

Learning English by walking down the street

Chiou-lan Chern and Karen Dooley

With internationalization and globalization, English has proliferated in urban spaces around the world. This creates new opportunities for EFL learning and teaching. An English literacy walk is one activity that can be used productively to capitalize on this potential. The activity has roots in long-established approaches to emergent literacy education for young children and pedagogic projects inspired by recent research on linguistic landscapes. Drawing on these traditions, teachers can target reading outcomes involving code, semantic, pragmatic, and critical knowledge and skills. We use the four resources model of literate practices to systematically map some of the potential of literacy walks in multilingual, multimodal linguistic landscapes. We suggest tasks and teacher questions that might be used for the explicit teaching of reading during and after literacy walks. Although grounded in Taipei, our ideas might be of interest to EFL teachers in other globalized cities around the world.

Introduction

Urban spaces around the world are increasingly rich in multilingual, multimodal signage. Still images and print in multiple languages are prominent, and with the spread of digital technology, moving images and audio are becoming common. These public displays of language have been described as ‘linguistic landscapes’ and are of interest to practitioners and researchers in fields as diverse as urban planning and politics. For language educators, much of the interest arises from the potential of particular linguistic landscapes for teaching and learning second and foreign languages (Cenoz and Gorter 2008; Shohamy and Waksman 2009). Pedagogic activities that make use of these resources have been developed in several contexts: EFL programmes in Chiba-shi, Japan (Rowland 2013) and Taipei, Taiwan (Teng 2009), and francophone and immersion French programmes respectively in Montreal and Vancouver, Canada (Dagenais, Moore, Sabatier, Lamarre, and Armand 2009). We will focus on one EFL teaching and learning activity: the English literacy walk. We have developed our work in Taipei during a time of rapid internationalization and globalization that has seen English signage proliferate by government decree (Teng op.cit.) and commercial imperative (Curtin 2009). As the opportunities and demands for strong and critical English reading practices thereby created are not, in a general sense, peculiar to Taipei, our aim here is to share pedagogic ideas with ELT educators in other contexts.¹

The English literacy walk is an excursion taken for the express purpose of teaching and learning about written English. It has roots in activities developed for emergent readers and English language learners in English dominant societies: ‘walking field trips’ (Hudelson 1984) and ‘environmental print walks’ (Vukelich, Christie, and Enz 2012). These activities were created to encourage the emergent literacy of children, specifically the capacity to recognize environmental print long before entry into school and formal literacy instruction. The activities typically required students to read signs, billboards, and so forth while teachers took photographs for follow-up work in the classroom. More recently, the focus has been on code-related knowledge and skills as teachers have sought meaningful alternatives to the phonics packages now prescribed in some English-dominant societies (Vukelich *et al.* op.cit.).

The English literacy walk has roots also in the ‘language detectives projects’ (Sayer 2010; Rowland op.cit.) and ‘language awareness outings’ (Dagenais *et al.* op.cit.) inspired by research on linguistic landscapes. These activities differ from environmental print walks in several ways. Firstly, they typically involve students venturing out with cheap, easily operated digital cameras to capture images of urban signage. Secondly, the focus is on multilingual and multimodal texts rather than English print alone. Thirdly, aims extend beyond conventional literacy skills to sophisticated pragmatic and critical reading capabilities (Cenoz and Gorter op.cit.; Shohamy and Waksman op.cit.).

Explicit teaching is a key to student learning from environmental print. In the literacy field, it has been found that merely immersing students in print is inadequate because environmental print can be ‘read’ without acquisition of transferable reading skills (Vukelich *et al.* op.cit.). Given our own experience in multilingual contexts, we suggest that at least some EFL learners are likely to have similar experiences with environmental print in English. Moreover, there is evidence that students do not necessarily even notice the foreign language print that is ubiquitous to the point of banality in their linguistic landscapes (Dagenais *et al.* op.cit.; Vukelich *et al.* op.cit.). Further, students may not engage with environmental print in a way that promotes the types of language and literacy learning valued in school (Teng op.cit.). The teaching activities we suggest here are designed to increase language learning from linguistic landscapes by encouraging students to approach unfamiliar print as a fascinating puzzle and to practise reading familiar print in the course of their everyday activities.

