DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE WITH LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE & M-LEARNING

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Abstract. This paper discusses a basic scenario of m-learning activities for a situated in-the-field examination of cultural diversity with the Linguistic Landscape approach, i.e. a systematic examination of written displays of minority languages in the public space. Enabling learners to participate in content exchange via the Web 2.0 paradigm, where learners act both as both media consumers and media creators, can be used to raise their cultural awareness through empirical hand-on exploration of the surrounding linguistic reality in a local environment. Exploration of cultural diversity conducted in the framework of connectivism using m-learning activities can be used to demonstrate that cultural awareness tends to be heavily influenced by personal perspectives and common stereotypes. Autonomous discovery of that phenomenon from the pedagogical perspective of authentic and informal learning results in an increased cultural awareness, which elevates participants’ intercultural competence.

1. Introduction

Development of intercultural awareness has already been perceived for some time (e.g. RHLEFM, 2008; CEDEFOP, 2009) as a basic condition for peaceful and prosperous coexistence in the modern times of highly accelerated globalization and glocalization. An ability to handle communication in culturally diverse environments is no longer required only of professionals working in international settings, but has become a key qualification sought after by employers (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006). As put by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, 4), “With ample opportunities for employment overseas, it becomes important for internationally competitive business to hire interculturally competent employees, if only for the future success of the business.”

A cultural diversity of a given environment can be investigated with the Linguistic Landscape methodology, which is a rapidly growing field of
research that can be essentially defined as a systematic examination of written displays of minority languages in the public space (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). An inextricable link between cultural diversity and its linguistic presence is stated in the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2002).

Research discussed in this paper follows an assumption that an exploration of cultural diversity can be situated in an environment fairly familiar to the participants. As put by Byram, Nichols & Stevens (2001, 17), “people who live in a particular country do not know intuitively or otherwise the whole of the culture of that country because there are in fact many cultures within a country”. This study explores a hypothesis that Linguistic Landscape exploration conducted with proper interaction, collaboration, and interpretation of results via m-learning activities can contribute positively to intercultural competence development.

2. Linguistic Landscape

The idea of Linguistic Landscape (henceforth, LL) was developed in sociolinguistics by Landry and Bourhis, who described it as follows: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, 25). This description is regarded (e.g. Gorter, Marten & van Mensel, 2012) as the reference point for subsequent developments in the field. The Linguistic Landscape, essentially understood as counting languages on written signs on the streets inside and outside various types of buildings and subjecting them to different levels of analysis, frequently embraces also qualitative data in the form of background interviews and thorough examinations of collected language samples. Combined with other sources of data, such as information on spoken language traditions or language legislation, it contributes to a better understanding of the cultural diversity dynamics in a particular area as it takes into account language demographics, attitudes and policies (Gorter et al., 2012, 3–4).

Linguistic landscape entails multilingualism, which in the era of dynamic globalization and glocalization is often manifested through the presence of minority languages (in all senses discussed above) in the linguistic landscape of a given region (Gorter, 2006, 81–82). Since any linguistic landscape is an entirely human-made phenomenon, it reflects the cultural reality of a given location. Consequently, it can be used to
investigate how language signs reflect language demographics and attitudes of a given region to discover the underlying cultural diversity.

An important aspect of the LL research involves various types of minority languages. One major distinction made by Gorter et al. (2012, 5–6) concerns autochthonous (or traditional) and migrant (or new) minority languages, although, as emphasized by Extra and Gorter (2008, 9), these groups have much more in common than is usually noticed. Another crucial distinction relates to the difference between unique minority languages, i.e. ones existing only as minority languages (e.g. Basque or Welsh), and local-only minority languages, i.e. ones that are majority languages in another state (e.g. Polish in Lithuania). Gorter et al. (2012) emphasize, however, that such distinctions are not always easily applicable in real-life situations, hence in each particular case they are, at least to some extent, arbitrary.

Another point in question in the linguistic landscape research concerns the unit of analysis. Although all LL studies take into consideration language signs, there are different views on what should be considered a valid language sign for the linguistic landscape. Backhaus (2007, 66) defines it quite broadly as “any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame”. Traditionally, most LL studies have been based on static linguistic signs. However, as noted by Gorter et al (2012, 6), this perspective seems to be somewhat outdated nowadays when, especially in urban regions, we are surrounded by flat screen displays and other dynamic visual signs that have gained enormous popularity.

