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Linguistic Landscapes as Resources in ELT: The Case of a Rural Community in the Philippines

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Introduction

Recent debates on multilingual education have pointed out that the existence of two or more languages do not necessarily pose problems for teaching and learning. As demonstrated in research in bilingual settings, meaning is greatly negotiated between teachers and learners resulting in gains in understanding of content in subject areas (Ferguson, 2003; Valdez, 2010). For example, the use of the mother tongue in any form of communication is the best method of expression especially those that are determined in educational contexts (Onkaş, 2011). Onkaş argues that if the mother tongue (or native language) is to be used as the tool for teaching and learning, both the teachers and the students will benefit. With the exception of technical vocabulary in specific fields which may not be translatable in other languages, teachers find the Mother Tongue useful to negotiate meaning in the classroom. The students, on the other hand, will most likely grasp the lessons as they are taught based on the language they already know— thus, the platform of the most optimal learning tasks (Nolasco, 2015).

A manifestation of the incorrect linguistic tool used in education is the high drop-out rates in different countries (Prinsloo, 2007). For example, Prinsloo found that students dropping out from schools in South Africa can be traced to the incorrect language-in-education policies specifically as the language used in classrooms is not comprehensible for the students. Thus, it can be said that the mother tongue may be a significant help in addressing this problem.

In the Philippines, for example, the inclusion of multiple languages in teaching has been evident through the Department of Education (hence, DepEd) Order No. 60, series of 2008 which states that when the mother tongue (MT) is used as the Language of Instruction (LOI), students can learn better as they are taught through a language they already know which consequently facilitates learning. In addition, DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2009 was issued to institutionalize Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and contends that teaching can be further enhanced if the language to be used in education is what the children already understand. In enhancing the educational system of the country through the inclusion of mother tongues (or, multiple languages), one can examine the linguistic background of the place and its people by deploying different linguistic codes in public domains and signs—thus, the incorporation of the linguistic landscape (hence, LL) in identifying the multilingual resources of the community and informing

the practice of multilingual education is essential.

Since MTB-MLE is informed by the nature and phenomenon of multilingual resources as tools in teaching and learning, it is fair to state that the presence and combination of different languages observed in public settings can further increase the educational aim of introducing the students to the multilingual setting of their place, and thus assist them in acquiring the pragmatic background of the construction of the linguistic landscape reflecting the multilingual make-up of the educational system and more broadly, of the entire country. The need to cater to educational and linguistic needs of the learners through their MT or first language (L1) can possibly increase their ability and skills in other languages that they will subsequently learn and acquire (Bialystok, 2013).

The presence of MT or L1 in public signs can further heighten the acquisition processes undertaken by the students. The ubiquitous presence of languages may also increase the retention of linguistic entries to be learned (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006, 2008; Sayer, 2010). Thus, the implicative functions of different linguistic systems that are present in LL can help the learners remember and attend to the language chunks they intend to learn and use. Also, teachers will more likely be informed on how the presence of languages in LL facilitate in teaching the first, second or target language. Exposing the learners to their target language which is used in actual contexts will possibly help them become better users of the language as they can pragmatically and authentically observe the function of the language, and consequently produce LL that meets the pragmatic foundations of their target language. Because LL can be instructive as to how multilingual resources are appropriated in the public setting, its informative force can also facilitate the practice of multilingual education. Given these points, this paper aimed at examining the linguistic landscape in a rural community in the Philippines as a potential resource for Mother Tongue Based Education.

Linguistic Landscapes and Mother Tongue Based Education

The most common definition of linguistic landscape (henceforth, LL), which is used in most of the research undertakings comes from the seminal work of Landry and Bourhis (1997).

They define LL as:

> The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25).

