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## Engaging with difference: Integrating the linguistic landscape in virtual exchange

In this article we present the findings from a virtual exchange project between undergraduate students of English at a Spanish University and students of Spanish at an American university. After engaging in information exchange, comparison and discussion of four cultural topics using WordPress and Zoom, the final task involved exploring the linguistic landscape and how the foreign/second language was used in their respective cities in order to encourage cultural awareness and engagement with difference. Data analysis included quantitative analysis (descriptive statistics) and qualitative analysis (coding and categorization) of the photos taken by the students in addition to qualitative analysis (open coding, Grounded theory) of the content of their reflection essays. Results suggest that the students engaged with difference at deep levels and that, when integrated in virtual exchange, issues relating to social representation and identity can be negotiated and differences can be acknowledged and valued.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The integration of Virtual Exchange (VE) (telecollaboration or online intercultural exchange) to promote language and intercultural learning has grown significantly over the last twenty years. This innovative pedagogy, which involves “sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators” (Evolve, 2019: para. 1), has achieved an increasing presence in our classrooms. Although found originally in the foreign language classrooms as a means to develop language and culture learning, more recently it has spread to other contexts such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) classrooms where English is used to teach content in Higher and Secondary Education (Schultheis-Moore & Simon, 2015).

Research in VE has confirmed that, in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge, this activity can encourage the development of key competences for employability such as foreign language (Luo & Yang, 2018), intercultural skills (Schenker 2012; Author

2017; 2019), autonomy (Little, 2016), learning to learn (García-Esteban, Villareal and Bueno-Alastuey, 2019), multiliteracies (Guth & Helm, 2012) and telecollaborative skills (Dooly & Sadler, 2013; O'Dowd, 2015). More recently, this initiative has become the objective of the European Commission, who, in 2018, launched the Erasmus + Virtual Exchange project. This initiative aims to engage young students in VE in order to help them develop a better understanding of one another by promoting language learning and intercultural dialogue in the multilingual and multicultural society that we are immersed in. Given its transnational nature "VE can also encourage internationalization on a large scale since it can offer students with economic difficulties or disabilities the possibility of experiencing intercultural exchange from their home institutions" (Author, 2020, p.64).

Despite its great potential for intercultural learning, VE is not without its challenges. Many researchers have elaborated on the difficulties its implementation poses for the non-trained practitioner and how there is a danger that students involved in this practice may achieve only a superficial level of engagement with difference in their intercultural interaction:

"Students [focus] on similarities and finding common ground in order to complete their assignments, suppressing [...] deeper explorations and engagement with difference". (Helm & Baroni, 2020, p. 182)

This finding is also supported by studies that analyse the linguistic strategies used by students in their virtual interaction (Belz, 2003) since they reveal the presence of discursive devices (i.e. types of politeness or evaluative language markers) that allow them to claim common ground as a way of focusing on the task while avoiding confrontation. In this context, difference is usually perceived as something that has to be managed or ignored, and students avoid questioning or facing up to difference in order to complete tasks quickly and with minimum strife.

Taking this difficulty to engage with difference in VE as a challenge we wanted our students to overcome in future exchanges, in this article we set out to explore whether the linguistic landscape (LL), when integrated in VE, can become an effective means to move beyond similarities and engage with difference.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 The Linguistic Landscape**

Research in this field has increased dramatically over the last ten years (Barni & Bagna, 2010; Malinowski, 2015; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni, 2010; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009) and there are multiple evolving concepts that refer to the LL in the literature. These include the notions of ‘cities as texts’ (Mondada, 2010), ‘the multilingual cityscape’ (Gorter, 2006), or ‘word on the street’ (Foust & Fuggle, 2011). There is also a wide variety of definitions of the LL, ranging from those that focus on the textual dimension and describe it as the “linguistic items found in the public space” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 110), to those that prefer to adopt a perspective that revolves around the social value of the languages involved: “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 23). These latter authors also offer one of the most widely quoted definitions in the literature:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 25)

Although nowadays the variety of signs is much wider, this definition still captures the essence of LL, which is multimodal (it combines visual and written texts), whilst it can also incorporate the use of multiple languages (multilingual). In recent years, the type of signs that can be found in the public space has broadened to include the language on T-shirts (Coupland, 2010), stamp machines (Van Mensel & Darquennes, 2012), jars of

honey (Blackwood & Tufi, 2012), football banners (Siebetchu, 2016), postcards (Jaworski, 2010), tattoos (Peck and Stroud, 2015), graffiti, flyers, posters, public art and political announcements (Burwell & Lenters, 2015).

