
“Activizing” the pedagogy of multiliteracies: The dynamic, action-oriented turn with languacultural landscape studies

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Abstract

In this article, I introduce the approach that I have named languacultural landscape (LCL), which is the advancement of linguistic landscape (LL) used as a pedagogical resource. I draw on the pedagogy of multiliteracies (PoM) and explore the potential of an LCL project to bring PoM in its fullest “critical” sense to plurilingual classrooms. The paper discusses the theoretical foundations of the LCL approach and outlines the differences and similarities between LCL and LL as pedagogical resources. I also provide recommendations on how an LCL project could be conducted in a classroom, based on an LCL research project undertaken by me in my local community. I argue that such a project could be used to not only address students’ understanding of cultural diversity by critically analyzing historical and political contexts of learning, but also as a way to reimagine the reality around them with more egalitarian cultural dynamics in mind.

Key words: languacultural landscape, pedagogy of multiliteracies, plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, critical thinking, multimodal competencies

Résumé

Cet article introduit une approche nommée paysage languaculturel (LCL) qui propose le concept de paysage linguistique (LL) comme ressource pédagogique. S’appuyant sur la pédagogie des multilittératie (PdM), cet article explore le potentiel critique du LCL au sein des classes plurilingues et pluriculturelles. L’article examine les fondements théoriques de l’approche LCL en soulignant les différences et similitudes entre LCL et LL comme ressources pédagogiques. Des recommandations sont présentées pour mener un projet LCL en classe basé sur une expérience menée dans ma communauté locale. J’estime qu’un tel projet, en analysant de manière critique les contextes historiques et politiques de l’apprentissage, permettrait non seulement de renforcer chez les élèves la compréhension de la diversité culturelle, mais il leur permettrait aussi de réimaginer leur réalité dans un esprit plus égalitaire.

Mots-clés: paysage languaculturel, pédagogie des multilittératies, plurilinguisme, pensée critique, compétences multimodales

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the world has changed significantly in many areas due to globalization and advancement of technology. These transformations have also impacted approaches to education. At the end of the 20th century, a group of ten educators known as the New London Group (NLG) anticipated some of these transformations by introducing the notion of *multiliteracies* (NLG 1996). NLG described multiliteracies as “the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity” (p. 63) and stated its aim as to supplement traditional literacy pedagogy by taking into account the aforementioned multiplicity. In particular, they argued that while “mere literacy” typically focuses on language only, a pedagogy of multiliteracies (PoM) looks at multiple modes of representation. The modes of representation can differ across various cultures and contexts, and have diverse cognitive, affective, cultural and social effects. In PoM, language and other modes of meaning as representational resources are not static but are continuously being reconstructed and redesigned by the users to achieve various cultural purposes.

Even though PoM was introduced 25 years ago, the data shows that this approach is still relevant in developing skills needed in the 21st century, and thus is still being discussed by many researchers and educators (see e.g., Ganapathy, 2014; Ganapathy & Kaur, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2017; Puteh-Behak & Ismail, 2018; Warner & Dupuy, 2018). Multiliteracies research has focused on the implementation of the PoM in diverse learning contexts such as English as an additional/second language (EAL/ESL), drama, music and primary education (Ganapathy & Kaur, 2009; Kaur & Sidhu, 2007; Kulju et al., 2018; Pandian & Balraj, 2010; Ryu, 2011; Tan & Guo, 2010; Tan & McWilliam, 2009). Many of these studies have concentrated on the use of digital technologies and visuals in L1, L2 or EAL classrooms. A considerable proportion of studies have also focused on digital texts, computer software and online games in promoting 21st century literacies (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Cardoso, 2018; Erstad et al., 2007).

However, at the same time, there have been a number of new developments in the field of educational research since PoM was introduced, and therefore it might seem in need of further modification to address these developments. In particular, a concept that has not been addressed much in PoM-related research is that of plurilingualism. Whereas *multilingualism* usually refers to the knowledge of several languages or the co-existence of various languages in a particular society, *plurilingualism* emphasises that an individual’s communicative competence is based on all the knowledge and experience of languages that they possess (Council of Europe, 2001), rather than individual competencies in different languages (Kubota, 2020).

Another concept that has not been sufficiently discussed and addressed in its fullest sense in the studies and implementations of PoM is the notion of *critical*. Cope and Kalantzis in their 2015 book (*A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Learning by design*) mention that in a pedagogical context “critical” usually refers to either “analyzing functions” (p. 4) or being evaluative of existing relationships of power. Therefore, in PoM, critical means “analyzing text functions and critically interrogating the interests of participants in the communication process” (p. 4). However, if we think more broadly about what critical can mean, we could see that it can be far more than just critical analysis or understanding of the historical, cultural and political contexts of learning. The goal of critical thinking, according to Thomas (1993), is to challenge the “truth” by creating a dialogue about alternative images instead. The act of critique implies that by thinking about and acting upon the world, we are able to change both our subjective interpretations and objective conditions. In this sense, critical refers to not only “a critical awareness of language and discursive practices” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 140), but also a *critical action*.