We organize our discussion of teaching ideas in terms of the ‘four resources model’, long established in some TESOL contexts (Freebody and Luke 1990). The model enables us to systematically ‘map’ reading practices:

- code-breaking: i.e. knowing and using the alphabetic code of written English;
- text participation: i.e. drawing on knowledge of topic and text to make meaning;

- text use: i.e. taking part in social activities to which a text is integral; and
- text analysis: i.e. critically analysing how a text tries to position readers within a particular world view.

In this model, it is not assumed that any one practice is acquired before any other. Given appropriately designed activities, students can engage orally in text analysis, in their first language if necessary, even before they can decode English print independently. Similarly, the model prioritizes no one type of practice over another; all the practices are essential for readers in the sophisticated textual worlds of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, we suggest ways that the English literacy walk can be used to develop each of the four types of literate practice as noted above. In doing so, we draw inspiration from both the emergent literacy and linguistic landscape traditions. As we suggest ideas for working with environmental print, we assume that teachers make principled selections of activities given local programme priorities and student need. In Taiwan, for example, this requires balance between text analytic and other practices: ‘neither critical literacy nor conventional literacy should be relegated to subordinate status’ (Huang 2011: 147).

Becoming an English code-breaker

The linguistic landscape of Taipei offers many opportunities for teaching code knowledge and skills. A walk through streets rich in Chinese, Japanese, and English signage, for example, provides exposure to character, syllabic, and alphabetic writing systems. Moreover, English roman script is only one of the alphabets on display: Korean hangul script is prominent, too. Furthermore, English is only one of the orthographies for roman script in use in the city: romanized Chinese is prominent, as are French, Spanish, and Italian (Curtin op.cit.). How might teachers use a linguistic landscape such as this to instruct learners in aspects of the code of written English relevant to their proficiency level?

With beginners, EFL teachers might use images collected during an English literacy walk to deepen student awareness of the alphabetic principle. Prior to the walk, the teacher can draw student attention to the foreign language print in the linguistic landscape. For example, they might prepare a PowerPoint presentation of images captured at a familiar place (for example high street, shopping mall). Students could be asked to guess where the image was taken and to identify the languages on the signs. During the walk, students and teacher could use their mobile devices (i.e. cell phones, tablets) or digital cameras to capture similar images. While the teacher might direct attention to particular signs, students should be encouraged to discover images and to capture those that interest or appeal to them. Some degree of student direction is desirable if the intent is to prompt students to engage independently with their linguistic environment.

As a post-walk activity, the teacher can ask students to sort images by writing system, producing posters for display on classroom, library, hallway, or stairwell walls. While sorting, students might be engaged in discussions promoting multilingual language awareness:

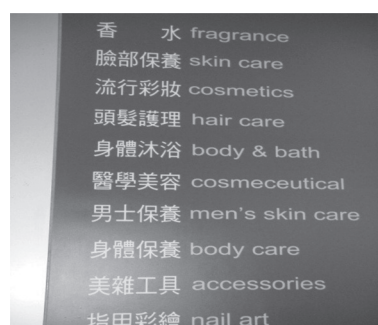
- Does the word on this bilingual sign have the same number of symbols when it is written in English and Chinese? (See [Picture 1](#).)
- Is the number of letters in written English the same as the number of characters in written Chinese? Why? (See [Picture 2](#).)
- Have any words been deliberately misspelt? Are the words displayed in an unusual fashion (for example written in a circle)? (See [Pictures 1, 3, and 8](#).)

