Teaching spanish to migrants in the Soconusco region, Chiapas, Mexico

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ABSTRACT
This research was conducted in the state of Chiapas, throughout the Soconusco region. Students from BA in English Language Teaching at UNACH (Universidad Autonoma de Chiapas) participated as teachers in basic Spanish courses for the migrant population, from January 2020 to April 2021. This paper aims to give an account of the partial results of a study; its main objective is to analyze the nature of teaching Spanish to migrants and people in mobility from different countries. Migratory movements are a phenomenon of special incidence in contemporary societies according to the Manifest of Santander (2009), one of the first works carried out in Spain in terms of language teaching to migrants and refugees. Given the need to incorporate the teaching of the target language into the global policies of care for immigrants, since their learning of the target language depends a lot on the active insertion in the host community (Manifest of Santander cited in Garcia et al. 2014). The Language school at the UNACH is a public educational institution with social responsibility that has collaborated with COMAR (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) seeking to protect the rights and welfare of refugees, migrants and people in mobility during their stay in Mexico. Thus, the Language School has carried out the implementation of teaching basic Spanish courses as a foreign language to refugees and migrants from countries such as Haiti, Surinam, the United States, Jamaica, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, and Canada. However, due to the COVID-19 contingency, these courses were changed from face-to-face sessions to virtual mode during that period and after the contingency, the courses had been taught in face-to-face sessions again. In this sense, this research yields interesting contributions that can be taken into account for a significant teaching-learning process of
Spanish as a foreign language or as a second language in the region of Soconusco answering the following research questions: What is the training of teachers who teach Spanish as a second language in the Soconusco region? What difficulties did they have while teaching Spanish as a second language? How effective were Spanish classes for migrants and refugees?

**Keywords:** teaching, spanish, migrants, difficulties, Mexico.

### 1 SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the years, human beings have sought ways of communicating with each other. Around the world, thousands of languages are spoken which can become an obstacle to achieving this complete communication. Today, many borders have been destroyed by globalization, which allows human expression to be an everyday task (Gómez, I., Martínez, D., Velázquez, V. & Aurelio, R., 2017). According to Pizarro (2013), “In an increasingly globalized world, an increasingly technologically developed society and eager to access information and knowledge, the mastery of foreign languages has become the key to access that knowledge, while being the passport that allows mobility to other worlds and realities.” (Pizarro, 2013, p. 165).

Teaching-learning process of a language breaks one of these barriers that prevents the human from engaging in complete communication. According to Villalba and Fernandez (2000) "From our own experience as students, we tend to think that learning a new language is a very complex activity that requires a lot of work and dedication, especially for adults" (p. 97).

Learning a language is not an easy goal, however, it is not impossible. One of the most important languages in the world is Spanish since it is spoken in many places in the world, including, south America, Mexico, and Spain. Luoma and Zarubin (2016) state that "The Spanish language in terms of the amount of people who speak it as their mother tongue, is the second largest in the world. In total, more than 400 million people in South America, Central America, Mexico, Spain, the Caribbean and in some parts of the United States” (p.01). In a certain way, non-English speaking people need to learn this language, especially in the issue of migration and refugees. That is, people who must leave their country of origin and who do not speak Spanish are facing this linguistic barrier of communication which they must break to have an active insertion in the host community. International policies ranging from Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights (UNESCO, 1948) to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 1951) have therefore been taken into account. Thus, education has been considered a fundamental tool for protecting human dignity. It must be recognized that human rights acquire greater meaning when they are threatened. For example, when people are forced to flee or to escape from an armed conflict or persecution, or simply migrate to improve their socio-economic situation. In their country of arrival, their educational status may be uncertain. In turn, asylum seekers who must decide
their future need basic Spanish language courses. For immigrants, access to basic education provides a certain stability as well as their self-esteem. The right to education obligates the State to provide access to services and financial resources so that no one is deprived of education. The implementation of the right to education for immigrants poses several challenges and dilemmas for host country governments. It may be in the public interest to prevent irregular foreigners from taking root in society through education and limit the distribution of scarce resources only to people who obtained a permanent residence and are looking for a job opportunity.

On the other hand, newcomers have a legitimate interest in becoming full members of society, through their participation and progressive inclusion; education plays an important role in this. Even though the States are free to decide on the distribution of their financial resources, they must respect at the same time the obligations of assistance and protection as parties to human rights treaties.