To bring the aforementioned concepts of the critical action and plurilingualism forward in PoM, I propose an approach that I call *linguacultural landscape* (LCL). This approach extends the concept of *linguistic landscape* (LL) by merging it with the linguistic anthropological concept of *linguaculture* (Agar, 1994, 2008). While there are various definitions of LL, one frequently cited is given by Landry and Bourhis, who describe LL as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). LL has also been defined more broadly as “the study of writing on display in the public sphere” (Coulmas, 2009, p. 14), or “all the language items that are visible in a specified part of the public space” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008, p. 267). LL research mostly uses photographs of public signage as data to learn about the multiliterate and multilingual ecology of cities (see e.g., Baranova & Fedorova, 2019; Fakhiroh & Rohmah, 2018; Li, 2015; Spolsky, 2009; Tufi & Blackwood, 2016). Some researchers have also explored LLs online, in a form of digital or virtual LLs, in an attempt to expand the concept to linguistic cyberecology (Blommaert & Maly, 2019; Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009).

A number of studies have focussed on the potential for LL to be used as a pedagogical resource in language teaching (Dressler, 2015; Malinowski et al., 2020; Rowland, 2013; Sayer, 2010) and other subject areas and programs (Dagenais et al., 2009; Hancock, 2012; Li & Marshall, 2020). The researchers have argued that LL can assist students in acquisition of multimodal literacy skills, enable greater awareness and creative analysis around social language use and provide students with information about what languages are prominent and valued in public and private spaces and the social positioning of people

who identify with particular languages. However, not many of such studies have explored LL as a pedagogical resource for PoM (Lozano et al., 2020; Rowland, 2013), especially in a Canadian context.

Linguaculture, with which LL is merged, is a term coined by Michael Agar (1994, 2008), who created it, expanding on Friedrich's (1989) notion of *linguaculture*. While Friedrich describes linguaculture as "a domain of experience that fuses and intermingles the vocabulary, many semantic aspects of grammar, and the verbal aspects of culture" (p. 306), Agar adds that the "language" in linguaculture is about discourse, not merely words and sentences, and the "culture" is about meanings that include but at the same time go far beyond what the dictionary and grammar offer (Agar, 1994, p. 96). Therefore, to highlight this complexity of what the notions of language and culture can embody I use Agar's term as part of my concept of LCL.

The purpose of this article is to explore the potential of an LCL action-oriented research project as a way to bring PoM in its "critical" sense to plurilingual and pluricultural Canadian classrooms. More specifically, in this paper, I first discuss the theoretical framework that LCL draws from and then go through the steps of an independent LCL action-oriented research project that I conducted in 2020. The steps of the research project are based on four elements of PoM: *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing* and *transformed practice* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; NLG, 1996), with the critical action part extension. This LCL research project could serve as an illustrative example for teachers to replicate in the classrooms.

Pedagogy of multiliteracies and the concept of design

The concept of *design* is particularly important to LCL as a pedagogical approach. NLG (1996) introduced the concept of design as part of PoM, in which teachers and students are viewed as designers of learning processes and environments and, most importantly, as designers of their meanings, identities and social futures. NLG proposes treating any semiotic (i.e., meaning making) activity as a matter of design involving three elements: *available designs*, *designing* and *the redesigned*. Whereas available designs refers to the various semiotic resources available, designing is the process of formulating emergent meaning through "re-presentation and recontextualization" (NLG, 1996, p. 75). This process is not simply a replication or recombination of available designs, but the transformation of available resources to create a new meaning — the redesigned. The latter then becomes a new available design or meaning-making resource. To better visualize this process, see Figure 1.

Through designing and the redesigned, learners can practice their knowledge and skills, analyzing the information obtained from various sources using various semiotic resources, and then transform this knowledge in other social