Environmental print alphabet charts (Vukelich *et al.* op.cit.) are another useful post-walk activity for beginners. To draw attention to features of English roman script, teachers can ask students to create charts for display around the classroom and campus. During the walk, students could be directed to capture particular features ('Let's make sure we find signs with E's on them') or a more general set of images.

In either case, initial post-walk activities need to involve selection and organization of images. After downloading their own images to a computer, and with the assistance of a data projector, the teacher can model the process of selecting clear and relevant images. Students can undertake the same process using the review function of their device or after downloading the images. For convenience in later lessons, they can then save their images to a folder and/or make and print a set of PowerPoint slides. These materials are resources for print awareness activities during which the teacher asks questions highlighting the characteristics of print and cursive script, upper and lower case, and diverse fonts:



PICTURE 1
Hair salon sign



PICTURE 2
A sign outside a body care shop



PICTURE 3
Cosmetics store sign



PICTURE 4
New Life (a church group)

- How many different A's did we photograph? How are they alike and different?
- Who can put our images in alphabetical order?
- Can we create a complete alphabet chart with our images of lower case letters? What about upper case letters?
- Are there any unusual fonts in our collection? Are some fonts easier to read than others? Can we find fonts on our computers like the ones in our images? (See [Picture 4.](#))

When creating a chart, the class can vote on images for inclusion. The winning images can then be printed for incorporation into the chart. Colour printing is ideal if the classroom budget stretches that far.

With more advanced learners, EFL teachers might create a phonics chart showing different symbols for one sound (for example kitten, cat, duck, queen). Over time, students can add to the chart new symbols or new words with familiar symbols found in the linguistic landscape. The aim of this activity is to promote reading and writing fluency. To this end, teacher questions should help students build the knowledge of orthographic patterns that underpins rapid word identification and a strong sense of the peculiarities of English orthography.

- Which symbol/letter represents this sound in this word? What other symbols/letters represent it in other words we know?
- Does this particular symbol/letter appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a word? Can it occur in more than one position in English?

We turn now from activities designed to build code-breaking knowledge and skills to authentic uses of English and pragmatic outcomes. It is from this that much of the pedagogic potential of the linguistic landscape arises. Signage offers opportunities for students to not only use English for a range of authentic purposes, but also to develop awareness of how the language systems of English work (Cenoz and Gorter op.cit.).

Becoming an English text user

The signage of the linguistic landscape in Taipei is rich with opportunities for building pragmatic competence. Uses of English abound: the language appears on bilingual signs in recreational, transport, and school facilities; it is found in the advertising of Starbucks, 7-Eleven, and other international businesses and is used playfully in creative shop names on upmarket streets. Moreover, English script is sometimes used 'decoratively' on objects such as scooters and signs on housing complexes or shops where it signifies 'cosmopolitanism', 'fashion', or 'cool' (Curtin op.cit.). How might this pedagogic potential be realized? The four resources model draws attention to links between text, context, and communicative function. It suggests that teachers focus on the ways that texts are shaped by contexts of use, what readers are supposed to do with a given text, and what counts as a successful reading of text in context (Freebody and Luke op.cit.). All these dimensions of pragmatic competence can be developed through an English literacy walk.

With a little creativity, more or less authentic pragmatic experiences involving functional environmental print can be built into English literacy walks. In Taipei, as in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities where extensive bilingual signage has been put up to create English-friendly environments, there are opportunities for students to not only use English, but also to reflect on text and reading. Beginners (McKay 2007) might be encouraged to predict the signage they expect to see (for example in restrooms, cloakrooms, cafés, shops, on street signs) during a visit to the park, zoo, museum, art gallery, or some other tourist attraction. During the excursion they could use the signs and/or an English language map to navigate their way around. Images of signage could be captured to illustrate a written recount of the visit. During all these activities students could be guided to evaluate their success as functional readers of English. More advanced learners might use environmental print to prepare a 'local living guide' for visiting exchange students. They could visit shopping areas, transport facilities, and entertainment venues to identify and capture images of useful functional English signage. Afterwards, they might use the images to illustrate maps and written directions for the visitors (see Picture 5).