In addition to the language found in the texts, authors such as Shohamy and Waksman (2009) suggest that the definition of the LL needs to expand and “go beyond the ‘written’ texts of signs in multilingual versions and include verbal texts, images, objects, placement in time and space as well as human beings” (p.9). This expanded definition calls for a multifarious approach to research in this field, and theoretical underpinnings found in the specialized literature include sociocultural theory (Blommaert, 2013), linguistic anthropology (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009), language policy and planning (Backhaus, 2009), geographic mapping (Barni & Bagna, 2008), geosemiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), and multimodality (Kress & Van Louven, 2006). In this expanded version, the LL is understood as a dynamic, flowing, non-linear, multilingual, multimodal, interactive and constantly changing space that “signals what languages are prominent and valued [...] and indexes the social positioning of people who identify with particular languages” (Dagenais, Moore, Sabatier, Lamarre, & Armand, 2009, p. 254). In this space, the presence or absence of languages sends direct and indirect messages with regard to the centrality versus the marginality of certain languages in society (Shohamy, 2006) and social actors contribute to shape this space and construct their own identities in their interaction with it. The LL is also “authentic, contextualized input which is part of the social context” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008, p. 274), which makes it an always accessible and readily available resource for language learning.

## **2.2 The Linguistic Landscape in Second and Foreign Language Contexts**

Some studies have mentioned the potential benefits that incorporating critical explorations of the LL into the foreign language classroom can have for students’

linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, multimodal, multiliterate, critical and reflective competences, both in foreign language contexts (Rowland, 2012; Sayer, 2010) and second language contexts (Burwell & Lenters, 2015; Dagenais et al. 2009). Sayer (2010) explored Oaxaca's LL and his investigation was prompted by a question: Why do people use English on signs in this community? He took 250 sign photos and organized them into different categories (i.e. audience, purpose, type and social meaning). He then suggested that this activity could be easily integrated into the FL classroom and offered some ideas of tasks that aimed to develop students' vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and grammatical features through an analysis of the LL.

In a similar study, Rowland (2012) following Sayer's (2009) asked his students to photograph and document instances of the foreign language in daily situations and contexts in Japan. The objective was to respond to the question "Why is English so prevalent around you and why is it there? This author found that his students showed evidence of gains in critical literacy skills, pragmatic competence, incidental language, multimodal literacy skills, multi-competence and sensitivity to connotational aspects of language (p. 496-7). He concludes that pedagogical LL projects can be valuable to students in a variety of ways, particularly in the development of their symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2009) and literacy skills in a multiliteracies sense (New London Group, 1996).

In a second language context, Dagenais et al. (2009) organized a telecollaborative project between elementary school children from two schools in Canada. The main objective was to cultivate the children's critical sociolinguistic awareness of the diversity around them through community-based activities. In their conclusions, the authors emphasize the need for intentional and direct pedagogical intervention for learning in the LL and activities

that take into account “their out-of-school lives, their own values and perceptions” (2009, p. 266).

Finally, also set in Canada, Burwell and Lenters (2015) reported on a case study in which Grade 10 students explored community identity through the production of collaboratively created audiovisual photo documentaries. After analyzing their documentaries, the authors concluded that the students were capable of identifying the gap between how their community is represented and how they experience it in their daily lives. They arrived at the conclusion that a critical approach to LL analysis can provide a unique pedagogical tool that allows students to explore issues of language, identity and representation, and helps them recognize the complexity of meaning-making in urban landscapes.

