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Learning from the Linguistic Landscape: A Project-Based Learning Approach to Investigating English in Japan

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Abstract

The most prominent foreign language appearing in the Japanese linguistic landscape is English – used extensively throughout areas such as shop signs, road markings, product packaging, and clothing. Whilst much of this English appears in the English alphabet, a significant amount is written in *katakana*, allowing the words and phrases to be integrated into Japanese syntax. This article reports on the development of a pedagogical activity which involved engaging university students with this English in the Japanese linguistic landscape, with the aim of facilitating the development of self-selected topics for the students' final-year graduation theses. The activity was framed within a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach to education, which engaged students directly in interacting with and critically examining their own linguistic landscapes so as to develop a deeper understanding of the forms and functions of English in this environment. They collected examples of English inscriptions from the linguistic landscape, wrote descriptions about each photograph, and brought them to class for analysis and discussion. Their comments were collected together and analysed to extract themes and areas of focus which were then returned to the students to help guide them in deciding upon a suitable working title for their graduation thesis. In this way, the linguistic landscape was exploited as a space in which to have students become researchers and critically analyse the English that surrounds them beyond the classroom.

1 Introduction

In modern-day Japan, the linguistic landscape is characterised by frequent and dynamic interactions between a wide range of languages, expressed prominently through the extensive use of script mixing (Barrs, 2013). For textual inscriptions in nearly all aspects of society, such as those found on shop signs, road markings, product packaging, clothing, building names, graffiti, and TV subtitles, the availability in Japanese of three distinct orthographies (*kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana*), along with various derivations of the Latin Alphabet (e.g. *romaji* and English), combines with a generally favourable attitude towards linguistic borrowing to produce a vibrant multilingual landscape (Backhaus, 2007; Dougill, 2008). In this way, the Japanese linguistic landscape can be considered one of the few situations where the average citizen of Japan is regularly immersed in a multilingual environment. Because of the huge number of English words which have been borrowed into Japanese since the end of World War Two, with many of them being highly-frequent lexical items in the everyday Japanese language (Daulton, 2008; Irwin, 2011; Stanlaw, 2004), English is by far the most observed foreign language found in this landscape.

This study reports on an activity designed to engage students at a Japanese university with the omnipresent English in their local surroundings. The activity aimed to exploit the authentic use of

English outside of the classroom as a space in which to cultivate the students' critical literacy skills, and at the same time to take advantage of this environment as an easily-accessible resource of empirical data for the students' own research projects. Specifically, the goal of the activity was to have the students engage in a critical examination of the forms and functions of English around them, and to develop their discoveries into possible research topics for a final-year graduation thesis. An academic requirement of all fourth-year undergraduate students in the Department of English at the author's university is to complete a 4000-word research report on a linguistically-focused topic of their choosing. One of the most challenging and time-consuming aspects of this requirement for the students is the identification and development of an academic topic for research, caused at least in part by the strong cultural expectation that even at the university level in Japan the teacher directs the learners and provides them with the relevant knowledge and ideas (Loveday, 1996). The shift in the students' fourth year of study from learner to researcher comes as a significant challenge to many of them, not having had much experience of practical research in their first three years of study. In the author's personal experience, this lack of practical research skills caused the first semester of the students' final year to be spent on exploring and selecting a suitable topic, rather than actually conducting and writing the research. This in turn caused a lack of time in the final semester to effectively explore the collected data, and resulted in theses which lacked depth in their analysis and discussion. To address this issue, an activity was designed to bridge the students' transition from learner in the first three years of study to researcher in their final year. The activity was devised to encourage students' personal exploration and selection of possible research topics at the end of their third year of study, scaffolded within the author's own research specialisation of the forms and functions of English in Japan.

