bicultural individuals, especially if they live in the borderlands. Moreover, some participants articulated the intricacy of belonging to both a minoritized ethnocultural group and the mainstream ethnocultural group. These examples reveal the burden of identifying with a minoritized ethnic group that is the target of systemic oppression:

(2)

a) Que no tenemos identidad, dicen algunos.
But we survive between two worlds, como ningunos. (poem, 136)

b) Stuck between two mundos. (poem, 110)

c) Ser Latino en los Estados Unidos can be a little difficult.
La vida no siempre es un American dream aquí in the United States. (poem, 131)

d) Entonces si alguien me preguntara que si soy americano o mexicano pues diría el típico "Mexican-American," pero en realidad no me identifico con eso, y […] empiezo a pensar que soy una persona rara, porque cualquier otra persona estaría bien con decir eso, pero yo no. (autobiography, 109)

[8] These examples are reproduced verbatim. Identity labels appear in italics. The number in parentheses at the end of the excerpts indicates the participant's code.

[9] In this research, "chicana/o" is understood as a hybridization of Mexican and American identities. This term also has a political connotation beyond the scope of this article.

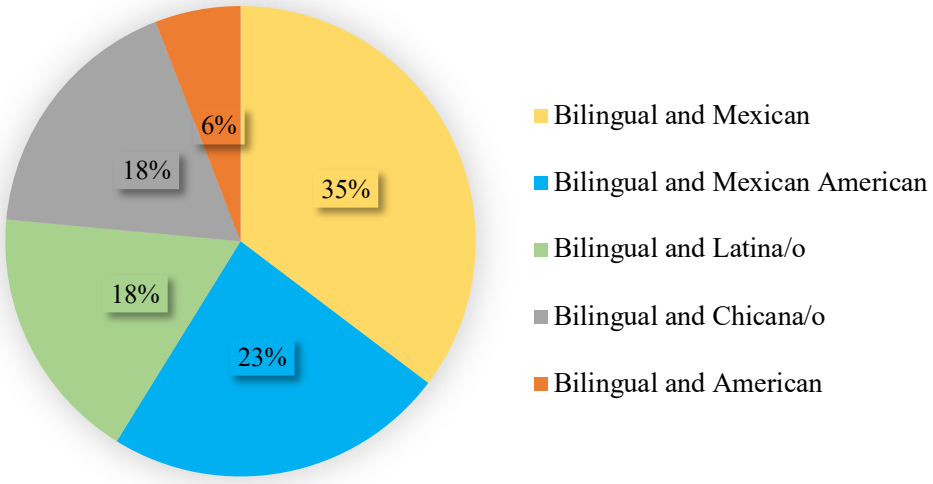
> e) Para mí, la cultura de Hawaii no ha sido prominente en mi vida como la cultura chicana, aunque siempre he sido demasiado americana para la población mexicana y demasiado mexicana para las personas americanas. (autobiography, 119)

These fragments show how hard it can be for some Latin American descendants to be part of mainstream society. This is also true for other minority groups, such as Asian-Americans and African-Americans.

Embrace of Bilingualism and Biculturalism

Of the 30 participants who mentioned ethnolinguistic identity topics in their writings, 17 (60.7%) referred to bilingualism as a critical element of their identity; six (21.4%) alluded to biculturalism as an important element; and finally, five (17.9%) mentioned both bilingualism and biculturalism. Bilingualism was mentioned more often in the poem than in the autobiography. It is clear that, for the participants, it was easier to self-identify as bilingual than as bicultural individuals, due to the complexities they face in the U.S. for not belonging solely to the mainstream ethnic group, as mentioned in previous examples. Of the 17 participants who used the label *bilingual*, as Graph 2 shows, six (35%) also self-identified as *Mexican*, four (23.5%) as *Mexican American*, three (17.6%) as *Latina/o* and *Chicana/o* respectively, and one (5.9%) as *American*.

