The linguistic landscape
enhancing multiliteracies through decoding signs in public spaces

Margarita Vinagre[1]

Potential impact	medium
Timescale	medium term
Keywords	signs, multimodality, multiliteracies, multilingualism, authentic input, cultural awareness

What is it?

The Linguistic Landscape (LL) is a relatively new field which draws from several disciplines such as applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural geography. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997),

> "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p. 25).

More recently, the type of signs that can be found in the public space has broadened to include the language on T-shirts, stamp machines, football banners, postcards, menus, products, tattoos, and graffiti. Despite this wider variety of signs, Landry and Bourhis's (1997) definition still captures the

1. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain; margarita.vinagre@uam.es; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4370-8880

How to cite: Vinagre, M. (2021). The linguistic landscape: enhancing multiliteracies through decoding signs in public spaces. In T. Beaven & F. Rosell-Aguilar (Eds), *Innovative language pedagogy report* (pp. 23-28). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.50.1231

© 2021 Margarita Vinagre (CC BY)

essence of the LL, which is multimodal (signs combine visual, written, and sometimes audible data) and can also incorporate the use of multiple languages (multilingual).

The LL signals what languages are prominent and valued in public and private spaces, and can reveal the social position of people who identify with particular languages (Dagenais et al., 2009, p. 254). Social actors (i.e. anyone who engages in intentional action) contribute to shape this space and construct their own identities in their interaction with it. The LL is also authentic input found in the social context which makes it an easily accessible and readily available resource for language and intercultural learning.

Incorporating critical explorations of the LL into the foreign language classroom can have important benefits for students' linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, multimodal, multi-literate, critical, and reflective competences. For this reason, a particularly well-suited approach to underpin these explorations is a multiliteracies pedagogy (The New London Group, 1996), which requires, in line with Kozdras, Joseph, and Kozdras (2015), the consideration of visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and tactile modalities as equally important in a digital world that includes multiple modes of communication in a globalised world. Inclusion, diversity, and celebration of difference are central objectives in this practice that aims to prepare students for citizenship in the 21st century.

Example

The LL has been integrated in the Virtual Exchanges (VE) organised between fourth-year undergraduate students of English at Universidad Autónoma in Madrid, Spain, and second-year undergraduate students of Spanish at Columbia University in New York, USA, over the last three years (Vinagre & Llopis-García, in press). The exchange takes place in the first semester of the academic year and lasts for six weeks. During this time, students work in small groups (pairs and trios) carrying out tasks jointly.

The VE follows a progressive method approach (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016), in which students from both universities first exchange information on WordPress about themselves (introductions) and four topics, one per week, relating to their cultures (stereotypes, history, and politics of their countries, slang and colloquial expressions, literature, cinema, and music).

In week five they meet their partners online in order to discuss, in a bilingual conversation, what they have learned from comparing aspects of both cultures in the previous four weeks. After the conversation has taken place, the students are asked to explore the LL of their respective cities in order to increase awareness of the prominence and value of the foreign language in the public spaces (English in Madrid and Spanish in New York). For this task, the students take and upload photos onto Padlet to create a visual representation of the presence of the foreign language in their urban environments. Then, they tag the photos by adding a short description and the location. After all photos have been uploaded, they are asked to categorise them by analysing official, public lettering (top-down) as well as commercial or private signs and posters (bottom-up) following Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Hasan Amara, and Trumper-Hecht (2006). After this analysis, the students have to reflect and critically think of the *why*, *who,* and *for whom* of the signs: Why are these signs here? Who makes these signs and decides on their language choice? Who are these signs for? Who is the target audience?

In order to facilitate engagement with difference, the students' categorisation of signs, as well as the answers to the questions above, are discussed in the in-class sessions with the teacher and their classmates. Then, students are asked to write a joint bilingual essay with their partners in which they discuss the findings of their analyses and reflect on issues of power, majority versus minorities, discrimination, identity, community markers, and interest in benefits attached to language use in their cities. Finally, students create self-reflection videos in which they elaborate on what they have learned through this experience.