In line with the above-mentioned studies and, given the LL’s potential to raise awareness of issues of identity, power, privilege and discrimination associated to language representation (Author, 2021), we decided to integrate it as pedagogical resource in a VE organized between undergraduate students at a university in Madrid and undergraduate students at a university in New York. The research questions leading this study are RQ1. Does the integration of LL-based activities in VE facilitate students’ moving beyond similarities to engage with difference? and RQ2. What sociocultural issues are raised when critically analyzing language representation in the LL of these cities? In order to answer these questions, we aimed to explore students’ perceptions, as language investigators, of culture and identity issues associated with the presence of the foreign/second language in their respective cities (English in Madrid and Spanish in New York).

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1 Description of project: Context and participants**

The participants in the exchange were 49 fourth-year undergraduate students, ten male students and thirty-nine females aged between 21 and 22, who enrolled on a course titled *Information and Communication Technologies*, an optional course offered on the Degree in English Studies (intact class) by a Spanish University in Madrid. As regards their competence in the foreign language, their level of English ranged between B2 and C2, according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The course aimed to foster a critical stance towards the literature underlying computer-supported collaborative learning and to involve participants in exploring different technology-based tools and their possible applications in EFL contexts to help them move from theory to classroom practice. In order to provide participants with hands-on-experience of virtual collaboration (experiential learning), an intercultural exchange was organized with students from a University in New York.

The American students were also undergraduates aged between 21 and 22, from all concentrations, who were taking *Spanish* (3 intact classes). This group was composed of fourteen male students and thirty-five female students. The American students' level of Spanish was a B2, according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages.

#### **3.2 Tools and tasks**

After introducing themselves by posting a photo or a short description on Padlet, the students worked in small groups on three tasks that adopted the 'Progressive Exchange Model' (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). This entails participants undertaking three interrelated tasks that move from information exchange to comparing and analyzing cultural



practices, and finally working on a collaborative product. See a summary of tasks in Figure 1.

Tasks	Description
Week 1. Information exchange (Wordpress)	Stereotypical beliefs about both countries and their people (Spain and the USA): Post at least 3 messages exchanging information and answer the posts uploaded by 2 of your partners.
Week 2. Information exchange (Wordpress)	History and politics: Post at least 3 messages to share with your partner some historical facts or events related to your country so that s/he can better understand where you come from. Contribute to the posts uploaded by 2 of your partners.
Week 3 Information exchange (Wordpress)	Slang and colloquial expressions: Post at least 3 messages showing your partner some colloquial and useful expressions in Spanish; s/he will do the same with English American slang. Contribute to the posts uploaded by 2 of your partners
Week 4 Information exchange (Wordpress)	The educational system: Post at least 3 messages to share information about your university experience, your studies and life on campus. Contribute to the posts uploaded by 2 of your partners.
Week 5. Comparison of cultural products (Zoom)	Explore and discuss with your partner some of the information and ideas you have exchanged in the previous 4 weeks. Compare the cultural products of both countries in a bilingual conversation.
Week 6. Exploring the Linguistic Landscape (Padlet, Zoom, Google Docs)	<p>Map the target language in your own city so that your partners may have an informed understanding of the presence of their native language in their partner's city: Spanish in New York and English in Madrid. You need to upload, tag and categorize (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006) photos and images that show how the foreign language is used in your city onto the Padlet created by the instructors. By doing this, you shall create a visual representation of the presence of English/Spanish in your urban environment. You have to tag the photos by adding a short description and the location. Then you need to analyze and/or critically think of <i>why</i>, <i>who</i>, <i>for whom</i> those signs are intended and why they are located where you found them. This will give you an insight on whom the 'language consumers' are where the signs are located, and why certain information is in the foreign/second language.</p> <p>Arrange to meet your American/Spanish partner via Zoom. You need to discuss what you have discovered about the LL of both cities after analyzing the photos. Elaborate on its significance in a joint essay that should be written in collaboration with your partner half in English and half in Spanish (Google Docs).</p>

Figure 1. Task description

The task in week 6 aimed to explore the LL of their respective cities in order to increase awareness of the prominence and value of the foreign language in the private and public spaces of Madrid and New York and consider the social and cultural repercussions of the messages. After uploading and tagging the photos, the students categorized the photos by analyzing official lettering (top-down) as well as commercial or private signs and posters (bottom-up) following Ben-Rafael et al., 2006 (see Figure 2).

