

# Using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource

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*This article discusses the idea of linguistic landscape and describes a small-scale research project undertaken in a local EFL community in Mexico using public signs to analyse the social meanings of English. The author presents a framework that distinguishes between intercultural and intracultural uses, as well as iconic and innovative uses of English on signs. He also identifies six social meanings represented on the signs and uses photographs to illustrate each meaning. He argues that the project is useful both for thinking about the innovative ways people use the language in local contexts and as a template for a classroom-based project that teachers can implement that engages EFL students in investigating and talking about social language use. The conclusion presents an approach for using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource in the EFL classroom which casts the students as language investigators and offers ideas for extension activities that connect the language classroom to the streets of the learners' community.*

## Introduction

As an EFL teacher, I often struggle to find ways to connect the content of my language lessons in the classroom to the real world students encounter outside the classroom. We know that exposure and practice are two essential elements for L2 acquisition; however, in most EFL settings throughout the world, students' opportunities for exposure and practice beyond the classroom walls are limited.

In this article, I present the concept of 'linguistic landscape' and explain how EFL teachers can use this landscape to have students investigate the social meanings of English in their community. I begin by explaining the idea of linguistic landscape. Then I describe a project that I undertook in my local EFL community using the linguistic landscape to analyse the social meanings of English. I give examples of the social meanings of English from the linguistic landscape of the EFL setting where I worked in Oaxaca. Oaxaca is a colonial city in a largely indigenous area in southern Mexico. It receives many tourists and has some expatriate residents as well; however, although English is a required subject in secondary school, few Oaxacans outside the tourist industry have more than rudimentary knowledge of the language. Still, English has status in the area, and EFL classes are popular for all ages and levels. In this sense, Oaxaca is quite typical of many EFL contexts around world.

The linguistic landscape project is useful for thinking about the innovative ways people use the language in local contexts. It can also serve EFL teachers as a model template for classroom-based projects that engage our students in investigating and talking about how language is used in social and cultural settings. I present an approach for using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource in the EFL classroom, by casting the students as language detectives investigating the social meanings of what I call ‘environmental English’. Finally, I suggest other activity ideas for connecting the language classroom to the streets of the learners’ community and discuss the pedagogical benefits of doing student-led projects of this kind.

## The linguistic landscape

The modern urban landscape is covered with signs: naming stores and streets, adorning T-shirts and backpacks, giving directions, peddling products, and promoting politicians. All these signs are written texts, or what Goodman (1986) calls ‘environmental print’, and taken together they compose what Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, and Trumper-Hecht (2006) and Shohamy and Gorter (2009) term our ‘linguistic landscape’. Although we are bombarded daily with the messages on these signs, they also become so much a part of the scenery that we hardly notice them on a conscious level. However, working as an EFL teacher in Oaxaca, it caught my attention that many of the signs are in English. I wondered: why should they be in English? On one level, it is hardly surprising that advertising and shopkeepers and even graffiti artists would choose English since it is the global language. On the other hand, it is surprising and, perhaps, a little odd just how much of this environmental print is in English since average Oaxacans on the street are not proficient enough in the language to understand the content.

We could interpret the ubiquity of English as part of the phenomenon of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992), and of cultural imperialism as well, since they are often tied with images promoting Western products. Figure 1, for example, shows a preschool whose name—*Wine the Phoo*—when pronounced as you would in Spanish roughly resembles the



FIGURE 1  
Wine the Phoo and  
Friends preschool

Disney character portrayed on the wall. However, instead of assuming that Oaxacans are merely the hapless consumers of Western language and culture, I was curious to find out how and why they chose to use English. Hult (2009) argues that a careful analysis of our linguistic landscape can help us appreciate the way individual language choices are constructed in multilingual societies.

Building an appreciation and sensitivity of the myriad of ways people—especially ‘non-native’ speakers—employ English for their purposes is important for both teachers and students. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008: 181) propose the development of a ‘socially sensitive’ pedagogy for teaching English as an international language and state that ‘what is needed is a productive theory of bilingual teaching and learning that recognizes the various ways in which English is used within multilingual communities and the specific purposes learners may have for using the language’. Similarly, Seidlhofer (2006: 42), in her characterization of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in Expanding Circle countries, describes ELF as an approach that captures the ‘polymorphous nature’ and sociolinguistic diversity of English worldwide.