Graph 2. References to Bilingualism in the Most Popular Ethnic Identity Labels



Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

The patterns shown in the previous results continue, as participants link bilingualism with the heritage ethnic group, and the mainstream group is the least preferred, with a mixture of them and a pan-ethnic term in between. The examples below show how some participants relate bilingualism as a relevant aspect of who they are:

(3)

a) I was raised speaking Spanish and English,
Just like everyone else in my neighborhood.
To be bilingual is to be a part of two worlds,
Te puedo cantar las de Chente,
And rock out to some Blink-182. (poem, 115)

b) El biculturalismo y el ser bilingüe son características mías que siempre apreciaré por todas las oportunidades y perspectivas que me ha dado. (autobiography, 118)

c) Al ingresar a la universidad, me di cuenta de que el conocer dos culturas me habría [*sic*] medio continente y que conocer dos idiomas me habría [*sic*] medio mundo. (autobiography, 132)

According to example 3a, as mentioned before, some participants—maybe most of them—share the feeling of belonging to two words. This allows them to navigate in two different contexts, which sometimes are separated, but coexist in an amalgam that constitutes a particular reality for individuals living in the borderlands. Furthermore, being bilingual in a society that values linguistic assimilation more than bi/multilingualism can be challenging, and some participants articulated the intricacy of growing up bilingual and belonging to a minoritized group in a multicultural environment. They also wrote about their linguistic insecurities in their HL. The following examples are illustrative:

(4)

a) Doble vida, doble vida. Aburrida, nunca es
They say I'm more American
Cuando hablo en inglés
"We speak English in this country,
Tú hablas el inglés?"
No, sorry señor gringo
Me speaki e-spanish (poem, 113)

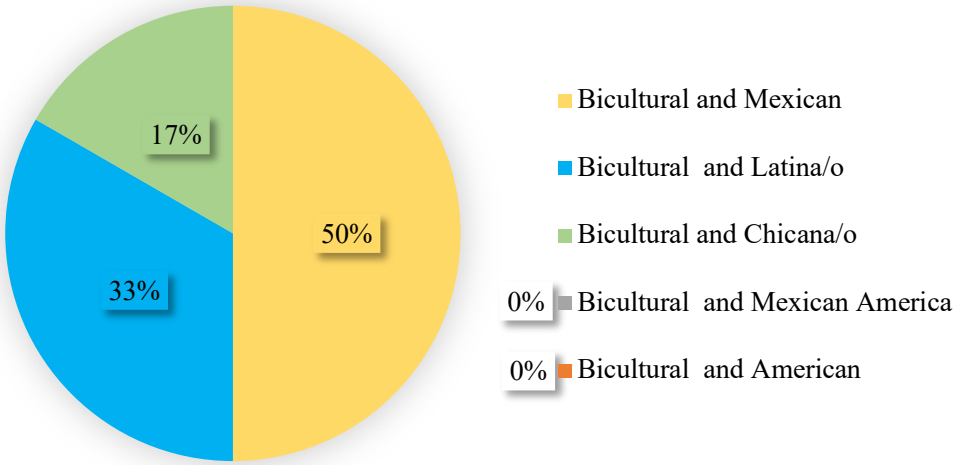
b) It is not easy being bilingual due to discrimination from others. (poem, 108)

c) I wish I could tell you that I can speak it well. Y poder hablarlo correctamente. Pero no puedo. I can't. No significa que soy malo en las dos lenguas. And even if I am mediocre at best. Comprueba una cosa. That I am bilingual. (poem, 111)

d) Being a woman in the middle of two cultures es difícil. A lo mejor mi español no es perfecto but best believe I will get my point across. (poem, 130)

In example 4d, it's noticeable the role that standard Spanish ideologies play in these participants' attitudes towards their identities as Spanish speakers, as some of them believe that their Spanish variety is not good enough because they don't speak Standard Spanish. Turning to the six participants who used the label *bicultural*, three (50%) also used the label *Mexican;* two (33.3%) used the label *Latina/o*; and one (16.7%) used the label *Chicana/o,* while none used *Mexican American* or *American* (see Graph 3).