3. Mobile Learning

Mobile Learning (henceforth, m-learning) is often associated with learning delivered by mobile handheld devices, such as smartphones, tablets, portable music players, etc., usually connected wirelessly to the Internet. Although such devices are central to conducting m-learning activities, such conceptualizations of m-learning have been recently viewed as rather constraining (e.g. Kukulska-Hulme, 2010), since they are limited to current technological instantiations, which tend to become obsolete before gaining widespread use in education.

Other proponents of m-learning (Winters, 2006; Sharples, Milrad, Sánchez & Vavoula, 2009) conceptualize m-learning in terms of the mobility of learning. This aspect is highly important, because extending learners’ mobility changes both the nature of learning and the variety of ways in which it can be delivered. However, as emphasized by Traxler (2009, 15), the nature of learning mobility can be viewed differently by
different learners: for some people it may be associated with reading on a laptop computer while commuting to school; for others it may be hands-free listening to podcasts while exercising.

Because the above interpretations somewhat constrain the understanding of m-learning, it has become apparent that its full conceptualization is still emerging. Moreover, as noted by Traxler (2009, 14), the present distinction between m-learning and e-learning appears to be temporary, since with the advent of portable devices, wireless connectivity, and extended battery life, these two concepts may soon merge into one. Therefore, Traxler (2009) proposes to view m-learning from the underlying learner experience. What distinguishes m-learning from other forms of electronic education is an emphasis put on ownership, informality, mobility, and educational contexts that are inaccessible to the conventional, i.e. desktop-bound, e-learning. Kukulska-Hulme (2010, 181) points out that m-learning is more specific than e-learning in its focus on mobility, which greatly extends the control of time and location that learners have over their learning activity by broadening learning opportunities in comparison to the traditional e-learning.

Since m-learning is closely tied to e-learning as well as distance education, any attempts to develop its definition and implications must take into account that it occurs differently in different educational contexts. Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler (2007) undertook an extensive analysis of research conducted in different learning contexts (including a large number of pilots, case studies, and trials) to specify emerging categories of m-learning. One distinguished category involves an informal, personalized, situated m-learning, which takes place when “mobile, wireless and handheld technologies are enhanced with additional functionality, e.g. location awareness or video-capture, and deployed to deliver educational experiences that would otherwise be difficult or impossible” (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2007, 182). This study focuses on that particular category.

3.1. Pedagogical characteristics of m-learning

Among different characteristics of m-learning, one that is particularly significant to this study is the aspect of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which implies that in the course of educational activity learning takes place in appropriate and meaningful contexts. Because situated m-learning supports context-specific and immediate learning that situates and connects learners (Traxler 2009, 18), this aspect is perfectly suited to the linguistic landscape methodology. It enables students to act as apprentices
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in the process of hands-on exploration of the local cultural diversity, which results in their participation in the learning community.

This study puts a strong emphasis on informal education (Livingstone, 1999), which can be essentially defined as learning involving the pursuit of knowledge that occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria, but is conducted under the guidance of an institutionally-recognized instructor. It involves a transition from the knowledge production paradigm to the knowledge navigation paradigm (Brown, 2005), where both formal and informal approaches to learning are mixed, and the traditional teacher’s role changes to that of a mentor.

Another aspect of m-learning particularly relevant to linguistic landscape investigations is the aspect of authentic learning, which implies that learning is centered around authentic tasks that enable students “to explore, discuss, and meaningfully connect concepts and relationships that are relevant to the real-world and are meaningful to the students” (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999). While investigating the local linguistic landscape learners become directly involved in the inquiry of cultural diversity, which provides them with opportunities to pursue meaningful problems and become engaged in the social discourse.

Moreover, the implementation of m-learning discussed in this paper falls into the pedagogical framework of connectivism (Siemens, 2005), in which learning is focused on connecting specialized information sets collected by individuals involved in the learning process. These connections enable learners to gain new knowledge, which expands their current state of knowing. The experience of individuals involved in the investigation of cultural diversity is fed back into a shared linguistic landscape to create new knowledge for all students involved in the process. Collaborative activities enable learners to gain new knowledge through the connections they have formed while examining the local cultural diversity with the linguistic landscape methodology.

4. Intercultural Competence

Terms such as intercultural competence or intercultural effectiveness can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, when various efforts were undertaken to develop a list of intercultural competence characteristics. They showed that any comprehensive measures applied in this context must be multidimensional in nature (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). For a long time the conceptualization of Intercultural Competence (henceforth, IC) had not been completely agreed between various disciplines, terminologies, and theoretical frameworks, which inspired Darla Deardorff...
to conduct a comprehensive survey in order to identify the components incorporated in that concept. Her outcome-based definition, which has achieved wide consensus among intercultural scholars, sees intercultural competence as “effective and appropriate communication and behavior in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2008, 39).