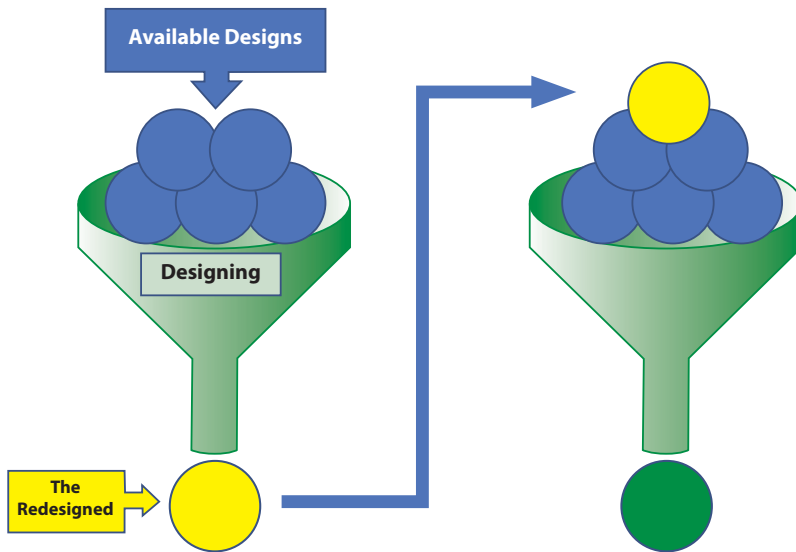


Figure 1

Available designs, designing and the redesigned

settings (Puteh-Behak & Ismail, 2018). Building on this, Cope and Kalantzis (2015) later introduced the learning-by-design pedagogy. Within this pedagogy, teachers become designers as they choose the learning activities, plan the sequence of these activities and reflect on learning outcomes throughout the whole learning process. Learners, on the other hand, by developing conscious awareness of the different kinds of resources available to them, become designers of their own knowledge and take greater control over their learning as knowledge producers/creators.

The concept of design or, more specifically, available designs, designing and the redesigned, is also reflected in the four components central to the implementation of PoM, as previously listed (NLG, 1996). Situated practice draws on one’s experience of meaning-making from different realms, such as the working life, public life and private life (corresponds to the available designs). Overt instruction allows students to develop the metalanguage of design. Usually it is not, merely a direct transmission of knowledge from a teacher, but rather a scaffolding process that helps the learner gain explicit information when necessary, building on the learner’s existing skills and knowledge. Critical framing, in turn, allows the learner to interpret the social context and purpose of designs of meaning (corresponds to the process of designing). In critical framing, students are encouraged to view critically what they have learned

in relation to the context in which the learning activity has taken place. According to NLG (1996), Critical framing is aimed to “help learners frame their growing mastery in practice and conscious control and understanding in relation to the historical, social, cultural, political, ideological, and value-centered relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice” (p. 88). Last but not least, in transformed practice (or the redesigned stage), students, as meaning-makers, become Designers of social futures, which means that they are facilitated to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to new social or cultural contexts, creating new meanings in the process. These four components (or principles) are not fixed and can go in any order or occur simultaneously. An LCL research project would embody these four components of PoM; however, with an added fifth step of critical action. This process is discussed in more detail in the corresponding section below.

Implementation and effectiveness of PoM in different contexts

Many studies have shown that PoM works well with students of different ethnicities and linguistic abilities (Ajayi, 2011; Burke & Hardware, 2015; Lotherington, 2013; Scull et al., 2013). PoM has been found to improve the academic achievement of non-dominant groups (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013; Ntelioglou, 2011; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010), as it can offer minority students more opportunities through the usage of a wider range of semiotic resources in comparison with traditional forms. Ntelioglou (2011), for example, used drama and PoM to help EAL students improve their acquisition of the second language. The author argued that the drama pedagogy used in this classroom drew on students’ personal and cultural experiences in the creation of identity texts and therefore provided room for a situated practice as well as multimodal representations of meaning. This process of creating performance-based identity texts cognitively engaged students, provided room for identity investment and therefore helped many students with their linguistic and social performances. In another study, Kajee (2011) argued that multimodalities can offer EAL students from contexts with a low resource base opportunities for creative meaning-making. In this study, she engaged of a group South African undergraduate EAL students who used semiotic resources such as gestures, native praise poems and PowerPoint presentations to “reconstruct, remake and reshape their own social identities as subjective agents of change through acts of language: written, image, gesture, digital and performed” (p. 250). In a similar way, Danzak (2011) integrated PoM and academic English in a graphic writing project to give her students the opportunity to reflect on their families’ immigration experiences.

However, the effectiveness of PoM also seems to depend on the socio-political and socio-cultural context. Some studies have shown that the implementation of multiliteracies was sometimes challenging when it contrasted

with socio-cultural peculiarities of a certain learning context. Tan and Guo (2010), for example, investigated the experiences of a teacher trying to implement the PoM in a Singaporean context, in which learning was heavily based on print materials. Despite seeing certain progress, the teacher still found it quite challenging to implement the multiliteracies approach as the emphasis on multimodality contradicted the focus of national assessment based on print sources. Pandian and Balraj (2010) also discuss a similar issue connected with implementing PoM in an examination-based context in Malaysia. They maintain that one of the challenges they faced in encouraging teachers to teach science using the multiliteracies approach was the fact that the teachers being part of the examination-based culture, preferred to prepare the students for the examination rather than try to apply a multiliteracies approach. This shows that PoM is not a universal tool and that it requires adapting and a certain modification when it is applied in a particular sociopolitical and sociocultural context. Thus, in the following study I discuss the potential of an LCL research project as a way to bring and adapt PoM for plurilingual and pluricultural Canadian classrooms with critical action in mind.