Graph 3. References to Biculturalism in the Most Popular Ethnic Identity Labels



Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

Once more, the participants preferred to identify with their heritage ethnic group in relation to bilingualism, and it is worth mentioning that *Chicana/o* is preferred to *Mexican American*. The following examples present a positive view of and sense of belonging to both cultures:

(5)

a) Me identifico *mexicana*. But I am really *Americana*. Me encanta celebrar el 15 de septiembre. And I also love celebrating the 4th of July. I got the best of both worlds. (poem, 126)

b) Yo creo que soy parte Americano y parte Mexicano. Es la única forma en la que me puedo describir. (autobiography, 109)

c) I'm not giving up my lengua or mi cultura, porque de tu Edén monolingüismo, esto es la cura. (poem, 133)

The phrase "the best of both worlds" (example 5a) is very common in the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S., usually said with pride. In 5b, instead of a mixture of cultures, the participant is expressing the separation of the two cultures, exemplifying how each individual experiences their biculturality in different ways. However, some participants wrote about difficult episodes being bicultural:

(6)

a) He says [you] are not welcome here. Aunque this is your home. And has been por los past 28 years. Llegaste con un sueño. Como se dice… The Mexican-American Dream! (poem, 113)

b) Mis maestros blancos juzgaron mi inglés and blamed my Spanish language, tuve que elegir entre mis raíces Latinas, or blend in con la American society. (poem, 131)

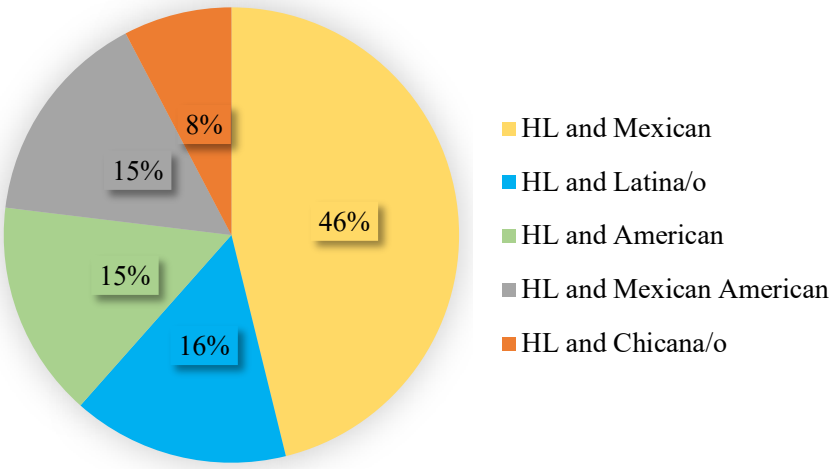
c) Nunca me he sentido muy acercada a la cultura mexicana y tampoco me identifico con la cultura americana. Cuando oigo que describen a los chicanos, latinos o *latinxs* [*sic*], tampoco me siento identificada, así es que, en cuestión de cultura, siento que no encajo en ninguna. (autobiography, 114)

Example 6a is a nuanced expression of not always feeling welcomed in the U.S.; example 6b expresses being pushed to assimilate; while example 6c rejects identification with either cultural group, which suggests marginality according to Phinney (1990).

Use of and Positive Identification with the Heritage Language

Of the 30 participants who mentioned ethnic identity, 13 (43.7%) also mentioned Spanish, their HL, as part of their identity. Of the 13 participants who wrote positively about their HL, six (46.2%) also used the label *Mexican*; two (15.4%) used the label *Latina/o*; two (15.4%) used the label *American*; two (15.4%) used the label *Mexican American*; and one (7.7 %) used the label *Chicana/o* (see Graph 4).

Graph 4. Positive Identification with the Heritage Language (HL) in Most Popular Ethnic Identity Labels



Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

The pattern continues as the preferred label in relation to the HL was *Mexican*. In contrast with previous outcomes, *American* was not the least preferred label. Six participants combined *American* and *Mexican American* with their HL, meaning there is no need to quit the HL to have a positive identification with the mainstream group. The following examples show use of and positive identification with the HL:

(7)

a) Les enseñaré a mis hijos hablar en español,
At school they will learn English,

> Serán bilingües como su mamá.
> I will not let their culture be extinguished. (poem, 115)
>
> b) Feliz y orgulloso poder hablar my native language. (poem, 121)
>
> c) El español es un idioma tan hermoso; es el idioma que utilizo para comunicarme con muchos miembros de mi familia. (autobiography, 131)

