Community Support for Language Learning: Teacher perspectives

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Abstract – Previous studies have opened up possibilities that linguistic landscape can support classroom learning. The aim of this research paper is to get a glimpse of Singapore teachers’ perspectives of how Linguistic Landscape can play a part in students’ language learning process. The findings of this paper revealed that teachers do see the potential of signboards being educative because of their authenticity nature, but the process of utilising them as a supplementary resource has to be carefully executed by trained teachers in order to fulfil educational goals.

Keywords - Linguistic Landscape, carryover effect, perspectives, language learning, community support

INTRODUCTION
Linguistic Landscape refers to “the visibility and salience of language on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p.23). It generally reflects language in use that is multi-modal. In the world of today, texts are produced through different modes: written/printed, pictorial/visual, aural/oral, gestural. Multi-genre, multi-modal texts that exist in public spaces hold much potential to trigger and enhance language and literacy development. As Blommaert (2003) put it, the language that is used by the community holds much potential in defining the quality of language education in schools. However, little is known about the “carryover effect” in which public signs can attribute to a learner’s progress in language learning. Therefore, this research project aims to shed light on primary school educators’ views on ways in which language use in the community (i.e. outside of the classroom and school) can support learners’ language learning in the Singapore’s context through language available in the linguistic landscape. The three research questions that will be investigated in this project are as followed:

1. How do educators deepen learners’ learning with the help of community signs?
2. What are some educators’ view on learning from the community (e.g. from signboards as part of the Linguistic Landscape)?
3. Is there a relationship between classroom learning and learning from the community? If so, how is this relationship established?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Previous studies (e.g., Hancock, 2012 and Hewitt-Bradshaw, 2014) have shown that Linguistic Landscape has the potential to serve as an authentic educational resource to engage students in their literacy development, extending beyond the classroom and school walls. Such engagement with community-specific texts can encourage learners to understand their literacy development in a broader social context. Lamarre (2014) also drew attention to the use of community signs as a resource in teaching that can recognize the social context of language learning and language use that can extend educators many opportunities to create meaningful experiences for learners. As a ripple effect, this exposure of real-world communicative materials in school may enhance the sense of belonging in the society. This study looks into the context of Singapore, a multiracial and multilingual nation with four official languages.

Multilingualism in Singapore
Singapore is ethnically diverse. There are 3 major races – Chinese, Malay and Indians. Although its national language is Malay, it’s official languages are English, Chinese Malay and Tamil. English is selected as the inter-ethnic language of communication (Curdt-Christiansen & Silver, 2012, p.2) and takes precedence in all official signs and announcement, and as the medium of instructions in local schools, while the mother tongue languages serve as the secondary communicative mean. It is important to know about the Singapore’s linguistic diversity as multilingualism gives rise to how linguistic landscape is portrayed and used as informative and symbolic functions (Moriarty, 2014, p. 458). Simply put, the intention and the structure of signs are depended on the language that Singaporeans use in daily interaction and are accustomed in in cognitive processing.

MOE Syllabus
Linguistic Landscape, when portrayed in institutional settings, such as public and private schools, can have a “carryover effect” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p23) on students’ language behaviour. As reflected in the year 2010 English Language syllabus, the Ministry of Education (MOE) advocates the use of authentic and contextualised educational materials to enhance students’ language learning in the classroom. It is believed that the English Language curriculum can be reinforced and enriched through “the use of a variety of print and non-print resources that provides authentic contexts for incorporating the development of information, media and visual literacy skills in the teaching of listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and representing” (CPDD, 2010, p.8).

Therefore, the ministry has devised and implemented numerous language resources to all primary schools to aid teachers in providing a holistic language learning experience to all students. One of them is “Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading” (STELLAR). The STELLAR curriculum aims to “empower teachers to teach our children the critical life experiences” (MOE, 2010). English teachers, who come from different primary schools in Singapore, with varied teaching levels and teaching experience. Before the interview, the interviewees were asked to fill out a form on their teaching background and experience. In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, where the interview questions (Annex B) were semi-structured to allow additional inputs from the teachers. Below are the details of the interviewees.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Year(s) of experience in teaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher no.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>North</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher no.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Central</td>
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<td>Teacher no.3</td>
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<td>North</td>
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Each interview was audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Transcription (Annex C) was formatted in the question-answer response. The analysis was conducted via an iterative process to identify relevancy to the research questions and interesting links in and across the transcripts. 2 types of thematic coding - Semantic coding and Pre-determined coding contributed to the analytic process.