Plurilingualism

The plurilingual approach sees languages as not static but constantly interacting and interrelating, which means that a person can access different parts of their competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor (Council of Europe, 2001). While multilingualism separates the languages, the plurilingual approach “allows for the interaction and mutual influence of the languages in a more dynamic way” (Canagarajah & Liynage, 2012, p. 50). According to Piccardo and Capron Puozzo (2015), plurilingualism implies a major shift in perspective toward the use of multiple languages as tools for facilitating communication. It also emphasises the agency of language users and the cultural context of all language use (Piccardo, 2016), which makes the notion of plurilingualism particularly important for this study.

According to the Council of Europe (2001), language is not only an important aspect of culture, but also a “means of access to cultural manifestations” (p. 6) Thus, plurilingualism is part of a broader notion of pluriculturalism. An LCL research project would give students an opportunity to work with diverse linguacultural semiotics, building upon and enhancing their plurilingual competence in the process. Due to the arrival of an increasing number of immigrants and refugees from all over the world, Canada has become increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural. LCL could be used to address and build upon students’ understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, while at the same time bringing PoM into Canadian classrooms.

What does “critical” stand for?

The “critical” label may refer to a variety of approaches or perspectives, such as critiquing and challenging culture and its symbols, participatory research, applied policy research and also political action. However, despite differences, these approaches are “unified by a style of thinking and writing that links the elements of cultural description to social organization, social structure, and action” (Thomas, 1993, p. 32).

In research, the critical paradigm asks the researcher to think how their research findings will affect those studied. The purpose of critical research therefore is not only to describe the world but also to change it (Lin, 2015). As Lin argues, the critical interest thus drives research that can lead to the empowerment of the subordinated groups in society through demystifying educational institutions, practices and policies that produce and reproduce the domination of certain groups in society.

In education, critical thinking can refer to various approaches and can be used for different purposes (see e.g., Ennis, 1989; Hunter, 2014; McPeck, 2017; Weinstein, 1991; Winch, 2006). However, most importantly, according to Thomas (1993), educators should integrate critical thinking into their curriculum to help students examine the conditions of their existence from their own perspective. Critical thinking recognizes that ideas can both control and liberate, and therefore conventional and taken-for-granted conceptions about the world should be challenged in order to move beyond “what is” to “what could be” (p. 21). This is how critical thinking can contribute to community organizing, legislative reform and policy formation.

Therefore, in the LCL approach I am extending the notion of critical to not only critical analysis and evaluation of the relationships of power, but also critical action in order to give students the opportunity to become critical social actors. Thus, students will be able to not only question the reality around them, but also to attempt to change it for the better to create more egalitarian conditions for all cultures in their local context.

Linguacultural landscape as a pedagogical resource

The LCL approach is based on the idea that language and culture are deeply connected. Agar (1994), for example, argues that:

Language, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, ‘culture’ is what you’re up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture. (p. 28)

Kecskes (2015) also adds to this that culture is the *originator*, which means that language is rooted in culture and is a carrier as well as reflection of culture. Kecskes argues that “cultural expectations and phenomena that members of a speech community attend to are the main variables that motivate the use of available linguistic means” (p.115). In other words, different languages affect us differently not because of what the language allows us to think but rather due to what that language habitually makes us think about. And this *habitual* aspect is comprised of culture. Hence, language and culture are not just connected, but also co-dependent. As Friedrich (1989) argues, language and culture are tightly intertwined and “constitute a single universe of its own kind, the parts of which are bound at least as much to each other as to anything else outside that universe” (p. 306).

Thus, as we cannot separate language from culture, the term languacultural landscape would be more appropriate for studies that look at the cultural and ideological context that underlies the usage of languages and other semiotic resources on signs. Considering that some LL studies, especially the ones where LL is explored as a pedagogical resource (Burwell & Lenters, 2015; Lozano et al., 2020), look into the cultural and ideological underpinning of the semiotics used on signs, it remains unclear why such studies are still being called “linguistic landscape.”

However, when students hear the term linguistic landscape, is it immediately clear to them from this term that public signage could indicate the cultural dynamics and power relations in the given area? On the other hand, if students were presented with a name that already implies the interconnectedness of language and culture, such as the languacultural landscape, it would make it much easier for them to start thinking about the cultural and ideological underpinning of the usage of various semiotics on public signs.

