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The Linguistic Landscape and Its Potential for English Language Teaching

Abstract

This paper provides a short exploration of the possibilities offered by the Linguistic Landscape to enhance students' language awareness and to act as a tool for language teachers. After briefly introducing the main features that characterize the Linguistic Landscape in urban spaces, namely its multilingual aspect, the informational and symbolic functions and the differences between *top-down* and *bottom-up* messages, the article describes the roles of English both as a *lingua franca* and as a symbol of prestige. A review of studies on the use of the Linguistic Landscape for teaching English is then presented. What is argued is that the Linguistic Landscape can be fruitfully employed to teach English – or another foreign language – at the university level. The proposed teaching approach will help students both to become more aware and also to be more active language learners.

Sommaire

Cet article présente une brève exploration des chances de la notion du paysage linguistique (*Linguistic Landscape*) afin d'améliorer la conscience linguistique des étudiants et de servir d'instrument pour les enseignants de langues. Après une introduction des traits caractéristiques du paysage linguistique urbain, à savoir son aspect polyglot, les fonctions informationnelles et symboliques ainsi que les différences parmi les messages *top-down* et *bottom-up*, l'article décrit les rôles de l'anglais comme *lingua franca* aussi bien que comme symbole de prestige. Suit un compte-rendu des études sur le paysage linguistique pour l'enseignement de l'anglais. La contribution suggère que l'on emploie, au niveau universitaire, le paysage linguistique pour enseigner l'anglais – ou bien une autre langue. La technique proposée aidera les étudiants à devenir des apprenants plus conscients et plus actifs.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag bietet eine kurze Erörterung der Möglichkeiten des Konzepts der Sprachlandschaft (*Linguistic Landscape*) bietet, um das Bewusstsein von Sprachlernern zu steigern und als Instrument in den Sprachunterricht integriert zu werden. Nach einer Einführung in die Merkmale der Sprachlandschaft, nämlich der Aspekt der Mehrsprachigkeit, die Informations- und Symbolfunktionen sowie die Unterschiede zwischen *Top-Down*- und *Bottom-Up*-Nachrichten, beschreibt der Artikel die Rolle des Englischen als Lingua Franca und als Prestige-Symbol. Hierauf folgt ein Blick auf die Studien zum Nutzen der Sprachlandschaft im Englischunterricht. Es wird argumentiert, dass man im universitären Bereich die Sprachlandschaft fruchtbringend in das Englisch-Lehren – oder das Lehren jeder anderen Fremdsprache – einbauen kann. Der vorgeschlagene Lehransatz wird Lernern helfen, sowohl bewusster als auch aktivere Sprachlernern zu werden.

1. Introducing the Concept of the Linguistic Landscape

One of the most visible phenomena in today's increasingly globalized world is the coexistence of different languages in urban areas. The growing flows of global immigration towards the West in particular have, in fact, greatly contributed to the introduction of new languages into urban linguistic landscapes. From standard state languages, such as English, French, Italian, Spanish and so on, to foreign minority languages, especially in neighborhoods where immigrants reside, the urban Linguistic Landscape tends to develop into a microcosm in which these diverse idioms are variously represented, at different levels and in spoken and/or in written form in its streets and spaces. Indeed, the bigger and more cosmopolitan the city, the greater the presence of different languages and the possibilities that inhabitants will be exposed to different idioms and cultures.

Landry and Bourhis published their definition of the Linguistic Landscape in their essay of 1997, entitled *Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study*. They formulated the concept of the Linguistic Landscape while carrying out research in the field of language planning in Belgium and Canada, two bilingual territories. In such bilingual countries, the use of languages in the public space is regulated in such a way as to mark the boundaries between two distinct communities, which in the case of Belgium, and in Brussels in particular, are the French-speaking and the Flemish-speaking communities (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 24). According to the authors, the Linguistic Landscape is anything we can read in the streets of our cities, and in particular “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on governmental buildings” (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 25). There are a number of other crucial aspects that characterize the written signs: on the one hand, they can be *top-down* signs, typically put up by the local authorities, as in the case of traffic signs, street names, names of sites, buildings, schools, parks and so on. *Bottom-up* signs, on the other hand, are private signs which one can find on shops signs and private businesses; also advertisements, political billboards, graffiti and even menus placed outside restaurant entrances are to be viewed as examples of *bottom-up* signage. Generally, they tend to be more creative, informal and display a wider lexical choice, which could be bilingual and even multilingual. Apart from written samples of language, instances of spoken language—e.g. conversations carried out in stores or in the street—also contribute to form the Linguistic Landscape. So far, most of the research has focused on the written samples of the urban Linguistic Landscape; however, there are noteworthy research projects that have also analyzed the interactions and conversations occurring in different languages and involving immigrant speakers (Bagna/Barni 2006).