As it is known, some refugees will probably stay permanently because they cannot return to their country of origin. It is therefore essential that national and local authorities anticipate, and design culturally adapted educational policies so that stakeholders can be integrated and have access to the labor market. From this perspective, the communicative competence of Spanish as a second language is a tool that allows refugees to integrate into the country where they stay, thus facilitating interaction and mobilization in the same way. According to Pizarro (2013) "In this context, studies in Foreign Languages (FL) and learning have become important areas to pay attention to"(p.165). The teaching of Spanish has gained importance over the years since the arrival of non-English speakers who speak Spanish has been increasing especially in Central America towards the Mexican country. Sánchez (2019) mentions in the newspaper Excelsior: "So far this year the flow of foreigners has risen from 138 thousand to 460 thousand, <This is Mexico>” The level of refugees and migrants will continue to increase, which means that the need to teach them Spanish will have greater demand as it has been observed in the Soconusco region.

2 METHODOLOGY

The present research was based on a qualitative-descriptive approach, which led to descriptions from the point of view of teachers who have taught Spanish as a foreign language in the Soconusco region. This research was carried out to register the teachers’ experiences teaching Spanish so it helped to triangulate the information with the documentary research through class observations, surveys, and interviews. The investigation lasted one year and three months and was carried out in 4 phases: the first phase involved documentary research, and the second stage included the development of criteria and tools for collecting information. The research instruments are detailed as follows: classroom observation sheet, foreign Spanish teachers’ survey through Google Forms, and interviews with teachers. The third phase
included the application of tools and interpretation of information in two different periods: before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The last phase included the writing of the research report.

3 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Surveys: The main objective of the surveys is to collect information about the methodology used by teachers, the application of technological tools throughout the classes, the knowledge about the Spanish language about the teaching of grammar and to collect opinions from teachers about their teaching practice of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL). Besides knowing if culture plays an important role in Spanish Teaching.

Interviews: they were conducted with teachers to search the teaching methodology and were based on well-structured and semi-structured questions; the teachers’ answers followed a sequence of questions related to the teaching grammar, the methodology, and teachers’ feelings about Spanish classes.

Observation sheets: they allowed the teacher to be observed for four weeks to collect the biggest amount of information about the classes, to analyze and compare them with the surveys and interviews for a better understanding of the responses to questions. The class observations allowed us to evaluate the methodology used by teachers.

4 CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The present study was carried out in the Soconusco region with 14 students in advanced semesters of the Educational Program “English Language Teaching”, at the UNACH, Language School in Tapachula, Chiapas who worked as Foreign Spanish Language Teachers. The Soconusco region is part of the southern border of Mexico, where migration and refugee procedures take place. To assist this kind of population, Spanish classes were taught to asylum seekers and migrants to help them integrate into Mexican society. Among the risks or threats presented during the investigation during the COVID-19 pandemic was that classes were taught face-to-face and there was a need to switch to virtual classes because of lockdown. As a result, the research was delayed and the points of view of Spanish students had to be omitted since the population was in lockdown. In addition, as part of the ethics, participants were informed and asked for their consent during the application of surveys and interviews.

5 DISCUSSION

The data analysis and the major findings are described below:

The first discussion comes after observing that the EFL teachers in the Soconusco region did not have a BA in Spanish Language Teaching, instead most of them were English students as it was found in this research. Therefore, some aspects were analyzed for example, why are they teaching Spanish, if their
major is in English Language Teaching? For that, it was observed that there is a great need for teaching Spanish as a foreign language, and it was seen as an area of opportunity to help migrants’ stay or human mobility during their stay in Mexico. Consequently, UNHCR looked for the help of important universities through agreements with the UNACH to join efforts in favor of it. The UNACH only has the BA in ELT available and that is why in-practice students of English were sent to teach Spanish to mobility people.

Another important thing to discuss was whether the in-practice English teachers would be able to teach Spanish efficiently.

Teachers who taught basic Spanish courses to migrants were advanced semester students of the English Language Teaching Program, who took the role of teachers as part of the social service. It should be mentioned, that the students from English Teaching Degree have subjects that complement their language teaching training. In this sense, besides studying different subjects of English didactics, they study an important subject that complements the profile of the graduate for language teaching, such as morphosyntax of Spanish and pedagogy-related subjects that help them to acquire the theoretical-practical foundations of language teaching. Although Spanish is the teachers’ mother language, there are some difficulties encountered during the implementation of classes as noted during observations for this research over the four weeks. Thus, it was observed that there were areas where teachers needed to improve to achieve a positive impact on the teaching of Spanish. These aspects are grammar, that is, teaching the structure and function of the language, the use of technology as a means of teaching, the design of didactic sequences, and the approach to Mexican culture. First, student teachers did not show consolidated knowledge to explain the function and structure of the Spanish language even if it was their mother tongue. Likewise, during the face-to-face sessions, in practice teachers scarcely made use of technological tools to teach Spanish. Regarding the design of didactic sequences, student teachers did not show evidence of methodological approaches for teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language as observed in classes. Another area that requires special attention is the emphasis on the cultural aspects of Mexico, which were not included in the classes. Finally, student teachers had difficulties finding the appropriate materials to teach Spanish to foreigners.