In example 7a, the writer expresses her aspiration to maintain the HL and pass it to her offspring so they, too, will be bilingual. Examples 7b and 7c show an embrace of the HL. Other participants expressed struggling/negative experiences with their HL and language shift. These examples provide additional evidence of how the pressure to assimilate, monolingual ideologies, and discriminatory speech and actions exercise violence against bilingual and bicultural individuals:

> (8)
>
> a) Pero cuando yo estuve en la escuela proposición 227, diciendo que las escuelas públicas en California deberían de enseñar solo en inglés, pasó. Crecí durante los años que ser bilingüe no era lo deseado. De muy chica aprendí que inglés era mejor que español y hasta vergüenza me daba de ser hispanohablante. (autobiography, 115)
>
> b) Pero sobre todo la transición de español a inglés han sido unas de las etapas más difíciles de mi vida. En ocasiones llegaba a pensar que el haber aprendido español como mi primer idioma no había sido tan prudente después de todo. (autobiography, 133)
>
> c) Ella [high school teacher] nos decía que el español que hablamos nosotros los mexicanos no era correcto. Que solo el español de España era correcto. Por tres años nos menospreciaba y me hacía sentir que mi español nunca sería lo suficiente bueno. (autobiography, 115)
>
> d) Cuando comencé a hablar bien el inglés ya no me sentía cómoda hablando el español. (autobiography, 130)
>
> e) Por ende, poco a poco se nos fue olvidando el español a pesar de los regaños de nuestros padres. (autobiography, 129)
>
> f) Pude ver cómo el saber inglés podía llegar a ser más importante que el saber español. […] Las escuelas fueron un tanto injustas, los que hablábamos español no tuvimos tantas oportunidades como los que hablaban inglés. No se nos ayudó a aplicar a universidades, fuimos directo a colegios. (autobiography, 134)

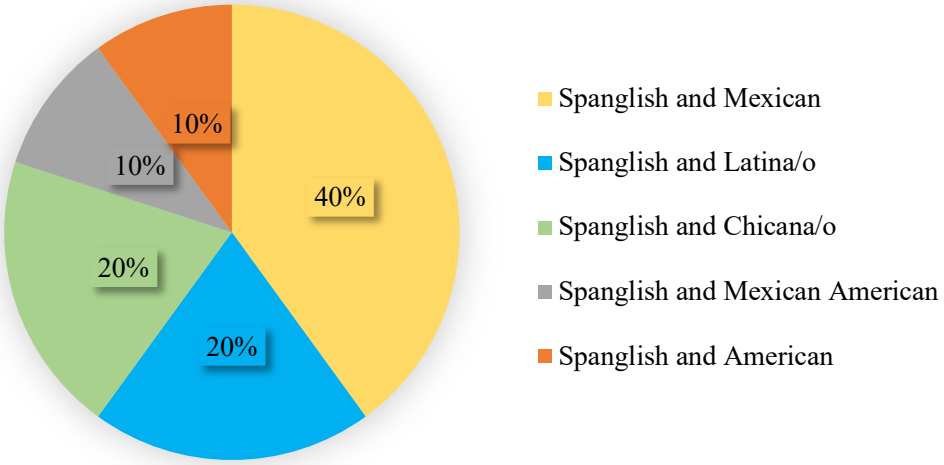
Unfortunately, the struggles expressed in examples 7a-f are not unique to the borderland contexts, they are situations that have been documented to occur in other areas in the U.S.

Use of and Positive Identification with Spanglish

Analyzing the positive views of Spanglish is another way of studying bicultural and bilingual identification, as previous studies have shown that Spanglish is an identity marker of bilingual communities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Zentella, 1997; Betti, 2008, 2018), and it is in Spanglish that the main signs of ethnolinguistic identity can be seen (Torres, 1997). Of the 30 participants who

mentioned ethnic identity labels, 10 (33.3%) also mentioned Spanglish, an English-influenced form of Spanish, as part of their identity. Of these 10 participants, four (40%) also used the label *Mexican*; two (20%) used the label *Latina/o*; two (20%) used the label *Chicana/o*; one (10%) used the label *Mexican American*; and one (10%) used the label *American* (see Graph 5).