While an LCL research project might share some common features with an LL research project as a pedagogical resource, such as using photographs of public signage as data, or the analysis, categorization and discussion of the photographed signs, it also differs from it in a number of ways. First, it emphasizes the development of plurilingual competence in students. Second, it is based on the four key elements of PoM (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; NLG, 1996). And most importantly it involves the critical action part that allows students (student-researchers) to not only recognize that the reality (i.e., languacultural landscape) around them is not to be viewed as something given, but rather something to be questioned and analyzed through an active discourse (Thomas, 1993), but also to reorganize and reimagine this social context with more egalitarian cultural dynamics in mind.

A languacultural landscape research project within the PoM frame

To explore the potential of LCL as a pedagogical resource, I have conducted a small-scale research project myself, drawing on the pedagogical frame of PoM, with the added component of critical action. In the following section, I provide a step-by-step guide based on my experience along with recommendations on how such an LCL research project could be conducted. This LCL research project could further serve as an illustrative example for teachers to use in a variety of educational contexts, such as EAL, social sciences, etc.

LCL and situated practice

This first stage in the research project relates to students' existing knowledge, experience and skills, and corresponds to the situated practice component of PoM. In their discussion of situated practice, Cope and Kalantzis (2015, pp. 4–5) call it “experiencing,” meaning that human cognition is situated and contextual. Situated practice is also what connects school learning and out-of-school experiences of learners. In an LCL research project, during the situated practice stage students are supposed to collect photos of the public signage in their assigned or chosen sociolinguistic context for later analysis (critical framing), application (transformed practice) and critical action. The definition of public signs I am referring to here does not only refer to the road signs, billboards, shop signs and signs on government buildings, but also to any other forms of representation in the public domain, either textual or visual (e.g., graffiti, posters on light posts, advertising signs, warning notices, building names, informative signs about directions or hours of opening, commemorative plaques, etc.). I would suggest choosing the area local to students as they can already have certain insights regarding the cultural and linguistic diversity there.

However, Hancock (2012) argues that it might be hard for students to make sense of the public signs around them or to look at the signage on an ideological level due to their pre-understandings of the world and situatedness in a predominantly monolingual education system. Therefore, I suggest that along with the process of taking photos of public signs, or after it, students should also research the history of the whole area they are looking at, as well as the history and background of individual businesses or entities whose signs they are analysing. This could give students more insight into the underlying ideological underpinning for exiting cultural dynamics and power relations in the area.

As part of my LCL research project, I took a total of 626 photos of all the public signs along Hastings Street in the Hastings-Sunrise area in Vancouver. This site was chosen because, at that time, I had recently become a resident there and wanted to learn more about local cultures. Along with taking photos,

I also looked into the history of the area and statistics regarding the cultural and linguistic composition. Through my research, I have found that Hastings-Sunrise is a warm and diverse community with a rich history. The key assets of the area are its community centres, parks, and open spaces (East Village, n.d.). It is a predominantly residential area, with shops and services mostly situated along Hastings Street. That is why the following study mostly focuses on Hastings Street within the boundaries of Hastings-Sunrise area as the majority of public signage is situated along this street.

In terms of statistics, Hastings-Sunrise is an ethnically diverse area (City of Vancouver, n.d.). According to the Census of 2016 (as cited in Vancouver Early Years Partnership [VEYP], 2019), more than half of the population of Hastings-Sunrise has a non-English “mother tongue,” with Cantonese being the most wide-spread language with 28%. The proportion of Indigenous population in the area has grown almost two-fold since 2011 and stands at 1100 as of 2016, which corresponds to 3.2% of the total population in the area. Visible minorities comprise more than half of the population of the area, with 58.7%. Out of this number, 38.5% is represented by people of Chinese descent, 4.9% by people of Filipino descent and 4.8% by people of Southeast Asian descent, among many other ethnicities. As for immigration, the same report (VEYP, 2019) states that 44.9% percent of the area’s population are immigrants, mostly from China (37%), Vietnam (10%), Hong Kong (10%), the Philippines (8%) and Italy (7%). The majority of immigrants in the area are first-generation immigrants (48.4% out of the total number).

This data has provided me with some important insights in terms of cultural and linguistic dynamics in the Hastings-Sunrise area, as discussed below, which aided me significantly when I was analysing the photographs of public signs. Without this knowledge, I might not have been able to draw the connections between cultural semiotics on signs and the underlying ideologies and power relations (as will be seen in the LCL and critical framing section below). Moreover, the critical action part could have been compromised without all this knowledge. Thus, background research of the area where the public signage is situated is very important in an LCL research project.