The specific language, or languages, which appear on the signs in the Linguistic Landscape of a given geographical territory provide information about the sociolinguistic composition of the inhabitants of that area. Moreover, the languages used on shop signs and on all types of signage in a given neighborhood could be bilingual or multilingual, and thus provide information on the various languages of the different ethnic groups living in a given area. As in the case of Brussels, there may be a number of culturally and linguistically differentiated groups living in a city. Although in some situations the coexistence of different groups may be roughly equal, at other times one group may have more prestige and a more positive identity when compared to other ethnic groups living in the same territory. Over the years, European cities have become more and more multilingual because of influxes of immigrations. Gorter wrote that:

“Multilingualism is thus a common phenomenon in Europe even though the linguistic diversity of Europe is not as rich as in other continents. Only 3.5% of the world’s total number of languages is indigenous to Europe. Still, Europeans often feel that their continent has an exceptional number of languages, especially when compared to North America or Australia which they mistakenly think to be monolingual English-speaking countries.” (Gorter 2010: 18).

2. The Role of English in the Linguistic Landscape

It goes without saying that English is the most widespread and used language of communication in the world. “It is the main language of science and technology and its spread is advancing in many countries and regions where English has not been traditionally used. English is also the main language of popular culture and globalization as can be seen in advertising” (Cenoz/Gorter 2008: 269). In all the research results on multilingualism in the Linguistic Landscape worldwide English is a constant presence, albeit with different functions and to different degrees. A noteworthy aspect is that essentially English has two basic roles in the Linguistic Landscape of urban areas. Being a *lingua franca*, English is almost always used in governmental and official signs. The public and official signs in the official language of the country are very often translated into English to provide

information to tourists and immigrants who do not speak the state language. In this case English acts as a functional language. A second function of English in the Linguistic Landscape is more symbolic in nature, notably when it appears in *bottom-up* messages, such as shop signs or advertisements. As Cenoz and Gorter observed:

“the use of English in commercial signs could be interpreted as informational mainly aimed at foreign visitors but it is obvious that its increasing presence has a strong symbolic function for a non-English speaking local population. As Piller (2003) remarks, English is often used in commercial signs for its connotational values such as international orientation, future orientation, success, sophistication or fun orientation” (Cenoz/Gorter 2008: 269)

The connotational and symbolic value of English is evident even in the Linguistic Landscape of countries where English is understood only by a minority of the population. Also in this case, a few, uncommon English words appearing on a commercial sign are enough to contribute to a sense of prestige and international flavor which is conveyed to the readers.

A significant number of studies based on the urban Linguistic Landscape followed the definition of the concept by Landry and Bourhis. These studies dealt with various aspects of the Linguistic Landscape both in European cities and in urban settings in the rest of the world. Copious research has dealt with multilingualism in the Linguistic Landscape of urban areas (for example: McArthur 2000; Stewart/Fawcett 2004; Bagna/Barni 2006; Backhaus 2006; Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Cenoz/Gorter 2008; Huebner 2006; MacGregor 2003; Collins/Slembrouck 2007; Seargeant 2009; Gorter 2010; Hélot et al. 2012; Blackwood/Tufi 2015, Blackwood/Lanza/Woldemariam 2016), while other studies have mainly focused on the presence of English in the Linguistic Landscape (Ross 1997; Schlick 2003; Griffin 2004; Dimova 2007; Mac Giolla Chìost 2007; Shohamy/Gorter 2009; Hasanova 2010). This does not come as a surprise. In fact, in most of the research on multilingualism in the Linguistic Landscape that has been carried out in the past and in recent years, there is a common thread that is impossible to ignore. Every study, whether based in Japan or in Mexico, in Africa or in Europe, includes a number of instances of, and various uses of, English. As already mentioned, English fulfills its function both as a *lingua franca* and as a symbol of prestige. Indeed, the omnipresence of English constitutes the “defining characteristic of cosmopolitanism in the Linguistic Landscape”, and as such English acts “as a semiotic resource and stylistic device and practice” (Blackwood & Tufi 2015: 202).

3. The Linguistic Landscape as a Didactic Resource for Language Teachers

Many authors have recently underlined that the presence of English in the Linguistic Landscape can be exploited in the English classroom, both in primary and secondary schools (Cenoz/Gorter 2008; Sayer 2010; Shu-Chao 2011; Chern/Dooley 2014). The Linguistic Landscape can contribute to raising the students’ awareness of their surroundings and can thus assume an important role in the acquisition of a second/foreign language. It can be explored by considering various aspects, such as “authentic language input, pragmatic competence, literacy skills, symbolic and affective factors” (Cenoz/Gorter 2008: 272). The Linguistic Landscape becomes a place where students are encouraged to become aware of their multimodal and multilingual surroundings. For example, Cenoz and Gorter (2008) write about a vending machine in the city of San Sebastian, in Spain. On the machine there are instructions in Spanish and in Basque: in this way learners of Basque and Spanish are learning an indirect strategy, a soft request, in a second/foreign language via an authentic communicative context in which value is placed on the minority language (Cenoz and Gorter 2008: 276).

Shohamy and Waksman (2009) are convinced of the pragmatic value offered by the Linguistic Landscape, and observe that “each building, each site, a billboard, an outdoor moving screen, a mall, a homeless person sitting in the corner of the street is actually a part of the Linguistic Landscape text that has to be critically read”. Thus, by adopting the Linguistic Landscape in the context of education students become more aware of the public sphere and of the use of language outside the classroom.