The activity adopted a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach, underpinned by the idea that "deep understanding occurs when a learner actively constructs meaning based on his or her experiences and interaction in the world" (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 318). The use of the linguistic landscape in the daily lives of the students was seen as an ideal authentic context in which students could actively employ these personal experiences and interactions, especially considering the otherwise limited opportunities for daily interaction with English in Japanese society (Morrow, 2004; Seargeant, 2008, 2009). Engaging students in a consideration of the linguistic landscape around them is an efficient way of increasing students' exposure to and engagement with a foreign language beyond the physical limitations of the classroom (Sayer, 2010). The activity was framed within five essential features of project-based learning environments, as set out by Krajcik and Blumenfield (2006, p. 318). These are (1) for the students to begin with a driving question that guides the activity, (2) for them to explore the question through authentic, situated inquiry, (3) to collaborate in the exploration of the question, (4) to be supported in their inquiries to go past their current abilities, and (5) to produce tangible outcomes of their inquiries.

Before implementing these five steps, students were first given a foundational series of classroom-based lectures and workshops where they learnt about the principal features of the linguistic landscape, including its history as a field of inquiry, its main terms and concepts, and examples of linguistic landscape studies around the world. Then for the first step of the PBL approach, they were provided with the following practical question to investigate: What types of English can be found in the Japanese linguistic landscape around you? For step (2), they were asked to explore this question by recording instances of English in the linguistic landscape in their daily lives; on campus, on their way home, in shopping centres, in any place where they noticed English to be inscribed in the public environment. They then collaborated in class, for steps (3) and (4), to categorise their samples by type, scaffolded by an example typology supplied by the author. For step (5), they were then asked to write 50–100 word reports for each of the samples, describing what they noticed about the use of English and how they had decided to make their categorisations. To further develop these "tangible outcomes of their inquiries," towards the end of the semester, the students worked together in class, supported by the author, to explore possible areas of research and produce possible titles for their theses which had been suggested by discoveries they had made in their surrounding linguistic landscapes. In the following sections of this article, a summary is given of several previous

studies which have discussed the use of the linguistic landscape for pedagogical practices, with a focus on the development of students' critical literacy skills, followed by a discussion of the initiation, implementation, and outcomes of the linguistic landscape activity.

2 The use of the linguistic landscape for language learning

It has been acknowledged that providing opportunities of exposure to language, and the practice of using it, are particularly difficult in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings (Nation, 2003). In Japan, the English language has no major institutionalised role to play in society (Morrow, 2004), meaning that the vast majority of exposure to and practice with English happens inside the language classroom. In such contexts, the linguistic landscape has been seen as a fertile area beyond the classroom in which to engage learners of English as a foreign language with practical examples of language usage (Sayer, 2010), with the principal benefit being that "involving students in a LL project decentralises the practice of language learning and ensures language learner interaction with a variety of highly contextualised, authentic texts in the public arena" (Rowland, 2013, p. 495).

With a heightened awareness of the language in the linguistic landscape that permeates many aspects of a student's life outside the classroom, important connections can be made between the language-focused learning that is typical of a classroom-based setting, and the meaning-focused input that can be gained from the attention paid to the language found in inscriptions throughout society. Cenoz and Gorter (2008), in a comprehensive analysis of the benefits of using the linguistic landscape for language learning, stress the importance of the input which the linguistic landscape can provide for second language acquisition. They state that the landscape around the language learners offers a rich source of informal learning which utilises the "authentic, contextualized input which is part of the social context" (2008, p. 274). This can help in the development of pragmatic competence, the acquisition of literacy skills, and the deeper understanding of how language is applied in society. This is echoed by Rowland (2013) who, in a meta-analysis of previous studies on the potential pedagogical benefits of linguistic landscape projects, finds six main areas of possible learner development: the fostering of critical literacy skills, the improvement of pragmatic competence, an increase in the chance of incidental language learning, the facilitation of acquiring multimodal literacy skills, the stimulation of multicompetences, and the enhancement of students' sensitivity towards connotational uses of language (Rowland, 2013, pp. 496–497). In his own linguistic landscape project, conducted with one of his university classes, he had students collect pictures of English used around them in their Japanese context and analyse them in class within the framework of a guiding question: How and why is English used on signs in Japan? His study concluded that a linguistic landscape project is an effective way of developing students' symbolic competence and multi-literacy skills, whilst at the same time raising students' awareness of the English that is available to them in their local environment.

