Language for all: Teaching graffiti for intercultural literacy

Mira Angrist, *Department of World Languages and Literatures, Boston University College of Arts & Sciences*

Abstract

This article describes how to help students connect what they learn in the language classroom to the outside world as they learn to understand, produce, and analyze spoken, written, visual, and cultural information in their second language (L2). As learners make connections between course material and the physical and virtual spaces where the L2 is used, they are introduced to the concept of "linguistic landscape" (LL), which refers to language on signs, advertisements, in graffiti, and other public venues. The examples come from a Hebrew class, where students gain deeper understanding of diverse intercultural realites in Israel and are prepared to function in authentic communicative situations. Colleagues in other languages could also use LL as a basis to explore intercultural realities of any multilingual space–from Berlin to Québec or in students' own environments.

Keywords: classroom instruction, curriculum design, planning & program design

Introduction

As a language instructor at a large urban university, the author strives to make instructional content relevant to their students' lives and hope they connect what they learn in the classroom to the outside world and can understand, produce, and analyze spoken, written, visual, and cultural information in their second language (L2). The course described here is based on the communicative approach, the use of authentic material, scaffolding, and inclusive pedagogy. Students are encouraged to make connections between course material and the physical and virtual spaces where the L2 is used and are therefore introduced to the concept of "linguistic landscape." The term "linguistic landscape" (LL) was first used by Landry and Bourhis in a paper published in 1997, when they defined it as the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (p. 24).

While the examples in this article come from a Hebrew class, where students gain deeper understanding of diverse intercultural realties in Israel and are prepared to function

in authentic communicative situations, colleagues in other languages could also use LL as a basis to explore, for example, intercultural realities of any multilingual space, from Berlin to Québec, or in students' own environments.

What is a Linguistic Landscape?

Bringing LL–which is made up of road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, shop signs, graffiti, and official government signs–into the classroom raises students' awareness of where and how language occurs, in which cultural spaces, and what it means. Shohamy (2012) describes LL as a symbolic construction of public space that is an outcome of power struggles over space, ownership, policy, legitimacy, and ideology.

In Israel, for example, when Hebrew, Arabic, and English are placed together on signs, buildings or within graffiti, Hebrew is always placed on top, even in predominantly Arabic spaces, whereas English has a solid presence in both Jewish and Arabic locales (Ben-Rafeal, Shohamy, Amara, & Trumper-Hecht, 2006). While LL in the context of monuments, road signs, and buildings indicates one form of cultural belonging and collective identity from a top-down perspective (public signs created by the state and local government bodies), multiple other languages, signs, and images permeating this same landscape also influence peoples' perceptions of the status of languages and social behaviors, and often encompasses bottom-up perspectives (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). Since graffiti disrupts the official discourse through dissent within a LL, LL-based assignments help foster students' development of multiple literacies, their abilities to read and discuss how linguistic, cultural, and social meanings are constituted in multiple modes through public uses of imagery and language.

Integrating Graffiti into an Advanced Language Class

Cenoz and Gorter (2008) state that public displays of language are authentic source material for language learners that could aid the development of pragmatic competence and literacy skills. In a third-year content-based course, *Voices in Israeli Society*, students analyze multilingual signs for purposes of language practice and to introduce them to diverse groups in Israeli society such as Orthodox, secular, immigrants, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews, Arab-Israelis, and more. Through reading newspaper articles, short stories, poems, and watching interviews, documentaries, and movies by prominent authors, poets, artists, political, and cultural leaders, students develop their interpretive, written, and oral skills while acquiring fundamental knowledge about ethnic, religious, cultural, and social diversity in Israel. Using the course management system (Blackboard) students collaborate with each other as they discuss the material and then upload recorded videos to *GoReact* (2011), an interactive cloud-based platform for feedback and grading students' video assignments. They also annotate texts through the interactive *Perusall* (2015) annotation software and receive feedback from the instructor and their peers.

Why Take This Step?