Graph 5. Positive Identification with Spanglish in the Most Popular Ethnic Identity Labels



Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

Again, the pattern repeats, as *Mexican* is the most popular label related to Spanglish, and *American* the least preferred, with a combination of both and a pan-ethnic term in the middle. The following examples show the use of and the positive identification with Spanglish:

(9)

a) Cuando me miran cambiar de idiomas tan fácilmente.
They are amused
Algo tan complicado para algunos
Me sale tan fluido (poem, 106)

b) Ahora en día los plebes necesitan saber que there is nothing wrong with speaking spanglish. (poem, 131)

c) Así es mi vida a veces
Not English or Spanish, but both
Como lo hace mi cerebro para cambiar el idioma
I want to know, ¿tú no? (poem, 102)

d) Me dicen que no mezcle las dos lenguas,
To stick only to one while I'm talking.
Pero están tan entrelazadas,
If I ever managed to keep them separate, it would be shocking (poem, 115)

Moreover, examples 9a-d also show that Spanish is used as a strategy of resisting ideas of monolingual superiority of both Spanish and English. Finally, only one participant overtly reported a negative view of Spanglish:

(10)

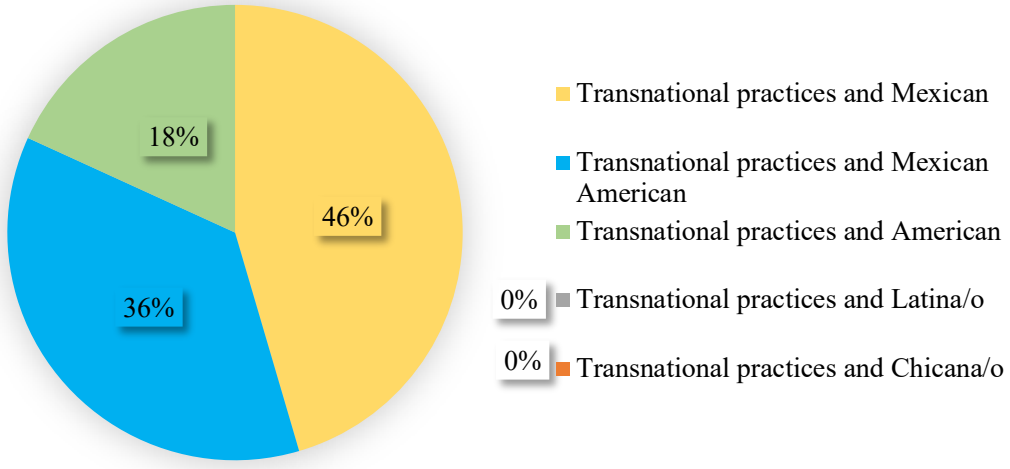
A veces me quita oportunidades. (poem, 106)

Example 10 reflects the lack of opportunities due to misconceptions and linguistic prejudice against Spanglish and bilingual speakers.

Transnational Practices

To find out to what extent there is a relation between transnational practices and positive identification with the ethnic group, it has been examined how participants who carry out transnational practices conceive their identities. Of the 30 participants who mentioned ethnic identity labels, 11 (36.7%) also mentioned practicing or having practiced transnationalism at some point in their lives. That is, they wrote about living in both a Spanish-speaking country and the U.S., or about crossing the US-Mexico border frequently; for example, to eat, visit family, see a doctor, or buy products only available on that side of the border. Of the 11 participants who mentioned transnational practices, five (45.5%) used the label *Mexican*; four (36.6%) used the label *Mexican American*; and two (18.2%) used the label *American* (see Graph 6).

Graph 6. References to Transnational Practices in the Most Popular Ethnic Identity Labels



Source: Own elaboration with data from participants.

