

The Linguistic Landscape as a Learning Space for Contextual Language Learning

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One of the challenges of teaching and learning a foreign language is that students are not being sufficiently exposed to the target language. However, it is quite common to find linguistic and cultural exponents of different foreign languages in authentic contexts (termed the "Linguistic landscape"). Using the Linguistic landscape as a learning space, may facilitate language learning. This paper, describes an approach for contextual informal foreign language learning supported by mobile devices and social media. The findings suggest that this approach holds the potential to increase learner awareness of language learning opportunities, thus supplementing formal learning and encouraging continuous learning.

Background and Introduction

When learning a foreign language, students should get as much exposure to the target language as possible. This is especially important when learning takes place in non-immersive contexts where the target language is not prevalent. As stated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), learning a foreign language gives an opportunity for students to relate to other languages and cultures and to experience otherness (Verhelst, Van Avermaet, Takala, Figueras, & North, 2009). Furthermore, learning a language encloses much more than just learning the formal aspects of the language. In fact, pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects have become an integral part of the formal language learning curriculum (Verhelst et al., 2009). Technology, in this case mobile technology and social networks, holds the potential to support learning opportunities for language learning (Lai & Gu, 2011). Social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, are increasingly being used for educational purposes and for supporting teaching and learning activities, by serving as informal learning environments and as supplemental tools for formal learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). SNSs hold the potential to facilitate a collaborative process of knowledge building and to create a "sense of community" (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, & Moskaliuk, 2012; Zhang, 2010). As such, SNSs can potentially be used as a tool for learning a foreign language, for encouraging engagement and the use of the language in social contexts (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Mills, 2011). Learning theories have stressed

the importance of learning in authentic, relevant, settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and mobile devices hold vast potential for supporting learning in such authentic contexts. Mobile devices are ubiquitous and perpetually connected, thus allowing access to information, as well as active contribution at anytime, anywhere, and on any topic of interest (Pachler, Bachmair, & Cook, 2010; Sharples, Taylor, & Vavoula, 2007). Furthermore, mobile technologies have the potential for supporting learning in additional ways such as learner immersion, enhanced engagement and motivation (Dieterle & Dede, 2007; Sharples et al., 2007).

The case study described in this paper, was designed with the intention of raising student's awareness to language exponents in their daily surroundings, by using the "linguistic landscape" (LL) as a learning space and an input source. Initial definitions of the LL were quite restrictive and referred mainly to the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). However, more recent studies point out the necessity to go beyond this definition and "include images, sounds, drawings and movement, in line with current theories about multimodality" (Shohamy, 2011). Some researchers have explored the theoretical potential of the LL for language learning and it was suggested that the LL could contribute to language learning by serving as a source of authentic input for the development of pragmatic competence and literacy skills, as well as for raising student's language awareness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). Language awareness is a complex construct which requires a holistic approach, it is currently defined by the ALA (Association for Language Awareness) as "explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use" (Svalberg, 2007). In this paper we refer to awareness in the context of language learning, as "the learner's knowledge or subjective experience that

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he/she is detecting a stimulus" (Al-Hejin, 2004). The stimulus, in our case, is the language exponent found in the LL. From this perspective, capturing and sharing an exponent suggests that there is awareness to its existence. Taking a social-constructivist perspective, learning is viewed in this paper as a social process, resulting from active participation in a collaborative creation of knowledge. This knowledge can, in turn, serve as a basis for other learners in their learning processes (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003; Stahl, 2000). Revisiting previous learning experiences allow learners to engage in reflective and ultimately more profound learning experiences (Dieterle & Dede, 2007; Sharples et al., 2007).

The objective of the research was to design a learning scenario that will encourage continuous interaction with the target language by:

1. Encouraging awareness to Spanish exponents in the learning space (the Linguistic Landscape).
2. Creating a flow between the classroom, the daily surroundings and the digital sphere.
3. Creating an informal learning environment, where students can interact using the Spanish language (by using Social Media as an interaction space).

Study Approach

A typical Spanish course at the university consists of four academic hours, divided into two class hours, twice a week, for two semesters. Most students have limited opportunities for interacting with the target language beyond the formal lessons. Participation in the task was optional and not mandatory; a total of 65 participants chose to join the task group on Facebook, thus opting to participate in the task. Out of these 65, 52 participants were current of former students- 47 current Spanish students from 6 different Spanish classes and 5 former Spanish students (who studied with one of the instructors on previous years and stayed in touch through Facebook). 3 instructors, the formal teachers of the 6 classes, have also participated in the task and 11 participants joined as external observers.

