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Utilizing the Linguistic Landscapes for Contextual Language Learning

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Abstract: The usual contexts of language learning are mainly limited to the classroom. There is a challenge to connect the contents of classroom lessons to the world outside the classroom. This mini project explores the potential of using the linguistic landscapes as a learning space for contextual language learning. Its objectives are to find an approach that can supplement formal learning as well as to provide meaningful and continuous learning for the students. In this project, students were asked to apply what they learned in the classroom in the real world context. The findings suggest that linguistic landscapes can serve as an authentic source of learning materials that positively facilitate learning. The project supports a positive learning experience through learner immersion, engagement and motivation.

Keywords: *linguistic landscapes, language learning, contextual learning*

INTRODUCTION

The aim of teaching language is for students to acquire the language meaningfully so that they will be able to function and negotiate meaning in the real world. However, the usual contexts of learning are mainly limited to the classroom. There is a challenge to connect the contents of classroom lessons to the world outside the walls of the classroom. As put forward by Nation (2003), it is difficult to provide opportunities of exposure to language

and the practice of using it in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings.

There have been many approaches to provide meaningful learning for students such as task-based learning or problem-based learning. Such approaches aim at promoting student learning of concepts and principles using the real-world situation or problems. However, such pseudonym real world situations raised a question – can teaching and learning through these task-based classroom activities satisfy the students' needs or what they encounter beyond the classroom? And how can real life situations be brought into teaching and learning?

Putting real learning situations in teaching can bring big opportunities for the students to improve. This is because exposure is one of the essential elements for the second language acquisition (Al-Zoubi, 2018). Thus, this paper suggests the potentials of bringing the real language in contact into learning. Specifically, it invites the language instructors to consider pedagogical potentials of the linguistic landscapes surrounding us, i.e the language used in public, for language learning.

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

The concept of Linguistic Landscapes (LL) relates to the use of language in its written form in the public sphere. It is visible to all in that particular area. Landry and Bourhis (1997) defines LL as 'the language of public road signs, advertising boards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings' (p.25). More recent studies have broadened the concept to include images, sounds, drawing and movement (Shohamy, 2011). These include advertisement flyers, advertisement on moving vehicles and tourist maps. The LL is a manifestation of the language use of the community in that area. It can inform about the sociolinguistic composition of the area and language(s) used for communication. Pragmatically, it can be a marker of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the group(s) inhabiting the area.

The diverse and vibrant use of languages as displayed in the public sphere has made it an interesting and dynamic context for language learning. Thus, researchers have explored the potential of LL for language learning.

As put forward by Cenoz and Gorter (2008), it can serve as a source of authentic input to develop pragmatic competence and literacy skills, and raising students' language awareness.

Studies on the use of LL as a learning space for language learning have shown positive pedagogical implications. For example, Rowland (2013) in the implementation of an EFL classroom project which requires students to analyse the use of English on signs in Japan, supports the idea that LL can benefit students' learning. The study discusses the contribution of LL in developing the students' symbolic competence and literacy skills in a multiracies sense based on the students' engagement with the discourse. In another study, Aladjem and Jou (2016) carried out a project which aimed at raising students' awareness to language exponents in their surroundings by using the LL as a learning space and an input source. Using the social media as a venue to share their findings and analyses, Aladjem and Jou claimed that the project had gone beyond the awareness of language awareness. It also indicates understanding, noticing, communicating emotions and reminiscing.

Along the same line, Barrs (2017) conducted an awareness-raising activity involving Japanese students, using LL as an input source for exposure to English. The students were encouraged to critically engage with the LL around them by looking at the place where English can be found, form in what ways English is used, and reason for the purpose of using English. It was found that the activity extended beyond classroom learning and students explored their own insights and findings like relating to the incorrect use of language.

There have been many other studies that examine the use of LL for language learning source of input (Wang, 2015; Herwitt-Bradshaw, 2014; Xi & Li, 2016; Clemente, Andrade & Martins, 2012; Floralde & Valdez, 2017). Other researchers have also conceptually recommends LL for its pedagogical benefits (Chern & Dooley, 2014; Gorter, 2006; Kamisah et al. 2018). However, in Malaysia, the studies of the use of LL for language learning are very scarce. Thus, the present study may contribute to a body of knowledge with regards to tapping the potentials of LL for language learning.

THE PROJECT

This mini project was based on learning theories that stress the importance of learning in authentic and relevant settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The researchers believe that students do not have the opportunities to learn in authentic settings within the four walls of the classroom. Thus, the project was created to supplement the formal learning in the classroom as well as to provide meaningful and continuous learning for the students. The aim of the project is, therefore, to connect the contents of classroom lessons to the real world outside the classroom in an informal, yet, authentic learning environment.

The project took place in the form of a fieldwork. It was actually an evaluation part of the lessons on the grammar components which included spelling, vocabulary, parts of speech and subject-verb agreement. The project involved 38 students from a pre-diploma English course in a public university. The majority of these students had very low level of English language competence, with low pass scores of D and E in English at the Malaysia Certificate Education (SPM) examination level.