For this outcome, *Mexican* was also the preferred label. However, it is noteworthy that "American" was the third preferred label, surpassing *Latina/o* and *Chicana/o*. Therefore, there is no opposition between transnational practices and identification with the mainstream group. The

participants' points of view regarding transitional practices were also polarized. Some wrote about "happy" and "joyful" experiences of crossing the border, while others expressed complicated attitudes toward the border space. The following are positive examples of these transnational practices:

(11)

a) Desde que tengo memoria Estados Unidos ha formado parte de mi vida y de la de mi familia, cruzando la frontera constantemente ya fuera para comprar mandado, ir al banco, ir de paseo o de compras, en fin, las cosas que mucha gente con visa que vive en una ciudad fronteriza como Tijuana hace. Esto fue parte de mi rutina cotidiana por 17 años hasta que nos vinimos a vivir a San Diego. (autobiography, 103)

b) Después de mi nacimiento, mis años infantiles consistirían en vivir en Tijuana y San Diego. Esto era gracias a que la mayoría de mi familia vivía en Tijuana entonces mis primeros años consistían en viviendo [*sic*] en Tijuana o cruzando la frontera cada día. Aunque era demasiado pequeño para recordar estos años, todas mis fotos de niño pequeño eran una mezcla de las experiencias de vivir en Tijuana y San Diego. (autobiography, 110)

c) Me encanta vivir cerca de la frontera
I am in between of two places that I love
Amo vivir aquí
No cambiaría los tacos de Tijuana por nada
Ni las hamburguesas de In and Out (poem, 126)

d) Visitar a mi familia en Tijuana and not feeling out of place
Ir a puestos de tacos and ordering my friends food, "4 tacos sin cebolla". (poem, 122)

e) I was born on this side of the border,
Pero siempre cruzábamos al otro lado.
Íbamos a comer tacos,
Donde siempre se veía un perro tirado (poem, 115)

Examples 11a-e show how common crossing the border was for some participants. Nevertheless, 12a-c problematized transnational practices:

(12)

a) Mi familia se mudó a los Estados Unidos hace muchos años. Pero nunca dejaron que se nos olvidara el Español o el hecho que somos Mexicanos. Mi familia iba a México cada año en diciembre para celebrar Navidad. Llegó un día en el cual mis padres decidieron que nos íbamos a mudar a México, nos mudamos cuando yo cumplí ocho años […] Tuve que decirles adiós a mis amigos y a familia, pero de todos modos yo me iba emocionadísima. Esos dos años y medio que vivimos en México son unos de los mejores de mi vida. […] Tenía tanta gente querida que cuando de nuevo nos teníamos que mudar […] Triste y no queriendo irme, se me hizo más difícil ajustarme a mi vida nueva en los Estados Unidos. (autobiography, 117)

> b) Soy considerada viajera de alto riesgo porque mis padres fueron deportados. Después de un año, decidí que cruzar la frontera todos los días era muy pesado para mí. (autobiography, 125)
>
> c) Aquí es cuando mi padre nos inscribió en la misma escuela americana a la que mis hermanos habían asistido años atrás. A las 4 de la mañana mi madre se levantaba, a las 4:30 hacíamos lo mismo mi padre y nosotras. Todo siempre rápido, como decía él. A las 5 de la mañana, salíamos de casa. 1 hora hasta la frontera, 2 horas para cruzar. Hubo un año en el que llegamos tarde 23 veces. (autobiography, 132)

While example 12a refers to family making-decisions on which side of the border to live on and adaptation to a new environment, 12b and 12c reflect the negative effects on U.S. immigration and border practices.

DISCUSSION

Taking the terms directly from the participants' free writing avoided the possible introduction of misinterpretations that could have existed by directly asking them whether they use specific labels or eliciting an identity statement. Most participants self-identified with the heritage group (RQ1) and as Mexican (RQ2-5), regardless of their place of birth, but none self-identified as American only. This is interpreted as an embrace of their *Latinidad* despite the discrimination experienced for belonging to a minoritized ethnic group and for being bilingual.

Also, some participants wrote about living in two worlds, being part of two cultures, or having hybrid identities due to their biculturalism/bilingualism. Others wrote about their identities as an amalgam of their HC, the mainstream culture, and their own experiences as immigrants and first-U.S.-born generation living in the borderlands. Moreover, they mentioned their joy in using the HL and Spanglish to preserve their HC and to resist acculturation and assimilation (Betti, 2017). They also disclosed how hard crossing the border regularly can be and the efforts that they and their parents made to receive an education in the U.S., even if they decide to live in Mexico to have a more affordable life. In sum, crossing the border is challenging the oppressive forces that seek to keep transnational students on one side of the border (Giroux, 1992).