## **A linguistic landscape project**

In order to find out about the use of English in the linguistic landscape of Oaxaca, I designed a modest research project I called ‘Environmental English’ around a simple question: why do people in Oaxaca use English in public places? The procedure for carrying out the research was straightforward and can be easily replicated as a student project in almost any EFL setting. I decided to look at each sign as a text that I could collect as data. Armed with an inexpensive digital camera, I collected 250 texts—photos of signs, billboards, posters, and banners in English—in my daily comings and goings across the city over the course of a few months. The 250 signs became my data set.

## **Analysing the data**

In order to make sense of my data set, I did qualitative content analysis (Silverman 2006). Qualitative content analysis is a relatively simple process of describing the data set and identifying connections and patterns across parts of the data. By keeping my research question in mind—why do Oaxacans use English on signs?—I began by arranging photos that seemed to share a common theme to create categories. I continued rearranging the photos and adjusting my categories until I was satisfied that the ones I had identified could explain almost all the photos in my data set. I should note that the meanings I present below as a result of my analysis are not meant to be exhaustive: other interpretations and meanings are certainly possible. Rather, the meanings I present below are meant to describe some of the meanings English has in Oaxaca. Teachers using this approach in other contexts should encourage their students to do their own analysis and come up with their own categories and interpretations.

## **The social meanings of English in Mexico**

As I looked for the themes that would help me organize the photos, I realized that I needed to make some distinctions about the different purposes for English on the signs. The first distinction that I found in my analysis related to the intended audience for the sign. Some signs were clearly intended to convey information to foreign visitors, and so

restaurants, money exchange places, social protest signs, and historical information plaques about churches, for example, were all written in English in order to be read by non-Spanish-speaking tourists. Similarly, 'For Rent' and 'Alcoholics Anonymous Sessions in English' were written in English for an expatriate audience. However, although Oaxaca is a popular destination for tourists and expats, only about 12 per cent of the signs fit this 'cross-cultural' purpose. Rather, most of the signs were intended for 'intracultural' consumption; that is, English was being used by a Mexican to communicate with other Mexicans. Interestingly, the predominance of the intracultural purpose challenges our conventional understanding of English as a 'lingua franca', which generally assumes that the language serves as a tool of communication between speakers of different languages (McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008: 155). A few of the signs included an equivalent translation in Spanish, but most did not. Since very few Mexicans have enough English proficiency to understand the content of the sign, I concluded that it was the linguistic medium (the fact that it was written in English) instead of the message (the content of what was written) that was conveying the meaning of most of the signs.

## Uses of English

The second distinction I made in analysing the signs was the difference between the 'iconic' versus 'innovative' use of English. The iconic uses reproduced English in corporate logos and slogans, such as 'Domino's: The Pizza Delivery Experts' (sometimes these slogans were translated into Spanish, but oftentimes not). The innovative uses were novel forms of language, like Figure 2. I also consider Figure 3 an innovative instance of English, although there is a clear intertextual reference to the Chicago Bulls basketball team. Often innovative uses of English were accompanied by iconic images of American cartoon characters or Hollywood figures, or in one case a swimming school named 'Follow Me', apparently referencing the popular 1980s BBC English teaching series.

As I looked at what the photos were telling me about my 'why?' question, I realized that the reasons people in Oaxaca use English are connected to the



FIGURE 2  
Innovative use of  
English: a small  
independent computer  
servicing store

FIGURE 3  
Innovative use of  
English: a local  
basketball tournament



social value or meaning that English has. Therefore, I decided to focus on the intracultural, innovative uses of English. I identified six themes that explained different social meanings that English has in Oaxaca.

#### **Meaning 1: English is advanced and sophisticated**

The most prevalent social meaning of English in Oaxaca conveyed the idea that the products and people associated with it are advanced and sophisticated. Many companies related to technology used English in this way, including mobile phone companies, internet cafés, as well as graphic designers, car wash places, coffee shops, and fitness centres. Several other companies whose service or product was not immediately apparent—like the ‘Aplusplus Certification Technological Center’—used English to reinforce the idea that their business was cutting edge. Figure 4 is a typical example from the ‘Sarusa: Working Women’ gym and conveys a sense of being chic and exclusive.

#### **Meaning 2: English is fashion**

The second social meaning connects English to an idea of being fashionable and modern. In fact, most of the small clothing boutiques in the downtown area have English-inspired names, such as ‘Fashion Urban Fashion Boutique’, ‘SatisFashion’, ‘Glamour’, ‘ApplePink’, ‘Outlet Lipz Club’, and ‘Dinorah’s Look’. Figure 5 shows a sign inside a shoe store that proclaims ‘In Fashion We Trust’.