The students were grouped in fours or fives and the task was to identify language errors found in public signs in towns of their choice. Three frameworks of language error were set as the framework for investigation, i.e spelling, vocabulary and grammar. The students need to capture and analyse errors found in public signs such as banners, buntings, signboards, flyers, notices and shop signs. However, these were only limited to the ones that used English language only. Signs that used any other languages were excluded from the data collection. In case where the signs contained multiple languages, only the part in English language would be considered. The students were given one week to complete the tasks of identifying, capturing and analyzing the errors. Then, they were asked to present their findings to the class. They should first present their analysis of errors, justify their analysis and correct the errors. In short, Fig.1 shows the steps of the project task:

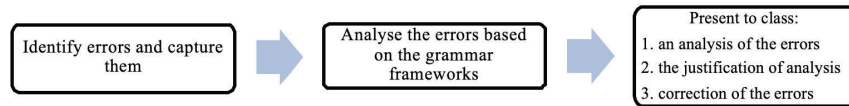


Fig. 1 Steps of Project Tas

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The project has shown that learning a language needs more than memorizing formal linguistic structures and grammar rules. As put forward by Cenoz and Gorter (2008), it cannot be separated from social and contextual

aspects. This project has proven that students need to experience learning. The students became aware of the language usage in their surroundings as they played the part of active explorers, seizing the learning opportunities in an authentic surrounding which could support and scaffold their learning process.

The students' presentation of their findings suggests that students were able to notice and be aware of the errors that existed around them. At times, they were further able to identify the errors and justify their analysis as well as correcting the errors. The followings show examples taken from the students' presentations on their findings.

4.1 Spelling Errors

Students, in their analysis, were able to identify the type of errors found in the public signs. They were also able to correct the errors. It is also interesting to note that in some cases, they even took the initiative to refer to the dictionary for the confirmation of the correct spelling of the misspelt words. Fig.2 shows some examples of the spelling errors found and the corrections.



Fig.2 An Analysis of Spelling Errors

4.2 Wrong Word

The examples below show that students were able to identify the wrong word used in the signs. They were able to pick up the wrong use of 'convenient' for 'convenience shop', and 'saloon' for 'hair salon' as seen in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3 An Analysis of Usage of Wrong Words

4.3 Language Inaccuracy

The findings indicate that the students were also able to detect language inaccuracies in the public signs. As shown in the Fig. 4 below, they were able to point out the errors in the sentence structure and subject-verb agreement elements in the company's and product's mottos.



Fig. 4 An Analysis of Spelling Errors

However, it is important to note that not all errors were corrected correctly. As mentioned earlier, the students who took part in the project had low competence level in English. Thus, they were not able to correct some complex errors like sentence structure or complex grammar. Notwithstanding, the researchers felt that it was still a great accomplishment as the students were able to identify the errors. For example, the students were aware of the errors in the price list as shown by Fig. 5 below. Nevertheless, they were not sure on how to correct the errors. Similarly, they knew that the translated version of the advice given in the bus was wrong, yet, they did not know how to correct it.



Fig. 5 Errors Identified but Not Corrected

Although the students were not able to correct the errors, the researchers believe that this can provide an opportunity for extension activities on the topic. The errors found in the real world can be brought into the classroom for error correction sessions, thus, providing real and authentic examples - linking classroom lessons to the real world.

4.4 Post-Project Interview

A post-project interview with the students reveals that such an experiential learning approach using the linguistic landscapes as a learning space proved to be an exciting and meaningful learning experience for them. Apart from the common positive evaluative comments like ‘the project is interesting’, ‘the field work is fun’, ‘it is exciting’ and ‘it enriches my knowledge’ the students commented that such approach of learning had widened their horizons beyond what was learned in the classroom. They felt that this method of learning had made learning ‘more meaningful’ as they were able to relate and apply their learning to the real world. This is in line with other studies that such activity can increase students’ exposure to and engage themselves with a foreign language beyond the limitation of the classroom environment (Sayer, 2010; Barrs, 2016).

It is also worth noting the students’ perceptions of their learning. With the project, they felt ‘important’ as they were ‘doing something real’, unlike learning in the classroom where the examples were given out of context. Such claims show that the project has given them the

opportunities to explore the application of English in the real world. One student's claim that he could not help but had now started noticing the errors in signboards. This shows that continuous learning has taken place.

The interview also indicates how students' perceive the learning practice in the classroom and how they actually want it to be carried out. The students claimed that by undertaking the project, they felt 'important' and 'learnt like adults' as they became 'investigators'. As the opportunities are restricted in the classroom, this little project has shown that 'the linguistic landscape can offer a fertile area of investigation from which to develop a wide range of research enquiries' (Barrs, 2016, p. 27).

CONCLUSION

The limited contexts for language learning in the classroom may limit the students' opportunities to apply the skills learned in the real world. This paper has explored the potentials of linguistic landscapes to be considered as a source of real input for pedagogical practice in ESL/EFL education. The mini project undertaken shows that linguistic landscapes can offer vast opportunities for meaningful learning to take place. In addition, it supports a positive learning experience through learner immersion, engagement and motivation. As remarked by Lazdina and Marten (2009), LL is 'an easy and enjoyable way of involving students into field work' (p. 212).

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