Category	Type of item
Top-down (public)	1. Public institutions: religious, governmental, municipal/cultural, educational, public health
	2. Public signs of general interest
	3. Public announcements
	4. Signs of street names
Bottom-up (private)	1. Shop signs: e.g. clothing, food, jewellery, house-ware, private offices, leisure
	2. Private business signs: offices, factories, agencies
	3. Private announcements: ‘wanted’ ads, sale or rentals of flats or cars

Figure 1. Public versus private signs in the linguistic landscape (modified from Ben- Rafael et al., 2006)

Then, the students were asked to reflect and critically think of the *why*, *who* and *for whom* of the signs: Why are these signs here? Who makes these signs and decides on their language choice? Who are these signs for? Who is the target audience? The purpose was to encourage students to investigate the themes that emerged when the focus was on the social function behind the messages and to gain an insight into whom the ‘language consumers’ were, why the signs were located where they found them and why certain information was in the foreign (and not the local) language. The students’ categorizations and themes were discussed with the teacher in class and then they were asked to discuss the differences between both linguistic landscapes with their partners using Zoom,

reflecting on issues of power, majority versus minorities, discrimination, identity, community markers and interest in benefits attached to language uses. Their conclusions were to be presented in a collaborative bilingual essay and a reflection video.

### **3.3 Data collection and analysis**

At the beginning of the project, students were given a written form in which they were asked for their consent to use the data gathered from the project for research purposes. Once consent was given and after the project finished, the author and a research assistant coded the photos according to sign type, language(s), purpose, intended audience and location, and analyzed them quantitatively using descriptive statistics. Then, the photos were classified following Ben Rafael et al.'s (2006) proposal (see Table 1) into 'top-down' signs (those issued by public institutions), 'bottom-up' signs (those produced by commercial businesses) and domain (i.e. educational or religious). This last categorization also followed Ben Rafael et al.'s. (2006) coding scheme, but it was broadened to include new categories that could explain all the photos in the data set (such as public art and graffiti). These categories are the result of our own analysis and are not meant to be exhaustive, since other interpretations and meanings are also possible.

Once the photos were coded, the essays written by eleven dyads were analyzed qualitatively. After anonymizing the texts by making sure that all students' names were changed in the data, open coding (Grounded theory, Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was applied. Open coding is an inductive, constant comparative method that allows researchers to systematically sort through the data, categorizing it around commonalities to notice what themes emerge. In order to carry out the analysis four steps were followed: a) name phenomena and concepts (i.e. code every relevant finding); b) develop categories (i.e. group similar findings); c) name categories (i.e. find a name for groups); and d) develop properties and dimensions of categories (i.e. determine dimensions and values).

The qualitative analysis was carried out applying Grounded Theory (Open coding), firstly proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded Theory mainly focuses on empirical situations (Glaser & Strauss, 2017:1), consisting "of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2014:1). Thus, we needed to "separate, sort and synthesize the [...] data through qualitative coding" (Charmaz, 2014: 4). Coding helps to portray what this data is about by assigning labels to particular qualitative data segments (Charmaz, 2014: 4). Therefore, in this study the open-ended responses were analyzed through data-coding by highlighting keywords to facilitate the process of assigning the content of student's answers into unique categories. First all of the students' responses for the three open-ended questions were segmented into codes of a single word or sequence of words. For this purpose, several questions were asked in order to find the codes: "*What does this data consist of?*", "*What is the student trying to say?*", and "*How are the students' responses similar or different?*". Then, those codes were combined in order to classify them into unique categories that encompassed and explained the students' perceptions about the use of technology-based gamification.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to answer the research questions in this study (RQ1. Does the integration of LL-based activities in VE facilitate students' moving beyond similarities to engage with difference? and RQ2. What sociocultural issues are raised when critically analyzing language representation in the signs of these cities?) results from the photo analysis were looked at first.

