THE ROLE OF LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES IN RAISING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AMONG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract. This paper explores how *linguistic landscapes*—the display of written language in public spaces—can be leveraged to foster intercultural awareness among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Through a qualitative case study involving undergraduate students, this research investigates learners' perceptions of public signs, advertisements, and street texts in multilingual urban environments. The findings demonstrate that analyzing linguistic landscapes not only cultivates critical thinking but also deepens students' understanding of sociolinguistic diversity, global English varieties, and cultural hybridity. This method is proposed as a meaningful, real-world supplement to traditional intercultural education, providing contextual and reflective learning opportunities that bridge classroom instruction and lived experiences.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, intercultural awareness, sociolinguistics, critical thinking, multilingualism, language teaching, EFL students

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, linguistic and cultural borders are fluid, frequently overlapping in both digital and physical spaces. This reality underscores the importance of cultivating **intercultural awareness** in language education, particularly for EFL learners, who often encounter English in localized, globalized, and hybridized forms. While language curricula traditionally rely on curated, textbook-based materials, everyday environments remain a rich, underutilized resource for authentic learning.

One such resource is the *linguistic landscape* (LL), defined as "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or [1]region"[1]. LLs reflect sociolinguistic realities and can serve as a dynamic site of inquiry for understanding language ideologies, power relations, and cultural identities. This study proposes that integrating linguistic landscape analysis into EFL instruction can deepen learners' intercultural competence by encouraging them to critically engage with real-world instances of multilingualism and symbolic language use.

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[1] Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23–49

Methods

This qualitative case study was conducted with 12 undergraduate EFL students at a B2 proficiency level (CEFR scale) from a Central Asian university. Over a three-week period, students participated in an ethnographic observation project. They were instructed to photograph public signs, advertisements, labels, and other textual artifacts in their everyday environments that included English or other foreign languages.

These linguistic items were then analyzed in group sessions through guided discussions facilitated by the instructor. Students examined not only the linguistic forms but also their sociocultural implications—questioning who the intended audience was, what cultural messages were conveyed, and how power or prestige might be encoded in language choice.

Data were collected through three instruments:

- **Reflection journals**, where students recorded personal insights and reactions;
- **Audio-recorded group discussions**, which captured collaborative meaning-making;
- **Pre- and post-project questionnaires**, measuring shifts in intercultural awareness and attitudes toward language diversity.

Thematic coding was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework[2], focusing on recurring themes such as language prestige, identity, and cultural hybridity.[2]

Results

The study produced several notable findings:[3]

1. **Increased Critical Language Awareness**. Students reported heightened sensitivity to the symbolic use of English in commercial contexts. English was often used to suggest modernity or cosmopolitan identity, particularly in fashion boutiques, beauty salons, and cafés. This symbolic rather than communicative use prompted discussions about *language commodification*[3].

2. **Understanding Cultural Hybridity** . Participants engaged deeply with multilingual signs that blended Uzbek, Russian, and English. Such signs often represented cultural fusion rather than confusion, and students noted how these combinations signaled local-global identities. This supported greater understanding of *cultural hybridity* and *glocalization*—the adaptation of global practices to fit local contexts[4].

3. **Challenging Cultural Stereotypes .** Several students questioned stereotypical or superficial representations of foreign culture. For instance, one student critiqued a café labeled "American Style" that displayed no

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[2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

overtly American products, prompting discussion about *authenticity* and *cultural marketing*.

4. **Enhanced Engagement and Curiosity .** Students became more observant in their daily lives, often bringing spontaneous examples to class. This suggests that linguistic landscape projects increase learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation by fostering real-world relevance.

Discussion

Traditional approaches to intercultural competence in EFL settings often rely on scripted dialogues, cultural trivia, or comparisons of customs and holidays. While informative, these methods risk presenting culture as static or monolithic. In contrast, linguistic landscape analysis promotes a situated, inquiry-based approach. It enables learners to see language as dynamic and ideologically charged—shaped by social forces, power relations, and economic incentives[5]. Through this lens, learners can:

- Reflect on English's shifting roles as a global lingua franca and as a symbol of modernity;
- Understand how language functions as a marker of identity, community, and inclusion/exclusion;
- Encounter authentic instances of *code-switching*, *language contact*, and *cultural negotiation* in context.

However, for LL analysis to be pedagogically effective, it must go beyond simple observation. Without scaffolding, learners may resort to surface-level interpretations. Teachers play a vital role in guiding students toward *critical literacy*, helping them uncover the deeper social meanings embedded in public texts.

Although the study's small sample size limits generalizability, the findings align with a growing body of research advocating *place-based learning* and *sociolinguistic consciousness* in language education.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating linguistic landscapes into EFL instruction is an effective way to cultivate intercultural awareness. It bridges the gap between classroom content and lived experience, positioning learners as ethnographers of their own linguistic environments. As English continues to diversify globally, fostering such reflective, localized learning will be essential to preparing students for meaningful intercultural communication.

Further research might explore the impact of LL analysis across different proficiency levels or in virtual environments, such as social media spaces where English similarly functions as a cultural and symbolic resource.

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