Adding a multi-day visual literacy component to the course through Israeli LL greatly expands students' multicultural awareness and critical thinking abilities. This set of activities enables students to engage with arts and other creative products from Israeli culture and communicate with one another in presentational, interpretive, and interpersonal modes. It also appeals to different learning styles and proficiency levels, expands language pragmatics, and reinforces the 5 C's of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Students use LL to interpret, interact with each other, present their opinions, develop their abilities to make observations and analyze

practices and perspectives, compare the LL in their own communities, and make connections between language and other disciplines. In addition, the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (ACTFL, 2017) help determine how students can "use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices or products and perspectives of cultures."

The unit is first introduced through an asynchronous pre-theme awareness-raising activity on a *Padlet* (2012) site, a collaborative digital board. Students are asked to upload images of Hebrew graffiti from the Internet or from their own travels to Israel. They use a set of questions that draw their attention to language and cultural patterns and write their responses (Appendix A), allowing the instructor to assess students' interests, previous knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and abilities to interpret linguistic patterns.

Some graffiti that students upload has a political context (such as, "We say yes to peace"; "We were born to love not to hate"; "Khana [a right-wing politician] was right"). Others are based on biblical phrases ("If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill") with modern interpretations (for example, "If, I forget you, O Jerusalem, it's because of Tel-Aviv or NY"), which illustrate why many secular Israelis are emigrating from Jerusalem to other urban centers within or outside of Israel because the city has become increasingly religious. Another example of graffiti combines the biblical phrase, "And you shall love others as you love yourself," with an image of gay couple sending both an informative and symbolic message on how Israeli orthodox communities relate to LGBTQIA communities: The orthodox abide by the Biblical teaching on accepting others, even if they are different from you, while the ultraorthodox community does not accept LGBTQIA members. Only one student uploaded a neutral graffiti–"*Sabba*" [Cool]—and explained that she intentionally chose this one because the others seemed too emotionally loaded. The activity also provides students with a chance to observe and read each other's graffiti posts. Therefore, they come to class with a more in-depth sense of what occupies Israeli walls, an idea of different graffiti styles, language patterns, and some initial cultural insights.

A word cloud survey using *Mentimeter* (2014)*,* an online survey software, helps collect students' perspectives on what graffiti means to them. Each student enters three words in Hebrew–for example, street art, vandalism, protest, street museum, voices for all, urban art, visible, illegal, legal at times–and watches the word cloud grow in real time. Then, the visuals and *Padlet* (2012) responses are explored further, and students have a chance to elaborate and ask each other questions. The instructor outlines additional information about the evolving history of graffiti in Israel. Since there is no Hebrew equivalent for the word graffiti, students choose an appropriate Hebrew word from a list suggested by the Hebrew Language Academy and eventually decide on the word "Kiyur" (a hybrid of the Hebrew word *Kir*= wall and *Tziyur*= drawing).
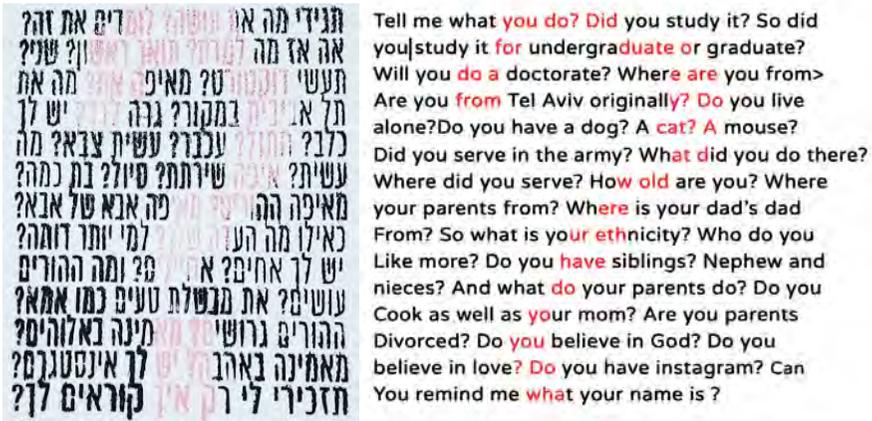
In the following lesson, the instructor exhibits Hebrew graffiti from various contexts on *Jamboard* (2017), the interactive Google whiteboard, and students group the examples into multimodal and multilingual formations, and into subcategories: politics, social justice, ethnic, religion, and literal meanings. Working in small groups, students analyze: (1) the presence of language (Hebrew, Arabic, English, or other) in the graffiti, hierarchical positions of the languages and their symbolic constructions, and (2) noticeable cultural perspectives. They then voice their opinions and compare the Israeli examples to graffiti in their own communities and languages.

