

TEACHING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS¹

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SADUOV, Ruslan. 2021. „Teaching linguistic landscape to university students.“
Philologia 31 (1): 105–114.

Abstrakt: Táto štúdia sa zameriava na výklad spôsobu výučby na štátnej univerzite v Baškire, jednej z ruských vysokých škôl. Autor vysvetľuje, prečo je zážitkové učenie dôležitým aspektom súčasného univerzitného vyučovania a popisuje praktický výskumný projekt zameraný na študentov 4. ročníka lingvistiky. Jadrom projektu je jazyková krajina, ktorú majú študenti v priebehu projektu zhromažďovať, kategorizovať a analyzovať. Autor zastáva názor, že táto aktivita je pre študentov pútavejšia ako práca v triede, pričom im zároveň poskytuje zručnosti, ktoré budú môcť využiť v budúcom zamestnaní alebo vo vedeckej kariére.

Kľúčové slová: projektové vzdelávanie, vyučovací prípad, jazyková krajina, školenie zručností, zážitkové učenie

Abstract: This article is devoted to a teaching case at Bashkir State University, one of Russian schools. The author argues that experiential learning is an important aspect of contemporary university teaching and describes a practice-oriented research-based project with the 4th year linguistics students. At the core of the project is linguistic landscape that the students are assigned to collect, categorize, and analyse throughout the project. According to the author, this activity may be more engaging to students than regular classroom work, it can give them the skills their future employers need, and it can also raise the prestige of a scientific career.

Keywords: project-based education, teaching case, linguistic landscape, skill training, experiential learning

¹ The research has been supported through the Grant of the Russian President to investigate the cultural and linguistic landscape of a city in the multi-ethnic region.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching university students entails more than providing them with a sum total of knowledge. More valuable and practical are the skills the students learn for better prospects of future employment. Hands-on experience also increases students' motivation during the studies. It is interesting and engaging as well as provides a counter-balance to the theoretical knowledge instructed in universities.

Project-based instruction is becoming more and more popular in Russian universities, and, therefore, project organizers find themselves in a mainstream. One of the key reasons for establishing project-based education is the efforts of the authorities to strengthen the link between universities and the industry. The weak connection between the two is believed to hinder economic progress and increase unemployment among the young people. On the one hand, businesses find it hard to find young graduates capable of handling practical tasks even though they want the young and resourceful. On the other hands, young people become less valuable as labor market participants: employers prefer to avoid hiring them. In this respect, introducing the projects leading to hands-on experience to the curriculum is relevant. We consider such projects as not just fashion but a viable and necessary part of instruction.

Another obstacle addressed by the proposed project is the insufficient reputation of researching as an activity and a career. There are essentially three reasons why research does not attract young people: 1. Stereotype that researching is low-paid. 2. Mis-assumption that researching is not helpful for career or personal development. 3. Conviction that researching is boring. While it is not relevant to address the first reason, the other two can and should be addressed by universities. Students should be exposed to research practice in order to see that it can be engaging and enriching for them in terms of personal development and career prospects.

With these two considerations in mind, we believe that a hands-on project with a research component is capable of addressing the pressing issues of contemporary Russian education and attain educational goals with higher efficiency. The major goal of this paper is to describe a teaching case of a practice-oriented project and discuss its main outcomes as well as limitations and prospects of the hands-on approach to instruction. Specifically, we are going to describe the project which was offered to students and entailed the analysis of the linguistic landscape.

2 BACKGROUND

The student project described in this paper is based on David A. Kolb's idea of experiential learning. In *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Kolb makes a distinction between experiential learning, on the one hand, and lecture / classroom learning, on the other. He claims that learning by experience is not a pedagogical method but it is equally important because "people *do learn* from their experiences" (Kolb 2015, 6, emphasis in original).

Kolb refers to three major models which laid foundation for contemporary experiential learning, in general, and his model, in particular: 1. Lewin's model of action research and laboratory training. 2. John Dewey's model of immediate action to feedback. 3. Piaget's model where environment is an essential actor in the learning process. The three models suggest that learning is an outcome of the opposition to the real world: there are "conflicts between opposing ways of dealing with the world, suggesting that learning results from resolution of these conflicts" (Kolb 2015, 29). Without this opposition, there is no learning.

Because interaction with the environment is in the heart of our project, Piaget's model is the most applicable to our case. In line with the theoretical assumptions of Piaget and Kolb, we believe that the experiential learning through a project like ours may benefit students by teaching them to act with practicality.