Students were asked to capture Spanish related exponents, as they encountered them in their daily surroundings, using their mobile devices. All means of documentation were allowed (video, still photos, voice recordings etc.). Once captured, students were asked to share the exponents on a dedicated Facebook group and to add their input regarding what they have posted, in Spanish. The input could include any information such as the location, a description of the exponent, reference to the context etc. Thus, participants were essentially interacting with the language in both a receptive (capturing the exponents) and a productive (sharing and adding

information) manner, as well as using the target language to interact with other participants, on Facebook. The task was intentionally designed to be ill-defined and open-ended in order to allow as much room as possible for student expression and interaction with no additional concrete objectives and outcomes. In this sense, the task was mainly designed to create opportunities for the learners to experience the unplanned encounters with linguistic exponents and to encourage communication and interaction between the participants. The study was conducted over a period of one full school year (two-semester).

The steps of the task were as follows (Each step requiring awareness and reflection):

1. Searching for language exponents in the daily environment.
2. Locating an exponent and documenting it.
3. Posting to a social network (Facebook) and adding at least a short description.
4. Commenting on peer posts and replying to peers' comments.

The study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of the types of exponents that students chose to post, as well as on the types and levels of interaction that took place around those posts.

Findings

Participation and Content Patterns

Out of the 52 students who participated in the Facebook group, 28 students have actively shared one exponent or more while the remaining participants chose to view or comment but did not post any original content. The number of views per post decreased gradually staying at 50 than dropping to 20 and less once the first semester ended. A total of 83 exponents were shared to the group, out of which, 59 were photos, 10 links, 11 Videos and 3 textual status updates. The content of the posts was versatile, ranging from photos of typical Spanish dishes, events that students had encountered on the street, photos of signs in Spanish, Spanish and Mexican restaurants and names of venues, to name a few. The majority of posts (65 out of the 83 posts) were captured in the physical surroundings but several students chose to capture digital (as opposed to physical) exponents, such as video clips in Spanish or links to Spanish commercials.

An analysis of the content of the exponents revealed two distinct categories of content visual exponents (such as photos of dishes or events) and textual exponents (such as street signs or names of venues) these categories will be discussed on the following chapter. The exponents shared by students, suggest varying levels of awareness that may go

beyond the definition of “detecting a stimulus” (Al-Hejin, 2004) and indicate understanding, noticing, communicating emotions and reminiscing, as described on the following examples:

- One student posted a photo of a venue named “Alegria” (joy- in Spanish) and commented “Alegria!” (With an exclamation mark) implying not only acknowledgment of the Spanish word, but also an understanding of it.
- A student posted a photo of a coffee cup with “¡Precaución caliente!” (Caution hot) warning in different languages, among them Spanish. Indicating awareness to a message, written on a daily item that is normally unnoticed.
- Another student explicitly acknowledged something that she hadn’t noticed up until that point- “no sabia que tenemos” (I didn’t know that Spanish ballrooms exist).
- A student chose to capture a sentence from a Spanish book he was reading. He captured a sentence from the book reading “no es fácil” (It is not easy) and commented “Mi Libro en español” (My Spanish book). A clear message of his feelings about the book task.

Finally, another student posted a photo of a cover of a children’s book that was based on a Spanish speaking TV series, under the title “¿Recordáis?” (Remember?). This student did not only post a photo that has a connection to her childhood, she also called the community members to reminisce about it.

Instructor/Facilitator Interaction Patterns

The three instructors participated actively as part of the group, adding posts and commenting on posts by students. Instructor interaction can be categorized into three roles-exemplary, supportive and instructive as detailed below.

Exemplary role: In order to kick start the activities and demonstrate the idea of language exponents, the instructors created the first few posts of exponents that they had encountered. In addition, the instructors served as “models” of the culture of the target language by postings exponents from their lives, for example, two instructors posted photos of typical Spanish dishes that they had prepared at home.