In order to analyze graffiti (Figure 1), students apply Glisan and Donato's (2017) IMAGE model which requires them to choose an **I**mage, **M**ake observations, **A**nalyze the image, **G**enerate hypotheses, and **E**xplore further and discuss cultural products, practices,

and perspectives in a communicative context. In this example, students first see questions taken from the graffiti on a Google document (Appendix B) before seeing the actual graffiti image. The questions appear in a different order than on the image and students are asked to categorize, predict the situational context for asking those questions, and voice their opinion of the questions. When the authentic graffiti is displayed, students share their observations from the questions, analyze what could be considered appropriate questions in Israel, and under which circumstances. Through the graffiti they learn about meaningful life cycle events in Israeli society. Students then choose a different contextual situation, make a list of questions appropriate for the situation in both Israeli and American cultures, and display them in a similar pattern to compare multiculturalism in Israel and globally.

Figure 1

Text graffiti in Tel Aviv (left) and Author Translation (right)

Tell me what you do? Did you study it? So did you|study it for undergraduate or graduate? Will you do a doctorate? Where are you from> Are you from Tel Aviv originally? Do you live alone?Do you have a dog? A cat? A mouse? Did you serve in the army? What did you do there? Where did you serve? How old are you? Where your parents from? Where is your dad's dad From? So what is your ethnicity? Who do you Like more? Do you have siblings? Nephew and nieces? And what do your parents do? Do you Cook as well as your mom? Are you parents Divorced? Do you believe in God? Do you believe in love? Do you have instagram? Can You remind me what your name is ?

Photograph by AUTHOR

Next, students consider graffiti in dialogue with one another to better understand current social discourses and perspectives in Israel. Dialogic graffiti–where someone else responds, erases, or adds a new letter or word to change the meaning–is ubiquitous in worldwide communities, including those in Israel. Guiding students to explore authentic examples of dialogic graffiti is another means of exposing students to the country's diverse communities. Here, students can see responses from across the political spectrum, as well as religious and secular individuals who represent a larger community. One example depicts seven parliament members, each one holding a plunger. This is a metaphor for how the political situation in Israel is "stuck," and the general assumption is that it was made by a left-wing artist. An annotator (possibly a right-wing individual) added text, stating "Only Bibi [Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu] can solve the situation." A third annotator erased the word "Bibi" and added the word "*Messiah*," which was probably added by an orthodox individual. This example showcases how three communities exchanged their beliefs, values, and ideologies in one multimodal graffiti.

Each culture has popular sayings, phrases, and even hashtags. In Israel, graffiti based on the phrase *Am Israel Chai*–which means "the people of Israel are alive"—are quite popular. A few well-known popular songs also use this phrase. Versions of the original graffiti add letters, words, a question mark, or an image which changes its meaning. For example,

capitalizing a word in the phrase *AM Israel Chai?* and using a question mark suggests that the annotator is not sure about the veracity of this statement. Adding a syllable to the word *Chai* and using the word *manhig* [leader] suggests that the commenter thinks the situation is so bad that Israel needs a new leader (see Figure 2). Another example is Theodor Herzl, the Zionist visionary dressed as a doctor and checking the phrase, suggesting that the statement needs to be checked in present-day Israel (see Figure 3). Students observe all of these graffiti in *Jamboard*, comment, annotate, and also guess who the potential commentators might be and what social or political groups they could represent and why. After the *Jamboard* activity, students use the *Graffiter* (N.D.) website to create their own graffiti responses to the *Am Israel Chai* graffiti (see Figure 4).