Firstly, the Semantic coding was used. The researcher highlighted phrases or words that she deemed to be related to the research questions or were interesting to bring up in the subsequent sections (Annex D). Then, the researcher conducted pre-determined coding by using fresh copies of the transcripts to identify the same notions of perspectives that the interviewees expressed as the research questions (Annex E). Lastly, the researcher cross-referenced both sets of analysis to identify similar ideas and reported them in the Findings section.

**FINDINGS**

To answer to the first research question, all three interviewees shared the same sentiment that students must be seasoned users of the English Language to strengthen their proficiency in speaking and writing using the language. Here are their responses:

*... it boils down to the usage of the language. The child might spend more time at home than in school but if he or she does not communicate more at home with their family members, I would think that it will hinder the command of the language.*

-Interviewee 1

You can tell that those students who usually speak English at home, they would have better sentence
structure and usually their tenses and grammatical errors are usually minimal than students who usually speak mother tongue at home.

-Interviewee 3

Interviewees felt that when students are habituated to using the English Language, they are more intrinsically motivated to pay attention in class and are more watchful of the correctness of their language use. This is in relation to the home environment that the student is living in and the home support that they receive, mainly from their parents and other immediate family members. Parents and family members are part of the community support that students receive because they are one of the main characters who are living in the same environment as their children. When parents encourage the use of English Language at home and are conscious in correcting their child, they are providing opportunities for their child to apply their knowledge about the language into their daily-life social interaction, instead of restricting it within the four walls of the classroom. This is what interviewee 3 meant by “the learning environment and the home environment are equally important”. All three interviewees believed that it is unfair to say that learning in the classroom is the main source of learning that a child will receive primarily, instead classroom learning plays the supporting role of helping students to reinforce their language proficiency and teaching them test-taking skills.

Learning from the community does not come from home environment only, it is also derived from the environment that the child lives in – the objects that he/she sees everyday which have the potential to becoming a language learning tool. The interviewees were asked to discuss on the linguistic features of signboards and the implications that they impinge on classroom language learning. With regards to the second research questions, all three interviewees had similar views on the language use on signboards. They felt that the language use on signboards are generally concise and short. These were what the interviewees said,

... the language that is used, they are very, erm, they are actually written in phrases, they are very clear, with the help of the symbols as well, it also guides them with the understanding of the signs.

-Interviewee 1

Very short. Maybe because they want people to read it at one glance, so they tend to omit words like determiners, so it kind of accommodate to our local culture, although we speak English, we also include Singlish into our language, so even when we omit the ‘the’ and ‘a’, it still gets to us

-Interviewee 2

... you know, usually for signboards, because you have minimal amount of space and you want to maximise the information you can translate to the consumers, so the language, accuracy of the language might not be there.

-Interviewee 3

Interviewee 1 gave a sense of positivity about the conciseness of the texts in signboards because she felt that the messages that were delivered were still very clear and easy to understand (See Photos 1 and 2 in Annex F). Interviewee 2 took on a neutral stance by specifying her response into the local context, by enrolling Singaporeans’ lifestyle as one of the factors for the texts to be short and exclude function words (See Photos 3 and 4). Both of them acknowledged that features of signboards are to capture the eyes of public, even the commuters who are rushing for time, therefore pictures are used to compensate to the clarity of the language use. Whereas interviewee 3 was more negative with the delivery of the texts. She felt that the space constraint for the placement of signboards is also a resulting factor for the ambiguity of language use (See Photos 5 and 6). As such, all three interviewees acknowledged that the language use in signboards did not conform to the prescriptive language rules. Because of the inconsistent accuracy of language use in signboards, interviewees believed that students will acquire the poor language use if they are exposed to it over a long period of time, or if there is no one to correct them when they use this linguistic error for the first time. Therefore, learning from the community can easily backfire if there is no supervision on the correctness of the language use in signboards and this can implicate with language learning in the school. The implications will be discussed in the Discussion section.

Nevertheless, all three interviewees views signboards as useful teaching tools to enrich their students’ language learning experience because they are authentic materials taken from the community that the students are living in and are localised to their context. This would answer research question no. 3 that interviewees felt that there is a relationship between classroom learning and community learning. Interviewee 1 saw the possibilities of students misunderstanding the use of language in signboards. If these misunderstandings are not corrected in time, they may bring in their misconceptions into the classroom. That is why teachers will need to do some “unpacking” (Interviewee 1) to do with the students. Interviewee 3 brought up a point where, some errors in signboards were commonly found in students’ works. So it made her wonder if “the people who have created these signboards right, have this misconception or error in school that end up being not corrected, and it ends up being translated in their work.”
DISCUSSION

Agreeing with Landry and Bourhis (1997), the language use in signboards does reflect the linguistic culture in a region. In the case of Singapore, the interviewees felt that Singaporeans have a preference of using contractions and Singlish as one of their communicative means. For signboards to be purposeful, they have to be understood by their target audience in order to convey their intended messages. The presence of multimodality also proves to be useful in order to help the target readers in processing information.