Deardorff’s definition is accompanied by an extensive, multidimensional, cyclical model that visualizes the development of intercultural competence from a personal to an interpersonal level of interactions. The model shows the process of IC development can be viewed as a movement from individual internal outcomes, characterized by personal intercultural reflection and attitudes, to external outcomes, which result in effective interaction in intercultural contexts. Altogether Deardorff identifies over 20 elements that were agreed upon by the international scholars and professionals in the field, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, comprehension, tolerance, etc.

Her model presumes that the development of IC skills is an on-going learning process that involves, among other crucial elements, curiosity and discovery, which are necessary to transform one’s attitude, knowledge and skills to become sensitive to cultural differences in situations where language functions as a means of interaction and communication. This is consistent with views expressed by European scholars (e.g. Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). Byram puts a skill of discovery and interaction, understood as “the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (Byram, et al., 2002, 14), among basic skills involved in the process. Therefore, a key aspect of the IC development is an opportunity to discover and evaluate as well as to analyze and interpret various phenomena related to other cultures, since the acquisition of intercultural competence takes place through discovery, interaction, and interpretation of other cultures’ manifestations.

5. Implementing Linguistic Landscape with M-Learning

The study discussed in this paper aimed at elevation of intercultural awareness of students through empirical discovery, analysis, and interpretation of a linguistic landscape implemented with m-learning activities. It was conducted at the Institute of English Studies of the University of Lodz in autumn 2012. The target group consisted of 20 students from an MA program in English Philology. Lodz is the third-
largest city in Poland, located in the central part of the country with a population of over 700,000 citizens. Over the last few years, the city has seen many foreign companies opening offices in the region. Consequently, the city shows numerous traces of cultural diversity in its linguistic landscape.

The investigation was conducted in the context of a local environment, i.e. a location familiar to participants (cf. Waliński, in press, for a similar study conducted in a foreign environment). The location was limited to a 700 meter stretch of the main street (Piotrkowska) restricted by two cross-streets. Students’ familiarity with the location facilitated mapping spotted language signs, and prevented participants from wandering off the exploration site.

The activity was conducted in two stages with the following scenario:

1) Initial tutoring and instruction, including collection of students’ predictions about foreign languages manifested in the site of exploration (30 minutes).
2) Introduction of the linguistic landscape methodology and assignment of exploration quadrants to students (15 minutes).
3) Exploration and data collection conducted with mobile phones (60 minutes).
4) Mapping the linguistic landscape onto a common shared map in Google Maps; sharing impressions from exploration (45 minutes).
5) Discussion based on comparison of predictions with empirical data acquired through hands-on examination. Summary of differences between the subjective intuitions and objective empirical findings (30 minutes).

The activity was conducted in two stages, each taking 2 teaching hours. The study focused on migrant minority languages, whose visibility stems from mixing different cultures in the modern Europe. The participants, as advanced philology students, were expected to have a fairly extensive knowledge of various languages. They were encouraged to look for all foreign language signs they could possibly recognize. The unit of analysis for the LL exploration was specified broadly as “any visible foreign language sign that could be spotted”, including both outdoor and indoor locations in the vicinity of the street.

The data collection was conducted with a simple methodology. Pictures of spotted language signs were taken with mobile phone cameras, and their locations were noted by students. Only personal mobile phones
were used for data collection – no additional technical equipment is required to conduct this type of activities.

The transfer of locations with foreign language signs to a commonly shared map of the linguistic landscape was achieved with the use of Google Maps – a popular web service provided free of charge by Google (see: maps.google.com). It enables marking locations on electronic maps and, what is especially crucial in this case, it allows for accompanying each marked location with a picture. Moreover, such maps can be shared publically.

5.1. Notes on m-learning activities

At the beginning of the aims of the activity were explained to the students, who were asked to think about their personal perspectives on the cultural diversity in Lodz, and to prepare lists of five foreign languages that they expect to see in the central part of the city, i.e. the exploration site. These initial predictions allowed to identify the students’ starting level of cultural awareness. Please note that all participants who took part in the study had previously studied in Lodz for an extended time and had general familiarity with the exploration site.

For the actual exploration activity the students were divided into 10 pairs, each requested to visit a different area assigned as a quadrant specified by address numbers on either left or right side of the street. The students were encouraged to continue exploration until at least 10 public inscriptions in foreign languages were discovered. During the exploration a ranking of languages expected to feature in the location was compiled by the instructor based on the students’ lists.