As pointed out by Gorter (2013), this first construct —captures well the object of linguistic landscape studies (p. 191). Needless to say, LL studies connote that all publicly displayed signs, irrespective of their origin and authorial genesis as well as linguistic and social purposes, constitute organs of investigation. However, recent critical linguists question the value and categoricity of LL (Laur, 2007). Laur assumes that defining LL according to its conceptual appearance in the public sphere is questionable because it is uneasy to determine the units of analysis that delimit the properties of the LL while it is also safe to argue that the subsequent abstract conceptualizations embedded within a sample of LL pose another platform of debate. Backhaus (2006), on the other hand, takes a different stand when he stresses that signs are limited to a definable frame, although on a different note he points out that Landry and Bourhis' definition of LL is too broad because of the scope that LL can appropriate—i.e., which type(s) of LL is more plausible to represent the initial definition—handwritten signs that may imply resistance or those that are officially issued which in turn represent authority. Since Mother Tongue Education emerged from the existing realities brought about by multilingualism, research on linguistic landscape that informs the domain of education has been evident in different contexts.

Methodology

Since this paper is based on the wider study of linguistic landscapes in a rural community in the Philippines, a qualitative approach was employed. A total of 422 photos of signs coming from business establishments (158), schools (84), churches (28) and governments (152) in Irosin, Sorsogon, a southeastern municipality in Luzon, Philippines was the subject of analysis. Linguistic landscape analysis was conducted by determining the type of languages used, the possible sources of authorship and potential readership (top-down, bottom-up) as well as the functions of the signs (Gorter, 2006; 2013).

Results and Discussion

Potentials of Linguistic Landscape for Pedagogical Purposes

Based on the analysis of public signs in Irosin, Sorsogon in the Philippines, several insights can be drawn which may be of use for language pedagogy. These are using linguistic landscapes in informing language and literacy programs, creating authentic teaching materials and enriching teaching strategies.

Linguistic landscapes informing language and literacy programs

A linguistic landscape tasks every reader to decode the meaning of the sign (Backhaus, 2006; Clemente, et al., 2012; Gorter, 2006). Decoding the content and social functions of the LL entails the readers' language and literacy practices. The public signs of Irosin, Sorsogon suggest that multilingual resources are deployed by people who create and consume the LL of the said place. In determining the social functions of the signs, the knowledge of literacy is further incorporated.

In comprehending the meanings of public signs, the readers use their linguistic skills and process the signs' functions by determining the relationship of the linguistic, symbolic and semiotic components which are used in the composition of the signs. Thus, the literacy practices of the readers are put into actual pragmatic applications in which they transfer their linguistic vis-à-vis cognitive skills in constructing the meaning of the public signs. Also, the signs' multimodality processes the readers' knowledge about other literacy resources incorporated in each sign. An example of this task is employed in Figure 1. The sign does not only show a government reminder, but more importantly despite its grammatical incompleteness, the sign denotes an instructive task for the readers who need to have their new voters' ID taken.
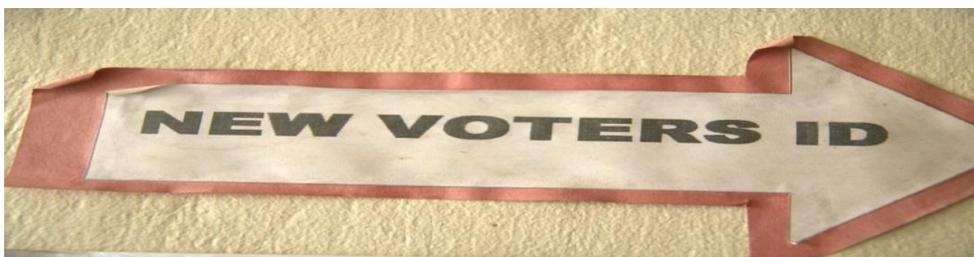

Figure 1. Government multimodal reminder.

In terms of the linguistic code used in this sign, it clearly shows how English is utilized by the sign maker in composing a direction-based announcement. This further suggests that English has become a primary language to construct public signs. The grammatical incompleteness on the other hand, suggests the notion of grassroots literacy that can be exemplified through incomplete linguistic entries yet

complete comprehension of meaning. One government employee was asked about the function of the sign and why it is printed on an arrow-shaped paper. The employee responded that this sign is targeting the government clients (city residents) and its main use is to tell people about the area in the city hall where their new voters' ID can be picked up. Suggestively, the reminder was printed or pasted on an arrow-shaped paper, so it can clearly and quite literally direct the residents to the specific location for the said purpose.