English literacy walks are opportunities for more than authentic pragmatic practice; they can be used also to promote explicit pragmatic awareness. The 'linguistic landscape project' (Rowland op.cit.)



PICTURE 5
A sign giving directions



PICTURE 6
Bilingual wordplay on a café design



PICTURE 7
Japanese-English tea shop
sign in a Chinese language
environment

for more advanced learners serves this end. This project is a post-walk activity requiring students to categorize images of signage by communicative function. The characteristics of the English signage of Taipei (Curtin op.cit.) suggest a set of relevant teacher questions (see [Pictures 6 and 7](#)).

- Is the English on this sign for us to read (for example persuasive language in advertisements) or is it decorative?
- If it is English for reading, why do we read it? Do we read it for information that helps us do things (for example locate the café at the park)? Do we read it while thinking about buying things (i.e. advertisements)? Do we read it for information and then reread it for fun (for example amusing wordplay in a shop name)?
- When are we likely to read this sign? What are we doing while we are reading this sign? What do we do after we read this sign? How does the message on the sign affect what we do?

The aims of the pragmatically oriented activities we have suggested are to prompt students to use environmental English for authentic purposes and to become aware of the pragmatics of textual design. This presupposes meaning-making. It is to those practices that we now turn.

Becoming an English text participant

For beginners, whose comprehension is limited (McKay op.cit.), reading their way through the linguistic landscape can be motivating: text is short and repetitive; print is richly contextualized by visuals and/or the setting. In making use of functional print during excursions to the park, zoo, museum, art gallery, or other tourist attractions as described above, students can enjoy rewarding meaning-making experiences.

Beyond this, the streets of cities such as Taipei offer opportunities for teaching EFL students to create meaning from multilingual, multimodal texts. Functional English is often found on signs that use not only English and Chinese, but also icons and maps. Advertisements likewise deploy words in one or more languages in combination with visual elements (Curtin op.cit.). Much of the pedagogic potential of linguistic landscapes arises from making meaning from these complex textual designs (Cenoz and Gorter op.cit.).

Explicit instruction during an English literacy walk for more advanced learners might address linguistic, visual, and multimodal design features. Teacher questions should guide students to explore design features integral to making meaning from particular texts. We take as our example here the shop signs so prominent in the linguistic landscape of Taipei and other globalized cities. To prepare for the walk, teachers should conduct preparatory lessons with exemplar images shared by data projector, printout, or online folder. Students could be commissioned to find certain types of images or to bring back a rich set of different images. To assist students to make sense of messages in different and integrated meaning-making modes, questions should be similar to those which will be used in post-walk activities.

- Which languages are used in this shop sign? Which meanings are delivered by which languages? Are the languages mixed?

If so, how? How do different languages contribute to the wordplay? What phrases or sentence structures does the text use? (Pictures 6–9) (Cenoz and Gorter op.cit.; Rowland op.cit.)

- Which meanings are delivered by the visual design elements of this advertisement? What does this colour mean to us? What does this font connote? What meaning does this shape carry? (Pictures 8 and 9) (Exley and Mills 2012; Rowland op.cit.)
- How do the words and visual elements work together to create meaning in this advertisement? Do they reinforce each other? Do they carry different parts of the meaning? Do they carry different meanings? Do either the words or the visual elements carry most of the meaning? (Pictures 8 and 9) (Cenoz and Gorter op.cit.; Rowland op.cit.)
- How do the visual messages invite you to take action? (Cenoz and Gorter op.cit.; Rowland op.cit.)