Although most participants wrote about positive experiences in comparison to negative ones resulting from their unique identities, the examples given attest that being Latina/o in the U.S is not easy. These outcomes reflect the sample and the social context that they inhabit. Somehow, most participants remain loyal to their HC and their HC. This could be because they feel that the HC and other communities of Latin American ascendence in the U.S. are less hostile than the mainstream culture.

The present research puts in evidence that these communities in the U.S. have made efforts to maintain their cultural traditions and values, that parents have fostered this ethnic and cultural embracement in their children, and that subordination and discrimination against minoritized individuals/groups have led U.S. Latinas/os to feel separated from the mainstream group. Despite this, there are some limitations to the investigation. First, it used a small convenience sample of

students; its results should be verified in larger studies, perhaps including individuals outside the educational context. Second, ethnolinguistic identity was not addressed in all compositions. Third, *Spanish*, *Spanglish*, and *bilingual* were the labels participants used most often to identify the HL as part of their identity, a limitation because, although certain participants claimed their languages as part of their identity, there is no indication whether the remainder considered language to be an identity marker. Fourth, the same label can mean different things to different people, and the participants were not asked what these identity labels signified to them. Finally, a post-survey completion interview with the participants could have contributed to a better understanding of the topic.

CONCLUSION

This research adds to the conversation about ethnolinguistic identity by challenging the perception that Latina/o or Mexican-origin individuals living in the borderlands share a homogeneous identity. As the outcomes reveal, not all SHS self-identify as "living in the hyphen." This study illustrates that identity can be difficult to negotiate as it is a personal feeling with several and complex variables involved.

Additionally, the data presented can inform HL educators' praxis, by confirming that SHS have an interest in addressing ethnolinguistic identity and that some individuals may struggle with reconciling identities that diverge from the mainstream norm. Ethnolinguistic identity is a critical component of HL education because heritage speakers frequently have a personal connection with the HL and HC, and both may contribute to the construction of their identities. Also, this study corroborates that bilingual speakers may struggle with identity issues if their HL and HC are stigmatized by the mainstream group in their social environment. Language can be understood as an *ethnic group symbol* (Tse, 2000) that allows speakers to connect with the culture of their ancestors.

Therefore, HL curricula could be strengthened by incorporating the topic of ethnic identity and its relation to language and society. It is recommended to adopt the CLA approach and border pedagogy in HL courses to facilitate the discussion of ethnolinguistic identity topics. It is essential that individuals who belong to underrepresented or minoritized ethnic groups,[10] including HL speakers, develop awareness of their local sociopolitical contexts so that they can recognize and confront linguistic and cultural discrimination. HL education aims to support students to become sociolinguistically informed individuals who, as agents of social change, advocate for the fundamental rights of their communities. In transnational spaces, the discussion of identity topics in the HL classroom becomes even more significant because it can empower immigrants, children of immigrants, and national minorities to reconstruct their political, national, racial, and ethnic identities (Valdéz-Gardea & Balslev Clausen, 2007).

[10] Latin America descendants in California are minoritized for possessing characteristics that diverge from the mainstream group and for not holding enough social and political representation, even though they are the largest ethnic group in the state.

In closing, to foster and preserve positive attitudes toward diverse ethnolinguistic identities, it is essential to pay attention to the social factors that promote or inhibit the maintenance of HLs and HCs in the borderlands. Given how likely it is that HL students have struggled or are struggling with defining their identities, HL education cannot ignore identity issues (Leeman et al., 2011). As Zentella (2007) argues, "language is not the fundamental solution because it is not the fundamental problem" (p. 36). It is crucial to improve the understanding, from both classroom and community perspectives, of the central reasons why some persons of Latin America origins abandon their HC and give up their linguistic rights. Scholars and instructors of HL also share the responsibility to keep expanding challenges to ideologies that stigmatize linguistic and cultural diversity and to push back against social inequalities and ethnolinguistic discrimination.

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