The Spanish students took 273 digital photos of fixed signs, more specifically billboards (6, 2.1%), storefronts (143, 53.4%), product descriptions (9, 3.2%), traffic signs (1, 0.3%), flyers (6, 2.1%), posters (22, 8%), graffiti (5, 1.8%), political announcements (8, 2.9%), commercial signs (38, 13.9%), community/religious signs (31, 11.3%) and public

art (4, 1.4%). Although they were asked to take monolingual photos in the foreign language, they also took many of bilingual signs. Thus, a total of 212 (77.6%) photos were monolingual (English), 56 (20.5%) were bilingual (English-Spanish) and 5 (1.9%) were multilingual with more than two languages in various combinations. The American students took a total of 114 photos of fixed signs, more specifically storefronts (22, 18.9%), product descriptions (7, 6.1%), flyers (4, 3.5%), posters (5, 4.3%), graffiti (4, 3.5%), political announcements (3, 2.6%), commercial signs (20, 17.2%), community/religious signs (46, 39.6%) and public art (5, 4.3%). Like their counterparts, although they were asked to take monolingual photos in the foreign language, they took many of bilingual signs. Among these, 64 (56.1%) photos were monolingual (Spanish), 46 (40.3%) bilingual (Spanish-English) and 4 (3.6%) were multilingual with combinations of more than two languages.

Then, from the open coding analysis of the students' reflection essays, three main themes emerged: students' increased awareness of their surroundings, language choice and social functions, and language representation and identity. We shall illustrate and discuss these themes in the following sections.

#### **4.1 Students' increased awareness of their surroundings**

Having to take photos of the LL of their respective cities helped students to look at familiar places anew, with the "eyes of a curious stranger", as Sara mentions in her essay:

Taking photos as raw material for the project [...] was really revealing as it made me see my own city, which I knew already very well, with the eyes of a curious stranger, or a researcher who has stopped enjoying the city for a while to start analyzing it, looking for evidence of something which is very evident in a multicultural and touristic city such as Madrid but that very often passes us by without realizing (i.e. English language traces in messages, panels, instructions, etc)

Most of the students' reflections displayed this curiosity and interest in exploring cultural diversity and, as researchers, they questioned why language was used differently

depending on social identities or purposes and drew their own conclusions. As Roberts et al. (2001) mention, the major difficulty of adopting a ‘students-as-ethnographers’ approach is that students’ learning tends to be restricted to the classroom where neither fieldwork nor telematics are available (p.243). However, by adopting this approach to exploring the LL within intercultural VE, students could open up new interpretive spaces for learning with their intercultural partners which are situated in their own cities.

The project allowed students to take on the role of the researcher who collects data by taking photographs of the city and analyzes them curiously while looking for answers to the questions *why*, *who* and *for whom*. Thus, while investigating the purpose and intended audience of the signs photographed by her and her partner, Natalia suggests that the presence of “English in Madrid is mostly bottom up, whereas Spanish in New York is top down” and writes the following:

Most of the signs I saw related to the use of English in Madrid were restaurants of fast-food or markets specialized in American products importation. On the other hand, my partner Rachel found posters written in Spanish mainly related to medical and social issues, probably addressed to the Latin-American population.

This observation shows that the students’ search for answers led them to speculate about their differences and similarities. Elaborating on the way the foreign language is used on the signs in both cities, they mentioned that, while English in Madrid was widespread on private signs whose goal is to trigger economic gain, the presence of Spanish in New York had a more social purpose aimed at addressing the Hispanic population and was therefore of public interest. This generalization was supported by their own categorization which was also corroborated by results from the researchers’ photo analysis, where 143 photographs (53.4%) of the photos taken in Madrid were storefronts and 38 (13.9%) were commercial signs versus 13 (11.3%) community/religious signs. In New York, 22 photos (18.9%) belonged to storefronts and 20 (17.2%) were commercial signs versus 46 (39.6%) community/religious signs. Although these are only quantitative surface

indicators and by no means reflect the entirety of the LL of these cities, they provide a glimpse into the students' collected data and allows us to better understand their interpretations of the signs in their surroundings.