Supportive role: Instructors often included emphatic expressions in their comments to posts, such as “¡qué bueno!” (Great!) or “estupendo” (wonderful), in order to express support and encouragement and create an environment where students feel safe and secure, even to make mistakes. Instructors also showed encouragement by using the “like” button for each post. In addition, instructions provided affective feedback- for example, one instructor expressed her personal fondness for a location (a bar) that a student had posted “Uno de mis bares favoritos de los pocos que conozco” (One of my favorites bars, of the few I know).

Instructive role: Instructors encouraged communication in Spanish and often pointed to formal aspects of the Spanish language. For example, an instructor used a post as a learning opportunity and commented on the correct use of exclamation marks in Spanish in one of the posts “¡Qué bien! Incluso se ve el signo de exclamación al comienzo y al final.” (That’s nice! you can even see the exclamation marks at the beginning and the end). In another case, a student posted a photo of a yacht named “hispaniola” and the instructor encourages a discussion by noting the historical context implied by the name of the Yacht “¿Es tu yate, Roni? Si no, es interesante saber quién da a su yate el mismo nombre que la isla a donde llega Cristóbal Colón...” (Is this your Yacht? If not, it would be interesting to know who names his Yacht with the same name as the island where Christopher Columbus arrived at).

Discussion and Conclusions

Learning a language entails more than memorizing formal linguistic structures and cannot be separated from social and contextual aspects (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). By becoming actively aware of language exponents in their surroundings, students were effectively becoming active explorers, recognizing and seizing learning opportunities around them in authentic learning spaces, with the community, in conjunction with technology, acting to support and scaffold their learning process (Dieterle & Dede, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sharples et al., 2007). Mobile technology and social media enabled a seamless and immediate experience by allowing students to capture and upload the exponents as well as to add information and to interact in real time. In reply to a comment on her post, one student noted “ahora estoy aquí” (I am here now!), expressing, in this sense, the immediate and authentic aspect of the experience, enabled by the mobile device. Facebook served as a meta-group for students from different levels and classes. Interaction on the page was inter-grouped and served as an anchor for all Spanish students. At the same time, the Facebook group provided learners with a space to interact as they engaged both cognitively and affectively with the task.

Three related issues came up as a result of the analysis of the exponents: the question of the boundaries of the LL, the types of exponents located and shared from the LL and the question of awareness of the LL in the context of learning. The notion of the linguistic landscape commonly refers to the physical context. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, It was previously established that this notion should be extended beyond its original definition (Shohamy, 2011). Our findings suggest that that it should be further enhanced to include the digital sphere. Students, though not specifically guided to do so, naturally shared exponents from both their physical and digital surroundings. We claim

that the digital sphere has become an integral part of our reality and learning context and hence, should be considered a part of the LL. As for the types of exponents located and shared in the LL, we noted that two aspects, critical to language learning, correspond with the two types of exponents that students chose to share; the formal linguistic aspect and the cultural aspect match exponents containing textual and visual data respectively. Further research should analyze the two types of exponents and ways of enhancing learning opportunities that arise from each type. Finally, we acknowledge the fact that awareness alone does not necessarily imply learning; a student capturing a linguistic exponent does not necessarily focus on its linguistic form nor recognize a language pattern. Some level of attention is needed for learning (Schmidt, 1995) and in this sense, the term noticing, which encompasses both attention and awareness is preferred when referring to language learning (Svalberg, 2007). Once the item is captured and shared, attention to more formal linguistic aspects may be drawn during the interaction with the instructor or with other participants.

The findings suggest that participation in the task decreased over time, both in terms of the rate of posting as well as the number of views. A possible explanation may be that it may become hard for students to keep motivated, once the novelty of the task has worn off. On future offerings, we are planning on holding more formal discussions in class, on some of the exponents captured and shared by students. The benefits of bringing the digital world into the classroom may be twofold; on the one hand, students' contribution to the learning process would be "formally" acknowledged which may serve to increase motivation, resulting in more involvement and an increased rate of participation. On the other hand, the sense of learning flow may be strengthened, breaking the time-space classroom boundaries. In terms of instruction strategies, we also conclude that facilitation is needed in order to encourage conversation and discussion on the topics and exponents posted. Instructor strategies should be further explored, especially ways of encouraging discussion among students (language: talking about the language) as well as discussion about relevant cultural and historical aspects of the target language.

This project served as an exploratory case study for both instructors and students. Overall, the results appear to be positive but there is a need to further investigate, replicate and enhance the experience. We are planning on extending this approach, taking into account the lessons learned from the first year trial.

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