Explicit knowledge of multiple and multimodal textual design features provides a basis for instruction in some of the comprehension strategies students can use to make meaning from the texts of the linguistic landscape. Drawing inferences is one of these. To develop this strategy, students might be asked an inferential question about the product featured in an advertisement. If an advertisement targets an implicit problem, then the question could be: ‘What problem does this product purport to solve?’ After answering, students might be asked to identify the sources of their inferences: both the linguistic, visual, and multimodal textual information on which they drew and the knowledge they brought to the text in order to ‘read between the lines’. Visualizing is another comprehension strategy that can be used to deepen participation in the meanings of an advertisement. For example, students might be asked to imagine themselves in the scene depicted in an advertisement: ‘What would you and the others in the scene be doing, thinking, and feeling?’.



PICTURE 8
A beauty shop sign



PICTURE 9
Convenience store sign with cute visual elements

The activities we have suggested here are designed to enable students to make meanings from English signage. But there is more to comprehension than this: critique can deepen student engagement with textual meaning (Huang op.cit.). It is to practices of text analysis, then, that we now turn.

Becoming an English text analyst

The very presence of English in the linguistic landscape of Taipei conveys multiple meanings. The signage of Starbucks and 7-Eleven, for example, signifies internationalization even as those businesses become localized. Decorative displays of English roman script on posters, housing complexes, and so forth around the city signify a cosmopolitanism that is a mark of East Asian modernity. Moreover, creative English wordplay is a distinctive feature of shop names in upscale commercial districts (Curtin op.cit.). In short, English conveys many different meanings on the streets of Taipei, as it does in other globalized cities around the world.

Text analysis enables students to probe the social meanings and values conveyed by language choices in multilingual texts. Some of these relate to the very fact that English appears in a text while others relate to the choices made within English meaning systems. In post-walk activity, teachers might engage students in critical dialogue about these choices. Productive lines of teacher questioning can be drawn from critical literacy and linguistic landscape projects.

- What does this advertisement try to make us feel and think? How does it use languages, ideas, words, and images to do that? Whose interests does this serve? Do other advertisements for similar products have similar effects? Why or why not? (Huang op.cit.)
- What values and ideas enable a writer to produce this text unselfconsciously and a reader to make sense of it naively? (Freebody and Luke op.cit.)
- Can we find an online advertisement for this same product targeting consumers in another country? How is it similar to or different from the advertisement on our street? Why does one company market the product differently to people in different countries? How is English used differently in the advertisements targeting markets in Taiwan and an English-dominant country? (Exley and Mills op.cit.)
- Are there other ways to think about this product? Why are they absent from the sign? Would the advertisement work if it included those perspectives? And if so, where and for whom? Why? (Huang op.cit.)

To the extent that it can be conducted orally, and with strategic use of first language, text analysis of English in the signage of multilingual, multimodal linguistic landscapes need not be restricted to advanced learners. With appropriate support, even beginners can critique the hegemony of English and the ideologies it carries. Indeed, it is imperative that they be equipped to do so lest the empowering potential of critical pedagogies be reserved for those with high levels of conventional English literacy. To establish mastery of conventional

skills as a barrier to entry into critical English literacies is to deny second language learners essential literate capabilities in a world where English is implicated in relations of power with consequences for social, cultural, and economic life chances (Luke and Dooley 2011).

Conclusion

Since English has become a *lingua franca* for global communication, authorities in cities such as Taipei, Beijing, and Shanghai have worked at creating English-friendly environments by including bilingual signs and posters to facilitate communication. Moreover, as is the case globally, English signage has proliferated for reasons of identity and commerce: the English on local signs is not always intended for visitors but sometimes replaces or supplements the local language (Sayer op.cit.; Curtin op.cit.). Environmental print, therefore, has become a useful, if politically complex, resource for learning English in contexts where language teachers once lamented the paucity of English input outside the classroom. As pedestrians, however, EFL students might well be oblivious to bilingual signs if they have not been reminded to attend to them. Yet, with proper attention, these street signs have the potential to not only help learners of English become familiar with the codes of environmental print, but also to lead them to actively participate in meaning-making processes in which textual analysis as well as appreciation of the design will emerge.