#### **4.2 Language choice and social functions**

Similar to findings in Burwell and Lenters (2015), the students remarked not only on the salience of the languages on the signs but also on the relation between language choice and the social, political, economic and cultural messages behind those signs. Elaborating on the use of language for economic profit in bottom-up (private) signs, Teresa and Erika mentioned the following:

Through our work in this project, we have been able to gauge that most brands make use of the marked-unmarked/surprising-unsurprising property of the world's languages in an attempt to awaken in potential buyers an interest in their products. Language choice is carefully studied, especially in advertising: different languages evoke different feelings and, consequently, are used in different contexts towards the achievement of different goals.

In this excerpt, the students showed increased awareness of how language choice can be used to manipulate speakers, in this case to lure passers-by into buying something. In Madrid, as English becomes increasingly globalized, it also acquires new, local meanings as people in those contexts take it up, learn it, and begin to use it for their own local purposes. This was reflected in Teresa's comments, which described the presence of English in Madrid as "fashionable and upmarket, widely used in advertising and marketing for the purpose of attracting customers" (See Figure 1).





Figure 1. Private signs (storefront and restaurant) in Madrid

In this same context, the students also discussed language and representation, reflecting on the impact English has on the social imaginary and its associations to notions of prestige, modernity and innovation. Ana expressed these ideas as follows:

When we think about the English language, ideas related to modernity, technological progress, business, science, innovation, fashion, the New York stock exchange, Hollywood, globalisation, etc. rapidly cross our minds. Once these mental associations are formed in the collective imaginary, every time we come across a sign written in English, we subconsciously think of those. In other words, we mentally configure a language by linking it with stereotypical ideas we think represent the culture of the country where that language is spoken. Accordingly, in Madrid the English language is mainly utilised to express ideas of prestige, fashion, modernity and technical efficiency, among others.

Globalization and language choice were also the focus of Marta and Cassandra's essay, which read as follows:

Nowadays, it is undeniable that we are living in an extremely globalized world. Everyone is exposed to many different languages in every city. However, the different languages we find when walking around our city do not have the same reasons for being there or the same influences on our daily life. Thanks to our discussion, we have become aware of this fact.

The students' comments above reflect Canagarajah's (2013) thoughts when he writes how "the multilateral flows of people, things, and ideas across borders has made more visible mixed forms of community and language in highly diversified geographical spaces" (p.

26). As students reflected on the complexity of these mixed forms of community in their own multilingual culture, they became aware of how much more complex it is when other cultures are involved and how not all multilingual repertoires have the same value everywhere.

When comparing these signs to those in New York (see Figure 2), the students became aware of the differences between the target audiences of the signs in both cities. Marta and Cassandra wrote: “The signs [in English] in Madrid are meant to address Spaniards, ex-pats and foreigners alike [...] however, most of the signs in Spanish found in New York are not aimed at addressing everyone like in Madrid but have a more specific target audience”. Comments like this show that the students perceived some essential differences in the use of both languages in their respective LL’s as they struggled to recognize and understand the heterogeneity of intentions and meanings that overlap in the LL. They concluded that “English in Madrid is intended for cross-cultural purposes while Spanish in New York is intended for intracultural consumption”.