When the exploration activity had ended, foreign language signs accompanied by pictures taken with mobile phones were mapped with the help of the instructor in Google Maps, which took about 45 minutes. In the meantime, short informal discussions were held with the returning teams, which allowed participants to share impressions from the exploration. All participants enjoyed informal, hands-on exploration of foreign culture manifestations. A tangible outcome of the exploration activity was a shared electronic map with foreign language sign locations, each accompanied by a picture of the sign. During the final stage of the session the students compared their predictions with the linguistic landscape emergent from the data obtained empirically, which provided an opportunity to expand their perspectives on the local cultural diversity.
6. Observations and conclusions

The activities demonstrated some evident discrepancies between the students’ expectations based on subjective intuitions and what had been discovered through the situated connected learning based on the empirical exploration. The following 11 languages were included in the students’ predictions: English (20 predictions); Spanish (17); German (15); Italian (15); French (13); Chinese (8); Turkish (7); Japanese (2); Czech (1); Russian (1); Vietnamese (1). The linguistic landscape revealed 9 languages in the exploration site, including: English (45 signs); French (12); German (7); Turkish (4); Chinese (3); Japanese (2); Italian (2); Greek (1); Dutch (1). The listing shows that top positions in the students’ lists were occupied by popular European languages, i.e. English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. The participants rightly expected English to be ubiquitous in the linguistic landscape of the city (cf. Bolton, 2012). Obviously, it was not only prevalent, but also particularly recognizable for the English Philology students taking part in the study. Additionally, it seems that French and German tend to occupy prominent positions in their mindsets, as they were both included in numerous predictions and spotted in numerous signs.

However, some other languages observed in the area differed from the students’ expectations as to their prevalence. For example, the expected visibility of Spanish was not confirmed in the exploration site at all. Moreover, Italian was not as strongly visible as had been expected. When asked why they see these languages as important in the city landscape some students replied that they learn those languages either in mandatory university courses or of their own accord in language schools. Such discrepancies indicate that our perception of the local cultural diversity is significantly affected by individual subjective representations: what we recognize as important is what we already know.

Furthermore, no signs of Czech, Russian, or Vietnamese were spotted in the exploration site, but traces of Greek and Dutch were found instead. It indicates that the objective reality does not necessarily overlap with personal expectations. A further indication that we perceive local cultural diversity from the perspective of individual cognitive representations is a conspicuous absence (both in predictions and spotted signs) of other less popular European languages, e.g. Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, etc. Although they were neither included in predictions nor spotted in the exploration, it does not necessarily mean that they do not function in the exploration site. It rather indicates that they escape perception, because they are not widely recognized.
Obviously, the above-discussed study is too limited (short time, few participants, small exploration site) to discuss general cognitive schemas pertaining to cultural diversity perception. However, the activity fulfilled its aim, which was to demonstrate that awareness of foreign cultures in the local surroundings tends to be biased by individual perspectives and stereotypes. When the above findings were summarized, the participants admitted that the activity exposed some foreign cultures somehow neglected in their mindsets. For example, different Asian cultures frequently tend to be approached superficially under the umbrella notion of “Chinese” (cf. Waliński, in press). Moreover, the students learned that some cultures perceived as “common” from individual perspectives are not necessarily strongly manifested in the local linguistic landscape. The students admitted that their perception of the local cultural diversity had changed. As pointed out by Deardorff (2008, 36), attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery for acquiring and processing knowledge about other cultures are fundamental to the development of the much desired internal outcomes characterized by personal stance and intercultural reflection. Thus, broadening of cultural awareness is a sound foothold for further intercultural competence development.

Taken together, the results indicate that cultures that are not fully recognized in cognition become, at least to some extent, neglected in our perspectives on cultural diversity, even if they are strongly manifested in the linguistic landscape. This observation goes along the lines of Piaget’s theory of schemata (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), Papert’s theory of constructionism (Harel & Papert, 1991), constructivistic assertions that learning is based both upon experience of external objects and former knowledge (Jonassen, 1991). It is also congruent with the cognitive “Me First” principle of world perception (Cooper & Ross, 1975), as well as findings on the level of mental construal of distant and near phenomena (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

In more general terms, the study demonstrates that is not the technology itself, but how we use it to create enhanced learning experiences that is crucial for successful implementation of m-learning in real-life educational settings. The study shows how relatively unproblematic it is to employ m-learning for an effective and entertaining learning experience used for pursuit of meaningful problems, which are not easily detectable otherwise. Moreover, the above-presented scenario provides for a contextualization of learning, which is achievable to a much greater extent with m-learning than would ever be possible with the traditional e-learning.
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