The pedagogic challenge is to find ways of encouraging students to capitalize on the English that is an increasingly abundant source of input in linguistic landscapes in globalized cities around the world. Through the four resources model (i.e. text code-breaker, text user, text participant, and text analyst), we have been able to look at some possibilities for taking students into the linguistic landscape and bringing some of the texts of that landscape into the classroom. The model is a useful heuristic; it enables systematic consideration of the reading practices required in text-saturated twenty-first century worlds. While we have separated out the four families of practice for purposes of description, they can be integrated in instructional activity. Any one act of reading involves a configuration of practices; instructional emphases should vary with local priorities.

Final version received September 2013

Note

¹ This article was written with funding support from the National Taiwan Normal University Faculty Exchange program, NSC 101-2511-S-003-057-MY3, and the Queensland University of Technology Long Professional Development Leave scheme. We also thank the *ELT Journal* reviewers for their helpful feedback.

References

Cenoz, J. and D. Gorter. 2008. 'The linguistic landscape as an additional source of input in second language acquisition'. *IRAL: International*

Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching 46/3: 267–87.

Curtin, M. L. 2009. 'Languages on display: indexical signs, identities and the linguistic landscape of Taipei' in E. Shohamy and D. Gorter (eds.).

Dagenais, D., D. Moore, C. Sabatier, P. Lamarre, and F. Armand. 2009. 'Linguistic landscape and language awareness' in E. Shohamy and D. Gorter (eds.).

Exley, B. and K. Mills. 2012. 'Parsing the Australian English curriculum: grammar, multimodality and cross-cultural texts'. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 35/1: 192–205.

- Freebody, P. and A. Luke.** 1990. 'Literacies programs: debates and demands in cultural context'. *Prospect* 5/3: 7–16.
- Huang, S.-Y.** 2011. 'Reading "further and beyond the text": student perspectives of critical literacy in EFL reading and writing'. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 55/2: 145–54.
- Hudelson, S.** 1984. 'Kan yu ret and rayt en Ingles: children become literate in English as a second language'. *TESOL Quarterly* 18/2: 221–35.
- Luke, A. and K. Dooley.** 2011. 'Critical literacy and second language learning' in E. Hinkel (ed.). *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Vol II). New York, NY: Routledge.
- McKay, P.** 2007. *Assessing, Monitoring and Understanding English as a Second Language in Schools: The NLLIA ESL Bandscales (Version 2)*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology and Independent Schools Queensland.
- Rowland, L.** 2013. 'The pedagogical benefits of a linguistic landscape project in Japan'. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 16/4: 494–505.
- Sayer, P.** 2010. 'Using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource'. *ELT Journal* 64/2: 143–54.
- Shohamy, E. and D. Gorter** (eds.). 2009. *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Shohamy, E. and S. Waksman.** 2009. 'Linguistic landscape as an ecological arena: modalities, meanings, negotiations, education' in E. Shohamy and D. Gorter (eds.).
- Teng, C. W.** 2009. 'A study on the effectiveness of elementary school's environmental print: a case study of one Taipei county elementary school'. MA dissertation, National Chengchi University, Taiwan. Available at <http://thesis.lib.nccu.edu.tw> (accessed on 11 November 2013).
- Vukelich, C., J. Christie, and B. Enz.** 2012. *Helping Young Children Learn Language and Literacy: Birth through Kindergarten* (third edition). Boston, MA: Pearson.

The authors

Chiou-lan Chern is a Professor of English at National Taiwan Normal University. She has taught courses on TEFL methodology and language skills at undergraduate levels and reading seminar at the graduate level. Her research interests are in L2 reading and critical thinking as well as EFL teacher education.

Email: clchern@ntnu.edu.tw

Karen Dooley is an Associate Professor in the School of Curriculum, Queensland University of Technology where she teaches English curriculum. Her research has looked at pedagogy for refugee students, digital and print literacies in a high poverty, high diversity school, and iPad use in kindergartens.

Email: k.dooley@qut.edu.au