The second thing to discuss was whether the teaching of Spanish by these in-practice English teachers would satisfy the needs of people in mobility in the Soconusco Region. During the research, it was observed that the migrants who attended these Spanish courses were avid to learn Spanish and, in some way, their needs were satisfied. Unfortunately, the classes were interrupted since it was the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic with the lockdown period. At that time, these people did not have internet at home and the classes were interrupted.

In response to the research question on the effectiveness of Spanish classes, it was observed that despite the evidence that there are areas to be improved, it was outstanding the motivation and active
participation that student teachers promoted in Spanish classes due to the training they had received in their English Teaching Bachelor’s degree. It should be noted that the results of the observations were also triangulated with the opinions of teachers through surveys and interviews. In this way, the findings of the observations coincided with what teachers said through interviews and surveys. According to teachers’ opinions regarding their training in teaching Spanish, all of them expressed not to have a degree or certification that guarantees knowledge about the teaching of Spanish. Also, 85.7% of participants did not know about the existence of any institution that certifies the competence of Spanish.

![Figure 1](source: graphics from the Google Forms results)

However, all participants expressed the need to receive training in Spanish teaching. Considering the above, regarding the difficulties that teachers expressed about Spanish teaching, 78.6% said that teaching grammar was the greatest difficulty they presented. While 71.4% expressed difficulty finding the appropriate material for teaching Spanish. Thus, also 28.6% of the participants commented that teaching Mexican culture was another difficulty they faced during the implementation of Spanish courses because the material they found was from other contexts such as the Spanish of Spain that is different from the Spanish from Mexico in terms of vocabulary, expression, and culture. 14.3% of the teachers replied that teaching with ICTs and TACs was a difficulty during their performance as Spanish teachers.

![Figure 2](source: graphics from the Google Forms results)
According to in-practice teachers’ opinions in the interviews and surveys, the main benefits that in-practice teachers perceived of these Spanish courses are that refugees and migrants can get better job opportunities and integrate into Mexican society and culture through Spanish language learning. In this way, the in-practice teachers’ role has had a positive effect on the non-Spanish mobility people who come to the South of Mexico either to stay or to continue their journey to the USA or Canada.

Figure 3. Question 12 in the survey applied to the student teachers of Spanish.

12. En su opinión, ¿por qué considera que sus alumnos inmigrantes quieren aprender español?

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was found most of the teachers did not have training or certification for teaching Spanish and they had become Spanish teachers because of the need for migrants or refugees from countries such as Haiti, Surinam, Switzerland, Jamaica, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Canada to successfully integrate into Mexican society to improve their quality of life. To make it easier for them to find local jobs and, if necessary, move to a formal job, integrate into the Mexican Education System. It is worth mentioning that Spanish classes taught by teachers who were students in advanced semesters from of the English Teaching Bachelor Degree were partially successful due to the pedagogical training promoted during their studies and the disposition of refugees and migrants to use the language repertoire for real and functional purposes.

However, the findings of this research showed a need for training Spanish teachers in the Soconusco region in grammatical content, cultural and technological areas, which were the most difficult aspects when teaching Spanish as a foreign language.

The interviewed teachers mentioned that “it was important to study the optional subject of teaching Spanish as a foreign language during the BA in ELT (English Language Teaching).” Nevertheless, it was noticed that although the English Teaching Degree curriculum in theory should have the flexibility to choose elective subjects, in practice it is not always possible. As for the need for intercultural training, becoming intercultural competent includes knowledge of cultural aspects such as emblematic places,
gastronomy, festivities, beliefs, traditions, Mexican history, etc. It is worth mentioning that languages must be taught along with the culture of the context in which Spanish is taught to make the class more effective and pertinent.

Regarding the need for technological training, surveyed Spanish teachers described that they required greater training in the use of technological tools and knowledge of applications for the teaching of Spanish. Therefore, in the last curriculum redesign of the English Teaching Degree program, all pedagogical content subjects included the development of technological competence that is the use of technological tools and applications focused on language teaching.

Finally, this research was relevant and interesting to find out the weaknesses and areas of opportunity in SFLT to contribute to the continuous improvement of Spanish teaching to migrants and refugees in the Soconusco area since migration is a never-ending phenomenon in the southern part of Mexico.
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