In using LL as a resource for multilingual schemes of language policies, the language management agencies may be informed about contemporary methods in using public signs as an educational resource—that is, LL are not purely linguistic and the multimodal instruments inscribed in public signs can further inform them about the readers' skills in comprehending the social functions of the sign.

The value of linguistic landscapes can also be informative in delivering cohesion among the sign's creators, readers and the text itself. Since not all signs are purely linguistic and some are also written with the incorporation of different symbols, icons and images, language and literacy policy makers and classroom teachers should also be aware that teaching literacy may not be limited to language-based teaching only. The local study of Del Rosario (n.d.) on train stations in the Philippines may support this argument since his investigation dealt with the positioning of the languages and how this placement can inform comprehension. Thus, the multimodality and multilingual composition of the signs connote that in teaching (or enhancing) literacy skills, teachers, and language policy makers should be cognizant about the different elements that constitute the signs and their meanings.

The diachronic study of Backhaus (2005) in Japan also reiterates that comprehending the signs needs to be indexed through their composition and contextual grounding. Consequently, the finding that non-linguistic signs are mostly found in the business sector which presents a higher number of bottom-up LL may imply the contextual foundation that lies in the business domain and why it has been used as a platform of contesting recognitions (yet common understanding). Figure 2 reflects this idea.

Figure 2: Non-linguistic vandalism on the wall of Irosin market.

Figure 2 is classified as non-linguistic because of the inscribed name and number. This pertains to linguistic ambiguity and its independence from norms of language usage. Also, the orthographic feature of the sign is quite problematic since the order of the ideas inscribed is not clear adding to the contesting meaning of the sign which may have been implied by the probable erasure on the lower right portion of the sign. A passer-by in the Irosin market was asked about the function of the sign and similar with the points given, the same answer was provided. That is, this sign connotes a probable defiance of the sign maker against the normative value of the wall—a call for the community's recognition was embedded in the sign. Arguing from this angle, it can also be considered that grassroots literacy is further employed by the sign maker, the text he/she made and the sign reader. Thus, despite the linguistic ambiguity of the sign and its independence from the prescriptive facet of the language, the sign readers can still comprehend and underscore the meaning that it connotes.

Although this sign may not be wholly incorporated in the teaching of literacy, learners can at least be informed about the value, content and symbolic package that signs carry. Teachers may be informed on

how non-linguistic public signs are informative of collective comprehension that readers create.

LL can be used as authentic teaching materials

Using LL as a pedagogical resource is also instructive in determining the direct educational values of the public signs as well as their implicative nature in embodying the language policies. Sayer (2010) and Chern and Dooley (2014), although focused on the presence of English in LL, argue that public signs can serve as resources in language teaching. Figures 3 and 4 present interesting angles on the pedagogical contribution of linguistic landscape.

Figure 3: Monolingual-multimodal school sign.

Figure 4: PNP Check point marker.

Figure 3 is a reminder that a school-related transaction can only be processed at a specific place in the building. The sign is in pure English suggesting the choice of the sign writer and the function of the said language. It can also be noticed that the sign is printed with an arrow placed below the words implying the direction that clients need to follow for their transactions to take place. In presenting this sign, the school taker responded that this has been effective since the students are guided to the place where their business may be conducted.

While Figure 3 is categorically directive (as it can literally direct where the undertaking happens), Figure 4 is more executory—that is, all drivers must submit their vehicles for police inspection. This situation, according to the resident interviewed, is related to the Gun Ban Policy for the upcoming election. This poster uses English implying the value of the language in reflecting specific social function.

Comparing the two signs, two major points may be raised. First, the production (through the material used) of the signs is different. The school sign is printed on paper and posted on the glass window which might restrict itself from physical destruction while the police announcement is printed on a synthetic material (a tarpaulin) which is similar with all the police-related and regulated signs displayed in other parts of the country.