#### **Meaning 3: English *es ser cool* (‘English is being cool’)**

Also related to the idea of being fashionable and sophisticated is the notion that English makes you cool. An example is the Keds shoe advertisements common on bus stops, ‘Keds: Be Cool’. The slogans on the posters use code-switching to bring home the message (Figure 6): Cool *habla en todos los idiomas* (‘Cool speaks every language’). Several small local stores selling clothing and accessories for adolescents also used the word ‘cool’ in their signs. I also included in this category other signs that seemed aimed at using English to project an image of coolness, such as the ‘Dream Machines’ bicycle shop and the creative expressions that drivers use to adorn the tops of



FIGURE 4  
English is sophisticated:  
an upscale fitness centre



FIGURE 5  
English is fashion: a sign  
in a shoe store

their cars' windscreens, such as 'X-Rated', 'Brown Pride', and 'Devil Driver'. A final subset of this category were the names of the *lucha libre* or wrestlers that appear on colourful posters announcing upcoming fights that are glued to lampposts, with names like 'AstroBoy', 'Laredo Kid', 'Crazy Boy', 'Los Mexican Power', and 'PathFinder'.



FIGURE 6  
English is cool:  
advertisement on a bus stop



FIGURE 7  
English is sex(y): ladies'  
night at a popular club



FIGURE 8  
English for love: graffiti in  
English

#### Meaning 4: English is sex(y)

English is also the preferred language for sex shops and gentlemen's clubs (often spelt 'nigth club' [sic] or 'country club'). Figure 7 is advertising a show for the ladies at the 'NRG Lemon Concept Bar and Restaurant' (NRG = 'energy' when spelt in English) which has 'no cover'. A similar poster announced a *Gran Concurso de Streapers* starring the 'Latin Lover'. The same bar also advertises their *Bling Bling Sábado* (bling bling Saturdays). Hence, the use of English seems to highlight the sexualized or risqué nature of the products and services being advertised.

#### Meaning 5: English for expressions of love

English is also used for purer expressions of love. In fact, I was quite surprised to find a number of graffiti writings like the one in Figure 8. Many others used the formulaic expression 'I ♥ \_\_\_\_'. Valentine's day balloons and romantic store decorations also often incorporated English expression highlighting the word 'LOVE', such as 'Love at First Sighth' [sic].

#### Meaning 6: English for expressing subversive identities

One of the most interesting social meanings of English in Oaxaca was connected to its use as a form of social protest or to represent non-mainstream social identities. Signs in this category belonged to tattoo and piercing parlours, head shops, punk shops, and on T-shirts with counter-culture references to drugs or music. The teenager in Figure 9 is participating in a protest march against the government, and his shirt that shows a marijuana plant reads 'I helped fund international terrorism' is a mocking reference to a George W. Bush speech. A banner over a dusty parking lot that is a hangout for neighbourhood kids announces the place as the 'URBAN STUDIO GHETTO: ARTE Y CULTURA URBANA, GRAFFITI—BREAK DANCE—BMX—CAPOEIRA—HIP HOP'. Like many cities, graffiti is a problem in some parts of town, and many graffitiists also choose their tagger names in English, such as 'Monster', 'BooBoo', 'R@bit', 'Mr. Naughty', and 'Punisher'. Many of the slogans of social





FIGURE 9  
English for subversive  
identity: masked student  
protestor

resistance—both against the unpopular local governor as well as the United States government and the Iraq war—were in English. Hence, English is a preferred medium for transgressive messages and counter-culture identities.

Connell and Gibson (2003: 191) point out that

transnational cultural products, in whatever direction they appear to be travelling, do not simply replace local ones, but are refashioned and given new meaning. (cited in Pennycook 2007)

Pennycook (2007) argues that English is a prime example of a transnational cultural product. And in all the examples given above, we can see that as English becomes increasingly globalized, it also acquires new, local meanings as people in those contexts take it up, learn it, and begin to use it for their own (whether global or local) purposes. Figure 10 summarizes the distinctions and themes I identified in my study. Again, the themes are not exhaustive, nor are they discrete categories. That is, there is considerable overlap and some of the photos I included in two or more categories. ‘Being cool’, for example, is clearly connected to being hip and fashionable, which in turn is associated with being sexy. Therefore, the categories represent a set of interrelated meanings which point toward the social value of English in Oaxaca.