Certainly, the carryover effect of linguistic landscape is present not just in social setting but also in the literacy development, however the interviewees believed that signboards do more bad than good on students’ language learning if the process is not supervised or facilitated. Both interviewees 1 and 3 felt that the primary purpose of signboards are not to convey information, not educate the public on language use. Essentially, the purpose of signboard is to convey its intended message in a short time frame, not educate the public on language, therefore its structure and organisation of information are vastly different from the formal writing that students learn in school. In school, students are encouraged to write extensively and produce lengthy compositions in school. Their writings are then graded based on coherence, cohesiveness and correct use of grammar and vocabulary. But in signboards, the syntax and grammar have to give way for creativity and conciseness because it has to attract public’s attention and gain awareness while struggling with space constraints and the short attention span that people devote to reading signboards. To demonstrate creativity would mean to think differently or present an idea in a novel way. More commonly found in signboards are to include word puns and “language play” (Lamarre, 2014, p.138) to attract attention, which unfortunately, may incur adverse kinds of responses depending on the proficiency of individual readers. Because students are still learners of the language, they may misinterpret the word puns or other creative forms of writings on the signboard as the legit form of sentence structure. The complication of this misinterpretation is that students will begin to use the incorrect language structure or vocabulary in their writing and speech. Unless the teachers help the students to dissect these creative forms of language, this is going to tear down the school’s efforts in reinforcing students to use the correct grammar and vocabulary.

Hence, the use of authentic, contextualised linguistic materials can only be purposeful when teachers make that linkage between classroom learning and real-world context for students (Taylor & Mulhall, 1997). As what Interviewee 1 has described, teachers have to carry out “some unpacking” for students when they bring these contextualised materials into classroom learning. Teachers should emphasize the importance of language as a mean of communication, not just in terms of doing homework but also about social interaction in the daily lives. This can be done by holding meaningful discussions with students on different types of signboards and their purposes and encourage them to apply their knowledge of the language by spotting any language error. The objective of doing so is to engage students’ participation in their own learning, boost their confidence in using the language by being capable of correcting real-world language materials, instead of assuming that all forms of writing in the real-world are correct.

However, the long-term benefit of using contextualised materials, in this case signboards, to enrich classroom learning can only be determined through future, extended research studies because of time constraints that all three interviewees faced in teaching and the mere fact that it is not included in the academic curriculum. The affordance of using it during lesson is low as teachers need to prioritise the syllabus over supplementary contents. Opportunities need to be intentionally created for such discussion sessions to happen, in which is unlikely to happen on a daily basis. So, teachers can reel in the help of parents and other students’ family members. As what Interviewee 2 mentioned, she would choose to ask students to complete their assigned work at home and devote some time in class to discuss supplementary contents such as signs because she felt that it was a learning experience that teachers can provide better because they have the linguistic expertise to do so. This may be the case for some teachers as they feel that the question-answer structure in the school worksheets are relatively easy for students to follow while supplementary resources do not have a fixed structure for teacher and students to go through, and it is entirely up to the teacher’s discrepancy to decide on a learning objective and roll out the learning process.

This brings back to the notion of having a more flexible curriculum in order for teachers to develop their own materials to reflect the educational and social environments (Taylor & Mulhall, 1997, p11). Without having a rigid curriculum to follow, teachers can spend more time in using supplementary resources to enrich students’ language learning. However, before integrating specific external resource into an educational setting, Wang et. al. (2010, p8) said that “teachers must decide what pedagogical, social and technological affordances are required and what affordances are available”. The usefulness of an external resource very much depends on the context, students’ abilities, background knowledge and experience and the learning goals for individual lesson (Bower, 2008).
CONCLUSION

This exploratory research study was set to gain an insight of Singapore teachers’ perspective of using signboards as a community linguistic resource to enhance primary school students’ language learning needs. The analysis of the three interviewees revealed that teachers do see signboards as a language resource but it can only be used according to context and with adequate guidance. However, the sample size of this research study is too small to make a generalisation of this finding. Hence, this study can be used to foreground future, extended studies to gain a better understanding of the usefulness of linguistic landscape in the educational setting.

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REFERENCES