Focusing on the fostering of critical literacy skills, in particular, the linguistic landscape has been seen as "a prime target for activities intended to engender a questioning stance in language learners" (Rowland, 2013, p. 498). This engendering of a "questioning stance" is the specific skill which the linguistic landscape activity in the present article aimed to develop in the students. The activity aimed to engage the students with a critical examination of their linguistic landscape by having them explore questions of what forms the English was appearing in, but more importantly of what functions it seemed to be fulfilling. Considering the issue discussed above that English has no major institutionalised roles in Japanese society, and is primarily a language for the purpose of international communication, students were encouraged to consider the core question of why English was commonplace in the Japanese linguistic landscape. The answers that students would come up with are then taken as the starting point to develop more specific research inquiries into certain aspects of this English usage.

3 Description of the activity

The primary purpose of the activity was not the engagement with any particular aspect of the English in the Japanese linguistic landscape itself, but rather a more general critical exploration of the forms and functions of English in Japanese society. The intended outcome of this critical examination was the generation of further research topics for the students' graduation theses. As introduced above, for this thesis, students are required to select a topic of investigation, conduct preliminary secondary research around the topic, and then carry out a medium-scale primary research activity in order to produce data for analysis and description. The final product, if they have chosen to write their thesis in English, is a 4000-word dissertation on their chosen topic following the standard structural components of an introduction, literature review, methodology, results, findings, and conclusion. The production of the thesis is itself a large undertaking for the students, but they are guided in its construction with regular tutorial sessions concerning issues such as research methods and data analysis procedures. Where the student is most independent is in the selection of the topic, with the graduation thesis being conceptualised as the production of a competent piece of academic research conducted on a topic in which the student is personally interested. For the reasons discussed earlier, it was considered not only beneficial but also necessary to provide a supportive framework in which students could understand what kinds of linguistic questions could be turned into a large-scale research investigation. Figure 1 shows the cyclical process which the activity was set up to foster. Students were first presented with lectures and workshops which introduced the fundamental aspects of the field of inquiry of linguistic landscape studies. They were then given a driving question which they could use to personally explore their own linguistic landscape, and to make their own discoveries as practicing researchers. These discoveries were then brought into the classroom for group discussion with classmates and the course instructor, and then further developed into areas of future research which could be personally explored by the students. The cyclical nature of the activity would be continued with students making further discoveries and exploring new questions as they reengaged with the linguistic landscape.