Figure 2. Private signs (storefront and restaurant) in NYC

#### 4.3 Language representation and identity

In addition to the overgeneralization offered by the students above in an attempt to explain

the observable differences in the target audiences of the signs found in both cities, the students continued to investigate, realizing that the foreign language could also serve other intentions and target other audiences. This became apparent when they analyzed the graffiti found in both cities (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Graffiti in Madrid (above) and New York (below)

By critically comparing the content of the photos, the students reflected on how English in Madrid was used to represent subversive identities (i.e. ‘The city belongs to us’ or ‘Remember our names Ron’s Crew in Madrid), whereas Spanish in New York addressed Hispanic speakers to encourage community activism (i.e. ‘Todos somos Marco’, referring to the former leader of the Zapatista army in Mexico, or ‘La reina Celia’ referring to Celia Cruz, one of the most recognizable symbols of salsa music). Enrique and William expressed these ideas as follows:



A Spanish graffiti artist uses English as an act of rebellion, whereas a Hispanic graffiti artist in NYC, chooses to write in Spanish as an act of reinforcing his cultural identity/background [...] Spanish street art [in NYC] is far more politically/culturally involved while the English art in Madrid is rather trivial and its message more poetic and random. Because of this we arrived at the conclusion that [behind the use of English in Madrid] there was not a political/cultural/racial or otherwise agenda motivating the artist and it was much more an “act of rebellion” or expression for the sake of expression, and that the choice of English simply broke away from the native tongue of the country to further violate the social norm.

These students looked for sources on graffiti and street art that could support their ideas and cited LaWare (1998) on the use of mural painting in Spanish in Los Angeles. They concluded that in the graffiti found in New York “there is a clear connotation of cultural pride in what LaWare calls community activism. By comparison, the graffiti found in Madrid seems to be a form of social protest” or represents non-mainstream social identities.

The students’ analysis of top-town (public) signs and their social meanings also provided some rich insights about the purposes behind language choice in both cities (See Figure 4).





Figure 4. Public signs in Madrid

According to the students, the use of English on this type of signs in Madrid is mainly aimed at targeting foreign visitors, since most signs are bilingual. However, public signs in Spanish in New York (Figure 5) also have a different target audience, as Emma mentions:

Many of these pictures have been taken in Spanish Harlem and Washington Heights. In these two areas there are large communities of immigrants from Spanish speaking countries. This fact is reflected everywhere, in the instructions to use the subway, in the hospitals, storefronts and commercial signs. Many of these are in ‘Spanglish’ because they aim to integrate the Hispanic community and the audience is primarily the Spanish speakers.





Figure 5. Public signs in New York

This reflection added a new dimension to the interpretation of the signs in the LL since it brought to the students' attention that, in addition to the relationship between written text, image, color and design, one also needed to consider its spatial relation to the streets within the city. Mentioning Spanish Harlem and Washington Heights as neighborhoods where Hispanic communities lived helped students contextualize, and their analysis of observable differences in the use of the foreign (second) language resulted in discussions that revolved around social and racial segregation, as reflected in this excerpt by Carmen:

This conversation was sparked after we started talking about whether we used our second languages in our daily lives in any capacity. My partner T told me that in the U.S. racial segregation is a very real and prevalent phenomenon. She told me that she's actually part of a group organization called "Mujeres" which provides a space for Latinas in her campus to talk about themes like integrating into a workforce with a predominantly white hierarchy, language uses stereotypes [...] She told me that the difference in cultural identities can be a stigma and that people are often forced to choose one of their cultures to represent them, even though America is supposed to embody diversity and culture.

Excerpts like the one above revealed that the students, through engaging in intercultural dialogue with their partners, became aware of the discourses of inclusion and exclusion that reflected the inequities of the city, and of the complex connections between identity and place that face urban citizens (Gruenewald, 2003). Discussions such as this made

students question the ‘real value’ of bi(multi)lingualism and realize that not every multilingual repertoire has the same value everywhere and at all times. They also helped to raise awareness of issues relating to language status and social representation, not only in the foreign culture, but also in one’s own culture, as Ellen reflects:

I have realized that Spanish in New York is considered an inferior language. I listen to people speak Spanish in companies, in my lessons, in the streets every day and yet most people favor English. In some situations, it’d be easier for me to speak Spanish especially when I know the other person speaks the language but we use English instead. It wouldn’t be acceptable to speak Spanish and this is not because I’m not fluent but rather because I don’t want the other person to think that I’m insulting or degrading them by assuming they can’t speak English. If this were the case, they would be considered inferior or less intelligent because English is necessary. I also saw an advertisement in English for a mobile phone company in my neighborhood and the same ad in Spanish when going to Spanish Harlem. This is a clear example of the separation of languages, cultures and people.