Sayer (2010) carried out qualitative research on the special use of English signs in the Linguistic Landscape of the city Oaxaca in Mexico. He was able to identify six social meanings, or themes each of which was linked to a particular kind of business or sign, and to the language that is used to describe them. For instance, when English is used to describe and advertise technological products, the products and the people who buy them are sophisticated and advanced. Equally, English represents fashion, as it is often used for fashion store shop signs. English can be considered “cool”, because the word *cool* is often used in stores for teenagers. *English is sexy, is used to express love* and can be employed to *express subversive identities*—typically through tattoos and with T-shirt designs (Sayer 2010: 147-151). Moreover, Sayer recommends using examples from the Linguistic Landscape to design teaching materials, such as “vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, grammatical features and loan words” in order to create a link between the students in the classroom and “world outside the classroom”. (Sayer 2010: 153). Thus, “students are encouraged to think creatively and analytically about how language is used in society and become more aware of their own sociolinguistic context” (Sayer 2010: 153).

Liu (2011: 98) addresses crucial issues in order to explain the advantages of using the Linguistic Landscape in courses of English in schools. She claims that teachers “have limited teaching hours and classrooms are too overcrowded to allow efficient teaching methods. The Linguistic Landscape can provide teaching materials for the teacher: new vocabulary, phrases, sentences, proverbs, puns and slogans that can then be used in class”. Liu (2011), who has been an English teacher in Taiwan, developed a methodology to enhance language learning and stimulate students’ awareness of English. Liu encouraged students to record signs in the Linguistic Landscape, classify them and then comment on them in class. The project should be carried out over one month and is divided into four different phases. In the first phase the teacher provides an overview of the signs that it is possible to find in the linguistic landscape and shows some pictures of them. In the second phase students go out and, with the aid of digital cameras, record the signs in a given neighborhood; subsequently they bring the material to class and share their findings with classmates. The teacher at this point shows those instances that display grammar mistakes to help students recognize them. The third phase entails the organization of the material and the preparation, with the help of the teacher, of a power point presentation. In the fourth and last phase students give their presentation and display what they have learnt from the linguistic landscape. Then they write a report. By following these four steps, students are encouraged to use all four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Chern and Dooley (2014: 114-115) propose a language teaching method for students of all levels of knowledge of English. The method is based on what they call the “English literacy walk” for EFL learning and teaching in Taipei, a multilingual area. The languages present in Taipei are Chinese, Japanese, English, Korean and also French, Spanish and Italian. The authors conceived a four-step model in order to help students recognize all the various alphabets of the various languages.

These and other methodologies and activities (see also Hewitt-Bradshaw 2014; Aladjem/Jou 2016) are indeed valuable contributions to the use of the Linguistic Landscape when teaching English in school. Our suggestion is that the Linguistic Landscape can become a valuable learning tool at the

university level as well. Sayer's "pedagogical walk" in the Linguistic Landscape should be adopted in order to have students gather the data. The didactic activities are essentially based on the following steps:

- a. After devoting a few classes to explaining the theoretical and practical aspects of the Linguistic Landscape, going over the the research literature, students are divided into small groups and select one or two neighborhoods that they want to explore by recording the written signs with digital cameras or cellular phones.
- b. Students should carry out a both quantitative and qualitative research; with this aim they can choose to focus on recording *bottom-up* signs, such as shop signs, menus outside restaurants, advertisements on billboards.
- c. Alternatively, students can decide to gather *top-down* signs, such as tourist information – both in the national standard language and in English - in the central railway station or outside historical buildings, or even near historical parks. Students should research the quality of the English translations.
- d. Students can even decide to record both *bottom-up* and *top-down* signs and compare them by calculating the percentages of the presence of English terms and by analyzing how they are used. They can compare and contrast the signs of the Linguistic Landscape they have recorded with the language of advertising that they find in newspapers and magazines.
- e. A further activity that helps students to learn and memorize new words is to establish the word formation processes of the English terms found in the Linguistic Landscape. To this end students can categorize the English words they have recorded according to whether they are compound words, clipped forms, blends, affixed words, loan words, acronyms or proper names. Students can discuss the uses of these words and decide which are the most interesting and creative ones.
- f. The final phase of this activity entails that students prepare a power point for a class presentation on the data they have gathered and encourage class discussions, leading to reflections on the uses of English in the Linguistic Landscape.

4. Conclusion

Through the teaching activities we have presented, relevant aspects and the potential for English language learning (and the learning of other languages) have emerged. Apart from the aspect of pragmatic language competence, these activities involving the urban Linguistic Landscape could deal more directly with aspects of English (or, depending on the city or region, other languages) such as: vocabulary, and recognizing and classifying word-formation processes; the comparison of foreign language signs and their translations into the national state language (typical of *top-down* signs); the recording and comparison of *top-down* messages and *bottom-up* signs, and analyses of multilingual and plurilingual messages. Such activities will stimulate students' awareness and curiosity both for their environment and for English language learning. Students are ultimately encouraged to become active learners of English.

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