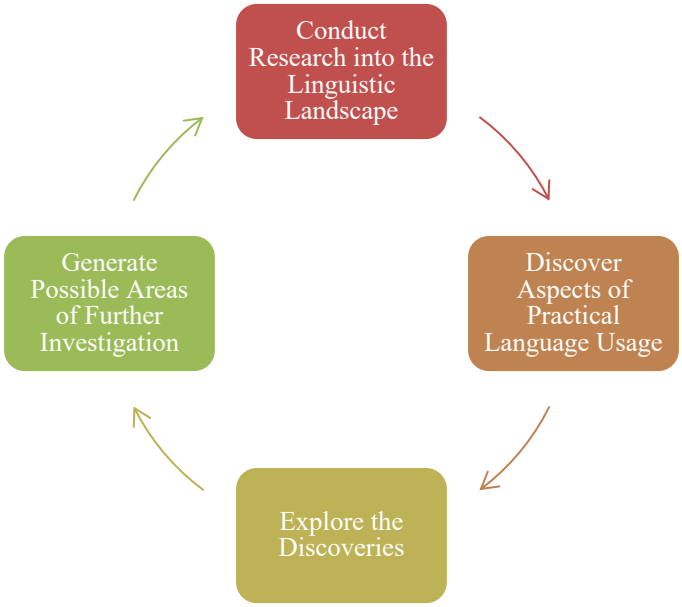

Fig. 1. Cyclical process of investigation using the linguistic landscape

The activity involved 15 students from the author's third-year seminar class on World Englishes conducting a research investigation into the types of English found in the Japanese linguistic landscape. Students first received six weeks of lectures and workshops which introduced them to the field of World Englishes, looking at the history of English's spread across the world, and its establishment as a second language or a foreign language in different global regions. Students then received six weeks of lectures and workshops on the field of linguistic landscape studies, as one example of the practical application of English in a very large number of countries across the world. They studied about the history of the field, definitional terms, and examples of studies conducted around the world. Particular attention was given to the study conducted by Backhaus (2007) on the signs of streets in Tokyo. Students were then given details of the project which was to be conducted in the last two classes of the semester, and the vacation period between the third and fourth years of study. This vacation period is when students should be ideally formulating possible research topics for their thesis, with the writing of the thesis ideally starting at the start of their fourth year.

Students were first of all given the task of finding ten examples of English textual inscriptions in their surrounding environment outside of the classroom, over the period of one week. They were given the freedom of choosing any inscription they wanted, with only one requirement: the English must be written in the Latin Alphabet. As discussed previously, English in Japan can appear in different scripts and each script tends to signify a different variety of English being used for different functions. As such, English written in the Latin Alphabet is often employed for different purposes than English written in *katakana* (Barrs, 2011; Stanlaw, 2004). The situation can become complex and for this reason it was felt necessary to restrict the activity to only English appearing in the Latin Alphabet. In the next class, students were given a basic typology of (Latin Alphabet) English in Japan, which was developed by the author from his own investigations of the linguistic landscape (see Table 1). Students were asked to try to categorise the inscriptions they found within one of the categories in the typology; or alternatively suggest a new category if they felt the typology given to them didn't sufficiently account for the example of English which they had found. Students were then asked to write a 50–100 word description for each of the photographs, detailing what the inscription was, why they put it into a certain category, and anything interesting that they noticed about the inscription. Students handed in a copy of their reports and these were collated and summarised by the author. The reports were then analysed using a process of data analysis outlined by Richards (2003). This involves (1) collecting the data, (2) thinking about what has been collected, (3) categorising the data with the help of a coding system, (4) reflecting on the categories, (5) organising the categories into larger groups, (6) connecting together the ideas which are generated, and (7) collecting further data (p. 272). Steps (1) to (6) were conducted using the reports submitted by the students, with step (7) being the primary aim of the research in that students would use their findings to go back out and investigate a particular area of interest in more detail. Step (3) of the data analysis process, the categorising of the data with a coding system, involved going through the comments and writing out the main themes encoded in the students' comments. These themes were then collected together into larger "areas of focus" which represented potential fields of further investigation. Students were then given these themes and areas of focus in order to help frame possible research questions.

Table 1. The typology of varieties of alphabet English in Japan (English written in the Latin alphabet)

Variety	Alphabet English in Japan			
Type	Academic English	Decorative English	Advertising English	Translation English
Example Contexts	Textbooks, exams, research reports	Clothing, product packaging	Signs, fliers	Electrical appliances, road signs,
Intended Audience	Japanese and non-Japanese	Japanese	Japanese and non-Japanese	Non-Japanese
Features	Follows inner circle models of standard English, such as American English	Grammatical and lexical accuracy is not of major importance	Used in place of Japanese scripts in order to attract attention	Used to assist people without Japanese language abilities
Examples	*I'm fine thank you* (From a high-school English textbook dialogue)	*Dimple Enhancement* (On a T-shirt)	*Sale* (On a shop banner)	*Push* (On a door)

4 The main themes in the student reports

As shown in Table 2, a qualitative analysis of the comments given by the students about their experience of trying to categorise the examples of their chosen English inscriptions resulted in 18 major themes grouped into four major areas of focus: a heightened awareness of English in the Japanese linguistic landscape, a consideration of the forms in which this English appeared, an appreciation of the intended audience of the English, and an analysis of the linguistic features of the English usage. In Table 2, the main themes have been grouped into each major area of focus, and the frequency with which each theme was raised by individual students is given to show how common the theme was through the data set. The last column of the table gives representative examples of comments given by the students.