Students' comments in the self-reflection videos corroborate the potential of this activity to raise cultural awareness and facilitate the use of language in authentic

contexts. Students also describe the experience as a 'confidence booster', since they realise they can communicate effectively in the foreign language with a partner from another culture.

Benefits

By integrating the LL into the foreign language classroom, students are exposed to language use in authentic cultural and social contexts, which enhances their communicative competence and helps them develop positive attitudes and emotions towards the 'other'. The LL also provides students with a 'third space' in which diversity can be explored, identities can be negotiated, and social representation can be contested. This space is not a physical,

> "fixed space, but rather a fluid, dialogic space which is constantly constructed and reconstructed by participants who actively engage in dialogue and negotiate identities, not only through self-expression but also through mindful listening and the co-construction of meanings" (Helm, Guth, & Farrah, 2012, p. 107).

In this space there are multiple possibilities for interpretation, and differences "are not hidden or minimised but acknowledged and valued" (Helm et al., 2012, p. 107).

Potential issues

Despite the steady growth of studies in this field, the pedagogical applications of the LL in the foreign language classroom are vastly under-explored and therefore many are unaware of its possibilities. One potential issue relates to some students remaining superficial in their explorations and reflections. In order to minimise this, regular guidance from the teacher in the form of questions for reflection and in-class discussions can help them move from their comfort zones into deep explorations of 'otherness'.

Looking to the future

The use of the LL as a pedagogical resource offers educators an excellent opportunity to create meaningful experiences for learners, since the use of public texts places literacy in a broader social context and connects learning to students' neighbourhoods and communities (Hewitt-Bradshaw, 2014, p. 158). In this context, the students can develop multiliteracies at the time they increase their awareness of, and appreciation for, diversity and difference. As this practice becomes more extended, practitioners will question the 'real value' of multilingualism and consider our duty to adopt a critical stance, one that involves connecting language with issues of inequality, oppression, and understanding.

References

Ben-Rafael, E., Shohamy, E., Hasan Amara, M., & Trumper-Hecht, N. (2006). Linguistic landscape as symbolic construction of the public space: the case of Israel. *International journal of multilingualism, 3*(1), 7-30. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710608668383

Dagenais, D., Moore, D., Sabatier, C., Lamarre, P., & Armand, F. (2009). Linguistic landscape and language awareness. In E. Shohamy & D. Gorter (Eds), *Linguistic landscape: expanding the scenery* (pp. 253-269). Routledge.

Helm F., Guth S., & Farrah M. (2012). Promoting dialogue or hegemonic practice: power issues in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology, 16*(2), 103-127. http://hdl.handle.net/10125/44289

Hewitt-Bradshaw, I. (2014). Linguistic landscape as a language learning and literacy resource in Caribbean Creole contexts. *Caribbean Curriculum, 22*, 157-173.

Kozdras, D., Joseph, C., & Kozdras, K. (2015). Cross-cultural affordances of digital storytelling: results from cases in the U.S.A. and Canada. In P. Smith & A. Kumi-Yeboah (Eds), *Handbook of research on cross-cultural approaches to language and literacy development* (pp. 184-208). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-8668-7.ch008

Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: an empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 19*(1), 23-49. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0261927X970161002

O'Dowd, R., & Lewis, T. (2016). (Eds.). *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice*. Routledge.

The New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(1), 60-92. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u

Vinagre, M. & Llopis-García, R. (in press). Multilingual landscapes in telecollaboration: a Spanish-American exchange. In H. Maxim & D. Malinowski (Eds), *Spatializing language studies: pedagogical approaches to the linguistic landscape.*

Resource

EVOLVE project website: https://evolve-erasmus.eu/

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2021 by Editors (collective work)
© 2021 by Authors (individual work)

Innovative language pedagogy report
Edited by Tita Beaven and Fernando Rosell-Aguilar

Publication date: 2021/03/22

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence**. Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.50.9782490057863) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2021 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo by Digital Buggu from Pexels (CC0)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-86-3 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-87-0 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-85-6 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mars 2021.