LCL and overt instruction

After all the photos of public signs have been collected, the next step is to classify or categorize them for further analysis. However, it might be a difficult task for students who are doing such a research project for the first time. Therefore, Hancock (2012) argues that there is a need to introduce mechanisms to support the reading and examination of public signs at all stages of the process. That is why overt instruction is an important part of an LCL research project. Cope and Kalantzis (2015) refer to overt instruction as *conceptualizing*. They argue

that conceptualizing is not just the teaching of academic concepts, but also a process “in which the learners become active conceptualizers, making the tacit explicit and generalizing from the particular” (p. 4). Thus, overt instruction allows students to develop a metalanguage to describe design elements.

As part of the overt instruction stage, students can be introduced to existing classifications of public signs if they fit the socio-cultural context of the place where the photos were taken. One of such classifications, often used in LL studies, is the division into bottom-up versus top-down public signs (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Within this classification, private or bottom-up signs include commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g., retail stores and banks), commercial advertising on billboards and advertising signs displayed in public transport and on private vehicles; while government or top-down signs refer to public signs used by national, regional or municipal governments (e.g., road signs, place names, street names, and inscriptions on government buildings including ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations and public parks).

Alternatively, the instructor can provide students with a set of questions to help them classify the public signs and find similarities and differences between them. For example, students can be asked to think about the following questions among others:

- What kind of sign is it (e.g., road sign, shop sign, advertisement, etc.)?
- What is the location of the sign (e.g., along a high street, in a residential area, at the bus stop, etc.)?
- Who is the owner of the sign (e.g., a dentistry, a restaurant, the municipal government, etc.)?
- What audience is the sign intended for?
- What languages and other semiotic resources (e.g., images, pictures, ornaments, etc.) can you see on the sign?
- Why do you think certain languages and semiotic resources are used on the sign?

However, it should also be noted that a list of questions or an already existent classification of public signs provided to students might narrow their perspectives, and thus limit their research output. Therefore, whenever possible students' autonomy in creating their sign's classification should be encouraged. Nevertheless, existing classifications of public signs or guiding questions could still be discussed with students to help them develop their own metalanguage for description of public signage. Ultimately, the teacher should weigh all the alternatives and choose the most appropriate in the given context.

LCL and critical framing

This part corresponds to the critical framing in PoM as it includes students critically analyzing and discussing the photos of public signs that they have collected. As mentioned in the previous section, the first step in the analysis is to put photos of public signage into categories or groups. The next step is to describe what public signs depict and identify connections and patterns across parts of this data set. This analysis can be co-conducted by the teacher and students or by students alone, depending on students’ level, age and experience. However, to encourage students’ autonomy and critical output, I suggest the teacher allow students to attempt the analysis on their own. Alternatively, students can do this research project in groups to increase their research output through collaboration.

Within each category of public signs that they have identified, students then should look at whether the signs are monolingual, bilingual or multilingual/plurilingual, and the amount of information conveyed through each language. They should also observe what culture or cultures the signs seem to represent or be aimed at, and what semiotic resources are used for this. In terms of the textual aspect of public signs, the salience of cultural presence can be conveyed through size, foregrounding, colour, sharpness of definition and other features of the font which make the text in a certain language look more pronounced (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) and thus emphasize the culture or cultures this language is associated with. Thus, students should look at not only what languages are present on public signage in the given category, but also at the way they are inscribed. In terms of images as part of public signs, students should take note of what cultural semiotics these images depict and what message they seem to communicate along with the textual component.

I further illustrate how such an analysis could be performed on the example the LCL research project that I have conducted. In my research project, after reviewing the photos I had taken, I noticed that the majority of signs belonged to private businesses, and therefore I decided to classify the public signage according to the “industries” being represented—healthcare, beauty services, shopping, entertainment, municipal government, eating out (cafes, restaurants and the like), religious, other services and urban artifacts (graffiti and murals). However, before I analysed the public signs representing each identified industry and drew my conclusions, I also decided to summarize the languacultural landscape of the area in general to see if the patterns I found would replicate in any of the industries. This shows that while there is a specific outline for this research project, there is also a certain flexibility to add other components of analysis or approach data a bit differently. For example, instead of taking photos of multiple public signs, students can be asked to analyse just one public sign, but in more depth through, for example multimodal analysis (see Daniels-



Figure 2

Plurilingualism of Hastings-Sunrise

son & Selander, 2016; Godhe & Magnusson, 2017; Jewitt, 2006; Kress, 2003) or with the help of the grammar of visual design approach (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006). Students can also be asked to interview the shop or restaurant owners to find out why they use particular semiotic resources on their signs. This would allow students to add a new angle to their analysis and learn about the actual intentions behind the usage of specific public signage.

In the following section, I highlight some parts of my analysis, illustrating what public signage could tell us about the area in general and about specific industries in particular. The featured industries were chosen based on the saliency of public signage belonging to them.