Figure 2
A Variation on Am Israel Chai

Photograph by AUTHOR

Figure 3
Theodor Herzl Checking on the "health" of the Phrase

Photograph by AUTHOR

Figure 4
Student-Created Graffiti "Am Israel is definitely alive"

AUTHOR's screenshot

Hebrew has always been the dominant language in Israel even though Arabic was also declared one of the two official languages in the declaration of independence of Israel in 1948. Until the late 1990s, Arabic was all but invisible in Israel's LL, even in cities like Jaffa with large Arabic-speaking populations. To further learn about language status and diversity, the instructor asks student groups to conduct research into two Israeli language initiatives: The

first is finding information about the creation of a new script fusing Arabic and Hebrew, the second involves developing a visual Hebrew-Arabic dictionary in the country's LL.

Designed by Liron Lavi Turkenichto (Turkenich, n.d.-a) to celebrate Israel's linguistic diversity, the script is based on the fact that readers of Arabic rely largely on the top part of the letter, while readers of Hebrew rely on the bottom part. She created a hybrid script called *Aravrit*, a combination of *Aravit* (the Hebrew word for Arabic) and *Ivrit* (the name used for modern Hebrew). *Aravrit* blends the two words by using the top half of Arabic characters and the bottom half of Hebrew ones to create new letters. These hybrid words are displayed as graffiti all over Israel (see Figure 5), and the first group of students presents this project to the class.

Figure 5
"peace"

Photograph by AUTHOR

The second group of students research an initiative developed by a social activist group called *Through the Language* (Turkenich, n.d.-b) who are creating a visual graffiti dictionary in the public space. This group's agenda is that many Arabs know Hebrew, but most Jews do not speak Arabic, and they wanted to make a difference. Figure 6 contains the Hebrew and Arabic words as well as the transliteration for the Arabic word.

Figure 6
The word "language"

Photograph by AUTHOR

This segment of the course culminates with online graffiti tours in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem (Turkenich, n.d.-a), allowing students to compare graffiti in two very different Israeli

cities. Students take notes during the tours, pay attention to texts, analyze differences, and reflect on the profiles of the cities. In Jerusalem, graffiti is more often based on biblical phrases than in Tel-Aviv, which reflects a tension between various religious groups. Students then upload their comparisons as an oral recording on *GoReact* (2011) and peers respond on the same software.

At the conclusion of the unit, the instructor collects feedback from students. In Mentimeter (2014), students prioritize what they have learned most or least about Israel through graffiti and then use the results to have a summative discussion. Finally, the instructor asks students to take the role of a graffiti artist on *Graffiter* (n.d.) and create a graffiti message based on a value, belief, or thought they would like to share with a wider audience.

Conclusion

Public spaces provide rich examples of authentic written and visual communication, creating both language learning and intercultural analysis opportunities. Whether photographing graffiti when visiting target cultures or integrating virtual LL-based activities, students can develop an increased awareness of LL both in the target cultures and their immediate surroundings. Graffiti provides an accessible and intriguing view into a community and also provides meaningful opportunities to discuss and analyze how public discourses are affirmed, changed, or subverted, while connecting students to L2 communities. Graffiti can also be integrated into thematic units in novice and intermediate classes since the graffiti texts are short. For example, the author uses graffiti in their Food Habits unit for novice high class where students explore what people in diverse communities think on food practices in Israel.

References

ACTFL. (2017). *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements*. Retrieved June 20, 2021 from https://www.actfl.org/resources/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements

Ben-Rafael, E., Shohamy, E., Amara, M. H., & Trumper-Hecht, N. (2006). Linguistic landscape as symbolic construction of the public space: The case of Israel. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 3*(1), 3-30. DOI: 10.1080/14790710608668383

Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2006). Linguistic landscape and minority languages. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 3*(1), 67-80. DOI: 10.1080/14790710608668386

Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2008). The linguistic landscape as an additional source of input in second language acquisition. *IRAL: International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 46(3), 267-287. DOI: 10.1515/IRAL.2008.012

Glisan, E., & Donato, R. (2017). HLTP #4: Focusing on cultural products, practices, perspectives in a dialogic context. *Enacting the Work of Language Instruction: High-Leverage Teaching Practices* (pp. 115-133). ACTFL.