How linguistic landscapes are created through various media imply their varying degrees of importance or roles in society. While the former sign is smaller, it is also placed in a specific area of the school building; the latter, on the other hand, can be expectedly found on roads of the city suggesting that even a non-native resident of Irosin should adhere to the regulations of the place (i.e., the police check point being a nationally-constructed policy). Thus, the creation, presentation and maintenance of these signs suggest that LL are structured according to the contextual value of the signs implying different meanings and significance.

In using these signs, for example, as teaching realia, language teachers may help students in decoding the value of the language—that is, why a specific linguistic code is used and other languages are not chosen; in analyzing the relationship of the sign's meaning and the physical material where it is printed; and in determining the sociolinguistic resources manipulated by the sign creator and the meaning that sign readers comprehend.

The employment of certain languages in linguistic landscapes may inform language teachers about direct and pragmatic realizations and sociolinguistic identities embedded in public signs which all denote the notions on language-in-education policies, and especially the practice involved in language teaching and learning. Moreover, school children may become more cognizant about the utilization of linguistic resources that they see around them thus becoming informed about the language they should learn and acquire to further gain competence in such language and become effective participants in social engagements.

As argued by Cenoz and Gorter (2008), languages used in signs are helpful for students in acquiring their second language. Since public signs are ubiquitous, the language learners become more exposed to learning the language they publicly see and the retention of such language in their cognition and linguistic repertoires would be optimally realistic. Thus, the construction of language policies in education may be informed by the specific presence and employment of linguistic codes in public signs and how these societal elements can enhance the achievement of educational objectives.

LL can be informative in formulating language teaching strategies

The practical application of the previous point can be seen through developing language teaching strategies. Taking children to the community and letting them observe public signs as well as the meanings embedded into such signs would most likely help the school children become aware of the sociolinguistic make-up of the place where they belong as well as the complete ideologies and systemic foundations that fashion the society. Figure 5 can be used as material that further promotes LL as an instrument in improving language teaching strategies.

Figure 5: Bilingual reminder in a store in the Irosin market

This sign is bilingually written and placed on a glass shelf in one of the stores in the Irosin market. This sign is one of the few LL in Irosin which uses English and Bikolano simultaneously. A customer was asked about the use of the sign and according to her, the sign reminds buyers like her that she needs the assistance of the store owner in taking a product from the establishment. Although the poster may be regulatory, the use of the smile icon neutralizes the plainness of the sign and the gravity that it upholds. The usage of such an element in public signs can be considered as a form of conviviality which connotes that sign writers do not only confine the message and context of their signs to its original function, but they also include their personal tendencies in creating and designing the public sign (Blommaert, 2014, p. 433).

Chern and Dooley (2014) used public signs written in English in helping their students become more knowledgeable about the grammatical, sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules of the language. Such novel steps would be facilitative in teaching the direct applications of multiple languages as resources in the practice of multilingual education. Moreover, signs constructed for specific social purposes may serve as tools in teaching the pragmatic architecture of the place and further inform the learners about the relationship of multiple languages and social functions. For example, Figure 5.7, which is placed on a glass container of goods in a stall in the Irosin market, may be used in teaching the students about the relationship among the languages used (English and Bikolano), about the placement of the sign and about the author of the sign and its target readers. Language teachers can incorporate an inquiry-based approach in determining the linguistic make-up and social value of the sign.

The prevalence of technological advancements can also be used in informing language-in-education policies (cf. Lawrence, 2012). Since it is not only language that has been used in current learning media, students deserve to be educated with competencies in communicative multimodalities including symbols, icons and technology-oriented applications (Canagarajah, 2005). Thus, the presence of these communication tools in public signs needs to be incorporated in multilingual education syllabi informing both language planners and users.

Being informed about the multiple languages used in public signs can be a rich source of teaching strategies that manifest pedagogical development reflecting and realizing the social relationships and sociolinguistic orientations and identities.

Conclusion

Based on this preliminary investigation, the study of public signs may open several opportunities for language teachers to maximize the potential of using real-life language in contexts relevant to students. As demonstrated in this research, multilingualism as manifested in public signs can help explain the nuanced character and multiple functions languages play in a community. Moreover, public signs can help teachers explain the role of context, reader-writer relationship as well as the diverse ways that meaning is communicated through a range of modalities.

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