As can be seen from the public signage (Figure 2), Hastings-Sunrise is a plurilingual and pluricultural area. Several languages can be found on and near the buildings along Hastings Street. English is the most frequently used language on public signs, which is not surprising considering the fact that it is one of the official languages in Canada; and the dominant state language is usually the language for communicating official messages. However, many public signs have Chinese script on them, which could be explained by a significant population of people of Chinese descent living in Hastings-Sunrise (VEYP, 2019). Other languages which are also found on signs, but to a much lesser degree, are Vietnamese, Italian, Japanese, French, Thai and Spanish. This, to some degree, corresponds to the cultural and linguistic composition of area shown in the Census of 2016 (as cited in VEYP, 2019). With regard to the font that is used for the text on public signs, there is a great variety of



Figure 3

Cultural semiotics of public signage in Hastings-Sunrise

patterns in terms of colour, size and overall distinctiveness. For example, in monolingual/plurilingual public signs English and the other language or languages can be the same in font size and colour, but there are also signs where either English or the other language/languages is/are more prominent, written in a larger or more distinctive font. Apart from different languages, the public signage in Hastings-Sunrise also shows an array of other semiotic resources associated with various cultures (Figure 3). However, as can be seen from the further analysis of public signs that represent some of the industries, this diversity is not omnipresent and thus does not necessarily signify egalitarian cultural dynamics in the area.

The healthcare and beauty services are some of the most widely represented industries in the area. Most of the public signs connected with these industries are either monolingual — in English — or bilingual — mostly in English and Chinese. Looking at the public signs belonging to the beauty services industry, it can be noticed that they often show various semiotics usually associated with this sphere, such as coloured nails, jewellery, fashionable haircuts and hair colour, lash extensions, etc. They also mostly show the images of people who could be racialized as White (Figure 4).

However, the owners and personnel working in these establishments are mostly of Asian descent, while the clientele could be ethnically diverse. Therefore, the question arises why mostly images of phenotypically White people are used on the public signage belonging to this industry? The answer could be in the idea that the aesthetic ideal in the beauty industry is often associ-



Figure 4

Public signage in the Beauty “industry”

ated with people who are racialized as White. According to Yip et al. (2019), constructions of beauty tend to be racialized as they reflect the values of particular contexts. Marketing representations of beauty emphasize Western ideals of youth, slimness and Whiteness manifested in, for instance, fair skin and hair texture (Hunter, 2005). This could be partly explained by the historical domination of European and American brands in the beauty industry (Jones, 2011). Magazines such as *Vogue* and *Elle* mostly depict Western standards of beauty, and this can affect individuals who might start to view this beauty as ideal (Yan & Kim, 2014). Thus, the Western beauty standards can spread through media and potentially create a prejudice that non-Western or non-White individuals are less attractive.

The public signs in the healthcare industry tend to have a greater diversity in terms of the colour and size of the text font in different languages, as well as a more significant presence of diverse cultural artifacts. For example, as can be seen from Figure 5, in describing the procedures that one can receive in their clinic, the latter describes their services in both English and Chinese characters. The colour and size of the text font are also the same which shows the equal positioning of these languages in terms of importance. However, the clinic accompanies textual information with the images traditionally associated with Asian cultures, such as the picture of a lotus, small clay pots used for a fire-cupping therapy and a yin-yang sign. This might show that, while the clinic acknowledges the official language (English), it also aims to highlight the cultural distinctiveness of this organization. And in fact, when I researched this clinic, I found that the owner of this company was the pioneer of her indus-



Figure 5

Big Feet acupuncture clinic sign

try, which is high-quality, low-cost reflexology and acupressure services (Big Feet, n.d.). The founder asserts that, when she created her company, many

people did not have correct knowledge and understanding of such services, and thus practitioners did not receive the respect they deserved. Therefore, she worked very hard to create and sustain her company's reputation (Big Feet, n.d.). This shows that the owner did not want to whitewash her business, but instead has promoted the ideas of cultural brand equity. Thus, the presence of diverse cultural semiotic resources could be explained by the symbolic function or symbolic value of these semiotics for the owners, who try to express their cultural identity this way, as well as make others more aware of their cultures' presence in this pluricultural society.

That said, it should be noted that, despite the presence of different cultures and more than half of the population in the area having a non-English mother tongue, still the majority of public signs representing the various industries are monolingual (in English), with little diversity of cultural semiotics. According to Weedon (2004), particular regimes of power inform the discursive fields. She argues that power is "dispersed across a range of social institutions and practices and functions through the discursive constitution of embodied subjects within discourses" (p. 19). Public signage could be perceived as such "embodied subjects within discourses." Thus, the aforementioned situation might be interpreted as an indication of hegemonic discourses and unequal power dynamics pertaining to the area.