Overall, it was found that students were indeed engaging with a critical examination of the English around them, and their comments are evidence of what Rowland calls a "shift in identities from *language learners* to *sociolinguists*" (2013, p. 496). Students were not just describing what they saw, but were taking a "questioning stance" (Rowland, 2013, p. 498) and thinking about why the English was there, who it was for, and in what form it was being used.

More specifically, the comments showed a heightened awareness of the linguistic landscape in general. They had noticed not only the amount of English around them, but also the availability of other language such as Chinese and Spanish. Another area of focus was in the appearance of English, with themes of how English is fashionable, cool, and cute being prevalent in their comments. There were also comments made about who the English is actually intended for, with themes concerning the nature and depth of the translations. And there was consideration of the linguistic aspects of the English, focusing on issues such as spelling, grammaticality, adaptations, and semantics. This last issue of the semantic meaning of much English in Japan being of less importance than the decorative nature of the English is a major theme of investigation in much of the literature into English in Japan (Daulton, 2008; Dougill, 2008; Hyde, 2002; Kay, 1995).

Table 2. The main areas of focus, main themes, and example comments

Focus	Themes	Freq.	Example Comments
Heightened Awareness of English in the Linguistic Landscape	English is everywhere in Japanese society	6	– English seems around me more than I knew. – So many signs in shops use English.
	More attention given to the English	4	– I never noticed that English before. – Now I am worried about English on my clothes.
	The Japanese linguistic landscape is multilingual	2	– More languages than I thought. – I noticed Chinese and Spanish.
The Form of English in the Linguistic Landscape	English looks fashionable	11	– The quality of this thing is higher because of the English. – Japanese people think English is very fashionable.
	English for decoration	5	– This English probably attracts our attention. – Japanese people like the way English looks.
	English is cute and cool	4	– This English is really cute. – Some English looks so cool compared to kanji.
	English for product naming	2	– I think this thing would be strange with a Japanese name. – The English for this item makes it look good.
The Intended Audience of English in the Linguistic Landscape	Not sure of the intended reader of the English	5	– I don't know if this English is for Japanese or foreign people. – Maybe this is for Japanese people, but I'm not sure.
	Translated terms may help visitors	2	– The translation is useful for visitors. – Foreigners will be able to understand how to use this.
	Some translations have only minimal English	2	– Maybe the English is not enough on this sign for foreign people. – There needs to be more translation on this.
Linguistic Features of English in the Linguistic Landscape	Linguistic meaning is not important	18	– The meaning doesn't matter. – Japanese people don't care about the meaning.
	Many English words are basic parts of Japanese	12	– These words are common in Japanese language. – The word 'post' and 'box' are regular Japanese words.
	Strange English on T-Shirts	11	– I don't understand the words on many T-Shirts. – I don't want to wear my T-Shirt anymore.
	Grammatical and spelling mistakes	6	– Why was this English not checked. – I am embarrassed by the incorrect English on this package.
	Adaptations	4	– The word is abbreviated in Japanese. – This word is pronounced differently.
	Hard to categorise	2	– This English has many purposes. – I can't decide what kind of English this is.
	Japanese-English is common	2	– There is a lot of English that is only in Japan. – Maybe foreign people don't know this English.
	English allows greater creativity	1	– A Japanese word here would be too direct.

In the last part of the activity, a copy of Table 2 was given back to the students to scaffold their development of specific and personal research questions for their graduation thesis. They were asked to initially collaborate and discuss possible ideas in groups, but then to use the vacation period between their third and final year of study to produce an actual working title for the thesis they would write in their final year. These titles were submitted direct to the author who then sent back comments and suggestions. It was not strictly required that students select a topic included within

the themes in Table 2 for their thesis, but instead the overall activity was envisaged as a method of scaffolding learners in understanding how research topics can be generated. In this way, the activity was fulfilling its overall purpose of having learners "connect classroom language study with language use in wider society, and thereby begin to formulate their own inductive theories of language" (Rowland, 2013, p. 496). Table 3 presents two examples of graduation thesis working titles for each of the main focus areas.

