Using the Linguistic Landscape to Bridge Languages

by VANESSA MARI

Using the linguistic landscape to bridge two or more languages is a teaching technique I have implemented with students learning English. The linguistic landscape is defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997, 25) as "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings." Making use of the linguistic landscape provides opportunities for students to engage in contextualized authentic language discussions—in English—about their first language (L1) and English.

Many teaching contexts are linguistically diverse, and as teachers we have to find ways of connecting the languages spoken by our students and the languages they come in contact with—or are likely to come in contact with in the future. Through this activity, the teacher makes use of multiple languages to help students learn English; additionally, students become critical thinkers about language use throughout their community.

This activity can be carried out over multiple days, depending on how the teacher organizes the lesson and how much emphasis is given to image collecting and analysis. I originally created this lesson for students who are 15 to 18 years old, with various levels of proficiency, but it can be adapted for use with younger or older students.

PREPARATION

1. Find pictures from your local linguistic landscape. You might use photographs you have taken, or you might use the Internet to search for public signs in your area or in nearby cities. A search phrase such as "public signs in Bangkok" or "advertisements in Bangkok" could yield helpful results. Be sure to include signs in the primary local language, English (if available), and any other languages your students understand or are likely to encounter in the community. You can even add signs that use more than one language.

   Students will work in groups of three or four, and you should plan to give at least two different pictures to each group. Ideally, all groups would have different pictures, but that may be impractical with a large class or with a limited number of available pictures.

2. If sharing photos is not possible in your classroom, plan to use the blackboard to make sketches of signs you have seen in your area, showing the language(s) on those signs.

PROCEDURE

1. Explain to students what a linguistic landscape is by telling them that the

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Questions for Analysis

- Where was the picture taken?
- Why do you think the sign is written in that language (or in those languages)?
- Who does the sign appeal to?
- Are there connections between your community and the language in the sign? If so, where do you see these connections?

Figure 1. Suggested questions for students to answer about linguistic-landscape photographs

linguistic landscape is the language that surrounds us in public spaces, such as on bulletin boards, road signs, street advertisements, and storefronts. To check students' understanding, you can ask them to suggest additional examples. Tell students that they are going to do an analysis of the language use in those signs.

2. To provide examples, show students the pictures you have prepared of the local linguistic landscape. Have a brief discussion; at this point, you would be interested mostly in basic description. You might ask these or similar questions:

    • What languages are used?

    • What do the signs say?

    • Where were the pictures taken?

    The critical analysis can come later.

3. Ask students what they think about language use in their community. What languages are represented? Where do they think each language (Spanish, Arabic, English, etc.) is used most often? For what reasons or purposes are these languages used?

4. Write the questions for analysis (see Figure 1) on the board and divide students into groups of three or four. Ask groups to use English to answer the questions as they analyze one or more of your photos. After groups finish their discussions, ask them to present their findings in writing, or you can have a class discussion in which groups share their ideas. The purpose of this step is to get students to critically reflect on the language use in the signs you have provided. For example, students might point out that English is used on restaurant signs to appeal to tourists in the area or that a local language is used on a store sign to attract a specific group of consumers.

5. Tell students something like this: "Now you know what linguistic landscape is. I want each of you to take three pictures of signs around your community. One sign should be in English, another sign should be in your native language, and the third sign should be in any language you want." If appropriate, you can add, "You will print out these pictures and bring them to class."

    Note that each teacher should determine the requirements for the pictures. The number of languages on signs varies from place to place. However, it is recommended that students bring pictures in multiple languages. If no third language is used locally, only two pictures are required. Students can use their phones, cameras, or the Internet to find these pictures. They should try to find signs that they think are interesting.

    In my case, the most efficient strategy was to ask students to take the pictures with their phones and print them out. The act of actually going out into their community and taking the pictures was much more rewarding than downloading images online, although finding pictures online is a viable option. If digitally taking and printing photos isn't possible, students can make sketches of signs they see and bring those sketches to class.

    You can decide how much time students will have to take the pictures. I give my students one week.

6. When students bring their pictures to class, ask them to write on the back of each picture an address or reference point indicating where they took the picture.

7. Have students get in groups of three or four. Tell students to share the pictures they took with the other group members. Together, they should review all the images and come up with categories for how the signs could be grouped. Categories might include the languages represented, places where the pictures were taken, types of signs, and types of buildings or businesses (bank, restaurant,

etc.) where the signs are seen. Groups should write down their list of categories and be ready to share them with the class.

8. Groups should use the questions for analysis (Figure 1) to guide their discussion about the images. Give students copies of the questions or write them on the board. Tell students that after this discussion and analysis period, they will share with the class any patterns they observed along with details about the most interesting signs. I usually give students about 30 minutes for the analysis and discussion; this should be enough time for them to answer the questions about some if not all of the photos.

9. Each group prepares a short oral presentation for the class. In the presentation, students can share the categories they came up with; if you like, these categories can be written on the board. Groups can report on a single image or on the most interesting things they noticed as they discussed the photos.

10. After the presentations, ask students to reflect on and discuss the similarities and differences they noticed during the presentations. Was there a common location where many of the pictures were taken? Was there a type of sign or type of business that was in more pictures than other types? Was there one sign that many students took pictures of? What did they notice about the places, or the types of signs, that each language appeared in?

11. As an extension, if you like, you can ask students to write a short report about their observations, based on either several photographs or a single image. What did they learn in this activity about language and how certain languages are used in their community?

FLEXIBILITY

You can adapt this lesson based on the level of the students. For example, lower-level students might make simple comparisons of the pictures, including shapes and colors; they can also identify signs with cognates, facilitating comprehension of the words. You might suggest categories yourself, and students can fit photos into appropriate categories. Advanced students can conduct a more detailed analysis and even create concept maps as visual representations of connections they have made about language-use patterns (for example, whether certain types of signs are more likely to use a particular language than other types). They can expand their analysis to cover a variety of pictures and to offer a detailed view of the local linguistic landscape.

This activity gives students the opportunity to become researchers and critical thinkers who consider how their L1, English, and possibly other languages are used in their community. This analysis creates a bridge between the L1 and English because students use both simultaneously as they analyze the languages they know or are learning. They also see their L1 portrayed in their classes, which makes it easier for them to see how both languages connect in the same space.

This activity also supports language acquisition because the students will use English to explore the use of their L1 and English in their community through authentic, contextualized images: they will work cooperatively in groups, hold discussions to develop and share critical analysis, give presentations, and write short reports. Students will enjoy making comparisons across languages, and the activity should generate meaningful discussions about how languages are being used in their community.

REFERENCE

Landry, R., and R. Y. Bourhis. 1997. Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 16 (1): 23–49.

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