As can be seen from this section, analysis is an important part of an LCL research project. In the process of analysis and discussion, as shown above, students can start drawing their conclusions with regard to the public signage in the given area, thus moving to the fourth component of PoM, transformed practice.

LCL and transformed practice

In transformed practice, students apply their knowledge and understanding to create new "texts" and communicate them to an audience (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). In an LCL research project, an example of such a text could be a PowerPoint presentation, a YouTube video, a poster or any other creative product that students prepare to share the findings and conclusions that they have drawn from the analysis of the given public signage. The students can then present their creative product to their teacher and classmates, or they can share it online (via YouTube, social networking sites, blogs, etc.) so everyone can access it. The teacher can either require students to prepare a specific type of a creative product or allow students to choose the form themselves to further encourage multimodal competencies development.

For my LCL research project, I decided to create an infographic poster where I shared my findings and conclusions regarding the public signage in

the Hastings-Sunrise area (Figure 6).¹

LCL and critical action

For the “critical” angle of this action-oriented research project, students should be asked to redesign a public sign or a group of signs to show what it/they would look like if there were more egalitarian cultural dynamics in the area. Students can then share this redesigned sign as part of their final creative product and explain what they have changed in or added to the public sign or signs and why. After redesigning their public signs, students could also be encouraged to post them in their blogs or on networking sites to further contribute to exposing and subverting the existing unequal power dynamics in their sociolinguistic context.

As part of my LCL research project, I decided to redesign a flower shop sign so it would reflect the cultural diversity of the area (Figure 7). I added the translation of the words on the sign in Chinese, Italian and Vietnamese, thus highlighting three most widely represented cultures in Hastings-Sunrise. I aimed to have the same size font for all languages on this public sign to show the equal importance of all cultures in the area. I also added other semiotic resources associated with the aforementioned cultures. In particular, I incorporated in the sign the pictures of lotus flowers (commonly associated with Chinese and other Asian cultures), flowering vines (usually associated with Italian culture) and roses and orchids (typically associated with Vietnamese and other Asian cultures).

Pedagogical benefits of an LCL research project

There are several potential pedagogical benefits to doing a student-led LCL research project. First, this research project promotes learner autonomy through student-centred activities. This corresponds to Dewey’s (1938/1986) idea of learning from experience as students build their own understanding of societal pluriculturalism as well as cultural dynamics in the given area through their exploration of LCL. Students also develop and extend their plurilingual competency in the process as they work with various languages and cultural semiotics.

Furthermore, an LCL research project can give students an opportunity to learn more about cultures in their area, thus connecting the classroom with local communities. This also allows students to get to know better the area where they live. Another advantage is that, while participating in this research project, students can bring up their own cultural knowledge, practice their criti-

¹ The infographic poster (Figure 6) was created with the help of Canva, a free graphic design platform (<https://www.canva.com>).



Figure 6

LCL analysis of Hastings-Sunrise: Findings and conclusions



Figure 7

The original flower shop sign (top) and the redesigned flower shop sign (bottom)

cal thinking skills and acquire multimodal competencies, which are all integral parts of PoM. Within the PoM frame, students can have the opportunity to use various linguistic and semiotic resources to (co)construct new meanings as part of their LCL research projects.

However, the most important benefit of an LCL research project as a pedagogical resource is that it can allow students to become critical researchers, who not only look into historical and ideological underpinnings of public signs and question the existing power imbalance in the area, but also work towards the promotion of more egalitarian cultural dynamics in their sociocultural context.

Conclusion

I merged LCL with the pedagogy of multiliteracies (PoM) to create an action-oriented pedagogical approach that could be used to not only address and build upon students' understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity by critically analyzing historical, cultural and political contexts of learning, but also as a way to imagine how the visible semiotics around them would look with a more egalitarian cultural representation through redesigning the signage in this given area. Thus, LCL could allow students to take an activism stance and become critical researchers who work towards changing unequal power relations in the society. In this process the students would also build their plurilingual competence as LCL would allow them to not just practice critical thinking, but also bring their own cultural knowledge and interpretation into the dialogue.

The LCL action-oriented research project that I have conducted and described here can be used as an illustrative example for a classroom project; however, it could also be adapted for a particular subject area (e.g., social studies, EAL/ESL, etc.) or student level (e.g., grade 9, 12, etc.). Within this research project, students should also be encouraged to identify their own connections between patterns of meaning derived from public signs and come up with their own categories for the analysis of photos of public signs that they have collected, as the ones that I have illustrated in my research project might not be suitable for all sociocultural contexts. There is also a great flexibility in how the final product of this research project could look; however, it should always include the critical action part, as it is the most important aspect of such a project.

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