Having to face divergent or contradictory notions about the salience of Spanish in New York meant that Ellen had to contend with having social representation contested, which also raised other issues relating to identity and power. As authors such as Dagenais et al. (2009) suggest, experiences such as this lead to representation becoming dynamic, since it has to be “reshaped through the confrontation of differences and negotiation of new meanings” (p.255). While striving to critically interpret the linguistic and social significance of multilingual signs in their situated spaces, students take on the active role of “conceptualizers, making the tacit explicit” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 185). By having to interpret these signs within the context of VE, students become ‘active designers of meaning’, engaging with difference at deeper levels and contesting social representation, not only in their own culture but also in others.

Engaging with difference at deep levels was also visible in Laura’s essay:

The fact that we unconsciously associate languages with stereotypical ideas constitutes a warning sign that is telling us that we are doing something wrong. Thanks to this project, we have learnt that language choice is a question of ideology, what we have called linguistic ideology. Language ideology is built upon stereotypical ideas that speakers unconsciously associate with languages. Stereotypes (ideal characterisation of

the foreign Other) are often infected by prejudice (judgement made on the basis of interest rather than emergent evidence), which in turn lead to reduction. Reduction happens when the complexity of a group of people is disregarded in favour of a preferred definition. It is very easy to be misled by our own preconceptions and, consequently, to reduce people according to these prescribed stereotypes: what we consider to be representative of the culture is used to define the person, simplifying the complexity of human nature. In the same way as we must avoid racist and sexist traps, we should avoid falling into the culturist trap of belittling languages and speakers to less than they are. Our telecollaborative exchange has allowed us to realise that stereotypes and prejudices on languages and speakers directly affect the way we communicate, reinforcing a 'we' against a 'they' when we should be aiming at constructing a common 'we' instead.

The use of the inclusive 'we' in the excerpt above suggests that the student is reflecting on the cultural embeddedness of her own beliefs and values and how one's life experiences also affect these beliefs. This was very relevant for María, who writes that "[...] within the context of this project, students can rethink both their own culture and their linguistic ideology, question stereotypes in order to subsequently subvert them, develop curiosity, open-mindedness and a desire to learn about other cultures, and to be empathetic and caring towards the other".

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The evidence reported by the students suggests that focusing on the LL as an activity integrated within VE provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn about language diversity from an intercultural perspective and engage with difference at deep levels and awareness of complexity. The students demonstrated a higher level of self-reflexivity and openness towards difference as they compared the linguistic landscapes of their two cities while engaging in dialogue with their international partners. The findings from this study also indicate that ethnographic methods can offer students "new ways of looking at the ordinary and the everyday, drawing out patterns from careful and extended observations of a small group [...]. Spending time 'lurking and soaking' in a



particular environment or with a group helps students develop an insider perspective on cultural processes and immerses them in the language of the group” (University of Southampton, Materials Bank). Moreover, scaffolded LL-based tasks within VE can encourage the development of intercultural learning in a multimodal environment (linguistic, visual, audio, spatial), one that allows us to see "the simultaneity of stories thus far" and “the liveliness, the complexity and openness of the configurational itself, the positive multiplicity” (Massey, 2005, pp. 12-13), a space with multiple possibilities for interpretation and “where differences are not hidden or minimised but acknowledged and valued” (Helm et al., 2012, p.107).

However, deeper understanding also brings new challenges. The students’ insights in this project led us to question the ‘real value’ of multilingualism and to consider the responsibility we have, as practitioners, to adopt a critical stance, one that involves connecting language to broader political contexts and ethical concerns and with issues of inequality, oppression and compassion (Pennycook, 1999). This should result in the integration in our classrooms of culturally-sustained pedagogies that respect students’ linguistic repertoires and raise awareness of the social conditions which constrain their individual linguistic agency and devalue their competences (Showstack, 2015).

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