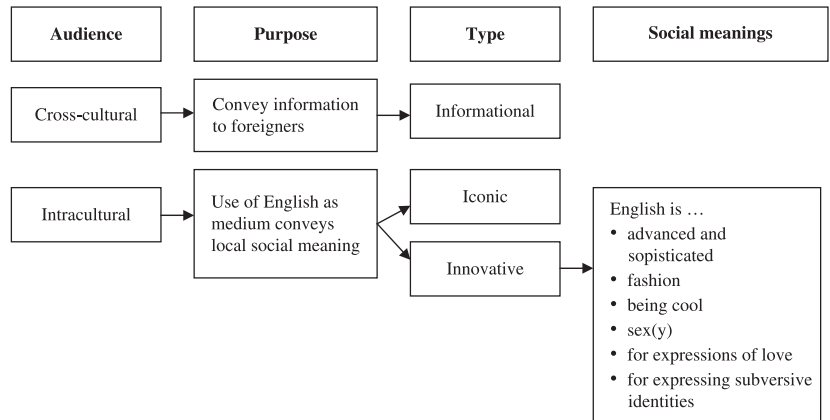


FIGURE 10  
English in the linguistic  
landscape in Oaxaca

### Using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource

The project I have modelled here can easily be reproduced as a classroom project, with the students taking on the role of ‘language detectives’: they become the researchers who collect the data by taking photographs and analyse it by organizing the photos into categories. If the ‘social meanings’ analysis project is used with students, they should be allowed to discover or identify their own themes. The six categories I used to explain the social meanings in Oaxaca may or may not fit other contexts, and they should be encouraged as researchers to draw (and be able to explain and defend) their own conclusions. It could be argued, for example, that some of what I have called ‘expressing subversive identities’ could just as well be interpreted in the category of ‘being cool’. The project should encourage a lively discussion about what categories students can use to organize their own linguistic landscape. Thus, rather than ‘give away’ the meanings by stating them for the students upfront, the project should start with the guiding question: why do people use English on signs in our community? From there, students should present their analysis and defend the interpretations they made in organizing and identifying themes in their photographs.

The teacher can also adapt the project in various ways to make it more suitable for different contexts and learners’ ages. Although I have modelled the project above by looking at social functions of language, it could also be adapted to focus on language forms, such as vocabulary (1 and 4), idiomatic expressions (2), and grammatical features (3):

- 1 Household inventory: students find all the examples of English on appliances and electronics in their house, such as the ‘5 disc changer’ on their stereo, the ‘grind’ button on the blender, or the ‘popcorn’ or ‘time cook’ settings on their microwave and discuss what they mean and why they are in English.
- 2 Clothing and accessories: students study the English used on T-shirts and backpacks. A ‘critical’ analysis could include a discussion of the ways that the gendered messages on boys’ and girls’ T-shirts differ or the ways people use English to mark social status.
- 3 Linguistic innovations: students look at the way non-standard forms of English are used in public spaces. This helps students become more

aware of standard and non-standard grammatical forms (which is also common in 'native-speaker' English use). The innovative uses of English I found included spellings ('4ever' or 'Mr Klyn Laundry'), different uses of the possessive (for example a sign in Spanish but using the English possessive, such as *Lucy's Estética*), adjective-noun word orders reversed, and the coining of compound Spanish-English words (*MundoClass* or *Prendacash*).

- 4 New loan words: students identify words that seem to have been recently integrated from English into their L1. English words that are now common in Mexican Spanish include 'sport', 'fashion', 'cool', 'express', 'extreme', 'relax', 'love', and 'coffee'.

## Pedagogical benefits

There are numerous potential benefits to doing a student-led linguistic landscape project. In general, the project accomplishes two main goals. First, it gets students to make connections between the content of classroom lessons and the world beyond the classroom walls. Second, it allows students to think creatively and analytically about how language is used in society and become more aware of their own sociolinguistic context.

The project accomplishes the first goal by having students explore the meanings of authentic texts. This is fun and motivating since it requires students to engage with authentic language as they go out in their communities to find the signs and then combine their technological savvy (using digital cameras and PowerPoint slides and/or Flickr or other social networking sites) with their critical thinking skills (to figure out how to organize them). It encourages them to develop their oral language by engaging meaningfully with the language as they explain and defend their ideas.

The project achieves its second goal by shifting the student from language learner to language researcher. A constructivist approach to education in other content areas strives to have the student approach the problem as a professional would, whether it is to take on the writing process as a writer would, or to approach a problem in the natural world as a scientist would. The linguistic landscape project compels the student to see the world through the eyes of a sociolinguist, who questions how and why people use language differently according to different social identities or purposes. This is constructivist in the Deweyan sense because students are engaged in concrete, experiential learning, where their understandings of the topic are built 'bottom-up' or inductively from their own exploration. Clearly, this perspective also underlies approaches in ELT that promote learner autonomy through the use of student-centred activities.

*Revised version received March 2009*

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