GoReact. [Digital Training Platform]. (2011). Retrieved June 19, 2021 from https://get.goreact.com

Graffiter. [Virtual Graffiti Creation Tool]. (n.d.). Retrieved June 19, 2021 from https://graffiter.com

Jamboard. [Interactive Google Whiteboard]. (2017). Retrieved May 16, 2022 from https://jamboard.google.com/

Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 16*(1), 23-49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002

Mentimeter. [Real-life survey tool] (2014). Retrieved June 19, 2021 from https://www.mentimeter.com

The National Standards Collaborative Board. (2015). *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*. 4th ed. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Padlet. [Collaborative Digital Message Board]. (2012). Retrieved June 19, 2021 from https://padlet.com/

Perusall [Annotation Software]. (2015). Retrieved June 19, 2021 from https://perusall.com/

Shohamy, E. (2012). Linguistic landscapes and multilingualism. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge, & A. Creese (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of multilingualism* (pp. 538-551). London: Routledge.

Turkenich, L.L. (n.d.-a). Liron Lavi Turkenich Portfolio. https://www.lironlavi.com/

Turkenich, L.L. (n.d.-b). Through the language. https://osnatbaror.wordpress.com/אמנות-בחברה-אזרחית/דרך-השפה-2/

Appendix A

מה משך אותך בגרפיטי ? (What about the graffiti draws your attention?)

מה שמת לב לגבי השפה ? (What have you noticed about language patterns?)

אילו מסרים הגרפיטי מנסה להעביר ? (What messages are the graffiti trying to convey?)

איפה הגרפיטי נמצא לדעתכם ? (Where do you think this graffiti is placed?)

מה אתם רוצים לשאול את אמן הגרפיטי ? (What would you like to ask the graffiti artist?)

Appendix B

יש לך אחים? יש לך אינסטגרם ? (Do you have siblings? Do you have Instagram?)

יש לך כלב ? (Do you have a dog?)

האם שירתת בצבא? (Did you serve in the army?)

אמרי לי מה את עושה (Tell me what you do.?)

מאין האבא של אבא שלך ? (Where is your dad's dad from?)

אחיינים/ אחייניות ? (Nephew and nieces?)

האם למדת את זה? (Did you study it?)

האם למדת את זה לתואר ראשון/שני? (So did you study it for undergraduate or graduate?)

מאין את. ? (Where are you from?)

Tהאם את מאמינה באלוהים ? (Do you believe in God?)

חתול, ועכבר ? (A cat? A mouse?)

מי את אוהבת יותר ? (Who do you Like more?)

האם ההורים שלך גרושים ? (Are your parents divorced?)

אז מה העדה שלך ? (So what is your ethnicity?)

איפה שירתת ? (Where did you serve?)

האם תעשי דוקטורט ? (Will you do a doctorate?)

בת כמה את ? (How old are you?)

מאין ההורים שלך ? (Where are your parents from?)

האם את מתל אביב במקור ? (Are you from Tel Aviv originally?)

האם את גרה לבד ? (Do you live alone?)

מה עשית שם ? (What did you do there?)

ומה ההורים שלך עושים ? (And what do your parents do?)

האם את מבשלת כמו אמא שלך? (Do you cook as well as your mom?)

האם את מאמינה באהבה ? (Do you believe in love?)

תזכירי לי איך קוראים לך ? (Can you remind me what your name is?)

Mira Angrist (MA Rutgers University) is Senior Lecturer and Program Coordinator in Hebrew at Boston University. She teaches all levels of undergraduate courses and integrates visual and digital literacy. She is an active member of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew and is a frequent presenter at regional, national and international conferences.