Table 3. Examples of graduation thesis working titles in each focus area

Focus	Working Titles of Students' Graduation Theses
Heightened Awareness of English in the Linguistic Landscape	• The Recognition of English Loanwords among Japanese People • The Necessity of English in Japanese Society
The Form of English in the Linguistic Landscape	• An Analysis of English Loanwords in Japanese Newspaper Advertisements • English on Japanese Signs: The Influence of English in Shop Signs on Everyday Conversation
The Intended Audience of English in the Linguistic Landscape	• An Analysis of the Japanese Naming of Cosmetic Products with English Loanwords • English Usage on Japanese Public Transport: An Analysis of the Availability of English on Public Transport in Hiroshima
Linguistic Features of English in the Linguistic Landscape	• A Linguistic Analysis of English Written on T-Shirts in Japan • A Comparison of Meaning Differences Between English Loanwords in Japanese Women's Fashion Magazines and their Original Words
Other related topics	• Japanese Loanwords in Japanese English textbooks: The Effect of Japanese Loanwords in Global English Communication • An Investigation of the English loanword 'mai' in Japanese

As can be seen in Table 3, a general area of inquiry which several students developed out of this activity was how much English is used in everyday Japanese life and whether or not its usage was necessary. One of the titles in this area focused on whether Japanese citizens actually understand the semantic meaning of English that is around them. This student had identified that even though they are in an EFL environment, their linguistic landscape offers a rich resource of English words and phrases, but it is questionable whether or not this English is actually understood by Japanese citizens. In the second focus area of the form of English in Japan, a student planned to investigate whether or not Japanese people could read the English used in the names and signs of shops. This student hypothesised from their own experience that in some cases the visual aspects of the shop's logo was recognised, but the English in its name could neither be pronounced nor understood. In such situations, the student was interested in how the name of the shop would be communicated verbally between people in their conversations. Within the third focus of the intended audience of the English, one student decided to explore the extent to which English translations are available on public transportation in Japan. This included a focus on the amount of translated material, and its accuracy in comparison with standard varieties of English. In the last area of focus, one student planned to conduct an analysis of the English used on clothing, proposing to survey university students as to their comprehension of Alphabet-script English words used on their t-shirts. This analysis was to involve a corpus-based study of the correlation between the frequency of the loanword, and its comprehension by the Japanese public. Amongst the students who chose topics not directly concerning English in the Japanese linguistic landscape, several still chose topics in a similar line of inquiry, looking at Japanese loanwords in English textbooks, and English words which had been integrated into the core lexicon of the Japanese language, known as *eigo gairaigo* (English loanwords).

5 Conclusion

The working titles given above in Table 3 are evidence of the successful outcome of the activity, which aimed to engage students as researchers in a critical examination of English in their linguistic landscape to foster the development of personal research topics for their graduation theses. Following a PBL approach in the implementation of the activity, students moved from investigating a driving question about English usage in their local environment to producing tangible evidence of their critical examinations in the form of working titles for their theses. In this way, the activity can be seen as achieving the goal of a PBL approach to education, in "increasing student engagement and helping them develop deeper understanding of important ideas" (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 317).

The activity also stands as an example of how to pedagogically exploit the linguistic landscape that learners are a part of, not only in terms of language learning from a linguistic analysis which learners can conduct on the English, but also in terms of positioning learners as researchers who can engage with the English as sociolinguists and critically examine the forms and functions of the English in their environment. One of the most appealing features of engaging learners with the linguistic landscape is that it lies immediately beyond the walls of the classroom. Indeed, the linguistic landscape can even include the inscriptions within the walls of the classroom and then within the boundaries of the school or university, a specific area of research which has taken on the name of schoolscapes (Gorter, 2017). In EFL contexts such as Japan, where opportunities to explore and engage with English are necessarily limited, the linguistic landscape offers a rich learning space beyond the walls of the classroom.

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