3 TEACHING CASE

The teaching case described in this study took place at Bashkir State University, Russia, and its participants are upper division (4th year) Bachelor students. The students selected for this project numbered 15. All of them were enrolled in the school's new program of Fundamental and Applied Linguistics. This program was introduced in 2016 to teach students to render a spectrum of linguistic services. The main concentration of the program is sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. The students had prior training of organizing and participating in other sociolinguistic projects such as surveys and interviews.

The project was organized in the early Spring semester of 2020 as a part of the students' research practice. The students were introduced to the documentation related to the practice and the assignments they were supposed to complete. Afterwards, they were given the theoretical basics necessary for understanding the task of the project.

Specifically, the assignment was to collect, categorize, and analyze the linguistic landscape of the region's capital city Ufa. Linguistic landscape was explained as "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 23). Essentially, it is the verbal arrangement of the urban visual space: billboards, signboards, street nameplates, advertisements, etc. that we see around us. The verbal messages on linguistic landscape carry certain information about the city and its citizens.

It is essentially a behavioristic idea that it is hard for us to find out anything specific about the collective mind of citizens. It is only possible to analyze the outcomes of their verbal behavior, which is linguistic landscape, to make a conclusion about their linguistic preferences and even identity. Identity of the citizens is a black box, which we can learn about only by investigating its outcomes (landscape).

Research methodology was explained to students as well. They were instructed on how to collect the material, categorize, and analyse it. Even though the field method of collecting the material (essentially, making pictures of everything with the verbal messages) sounds easy, it requires thorough explanation because mishandling the method or technology may lead to the need to retake the pictures of landscape.

3.1 Motivation and Aim

The main motivation to introduce this project into the curriculum is the need to give students more chance to learn by doing, which is an approach that yields positive results. Normally, hands-on experience is perceived positively by teachers and students. A prior hands-on project at Bashkir State University within the scope of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project where students collaborated with American students yielded a good feedback. Students believed it was a useful assignment because it enabled them to become better project managers and more responsible collaborators. They were able to learn skills in an engaging environment through agency (Steinmann, Saduov, and Maylath 2016).

Another goal was to provide students with an opportunity to do something practical in order to balance the theoretical curriculum with practical skills. The contemporary labor market in Russia demands alumni with the experience of doing rather just knowing how to do. The existing gap is filled by the project like the one discussed in this paper. Students are meant to be equipped with skills but also empowered through the realization that they can apply their knowledge to a real-world activity.

Eventually, the project was driven by the motivation to involve students into research. Students generally dislike science and do not see it as a career prospect. It happens partially because they are regularly introduced only to one aspect of research – one that happens “in an armchair” by going through the theoretical sources and drawing conclusions based on dictionary sources in linguistic research. While fully realizing the power of this approach, we believe that students should also be exposed to the “dirty feet” type of research whereby a researcher organizes a field study and literally has to go outside and look for the empirical material. The dirty-feet studies seem to be more alluring to students due to its activity-based approach.

3.2 Technology

The study of linguistic landscape involves the use of technology. For the collection of the linguistic landscape material, one needs to use a digital camera or a cell phone with a camera. The choice between the two rests with the researcher because contemporary cell phones allow making pictures with resolution high enough for the research purposes.

The other technology necessary for the project is a PC or a laptop with an image and word processor. This is needed for the classification and analysis of the images taken during the field stage as well as for writing the report.

3.3 Assignments

The assignments for students were divided into three stages: preparatory, main, and concluding.

3.3.1 Stage 1

In this stage, students were supposed to study three sources, which provided a brief theoretical background and examples of similar studies in other parts of the world. They wrote brief summaries of the studies according to the IMRAD (introduction-method-results-discussion) structure. Afterwards, they created an introduction and a method sections of their own future study. The introduction covered the goal and tasks, as well as hypothesis. The methods part included the methods and procedure employed for the attainment of the goal.

The sources selected as representative for this project included the following:

- Backhaus P. Linguistic Landscape (Backhaus 2019)
- Zakiyatul Fakhroh & Zuliati Rohmah Linguistic Landscape of Sidoarjo City (Fakhroh and Rohmah 2018)
- Alos i Font H. Lingvisticheskii Landshaft g. Cheboksary i Zamechaniya Po Vypolneniyu Zakona Chuvashskoi Respubliki ‘O Yazykakh v Chuvashskoi Respublike.’ (Alos i Font 2014)

Backhaus was selected because of the significance of his contribution to the theory of linguistic landscape. The source provided a neat theoretical background for the study. Zakiyatul and Zuliati provided an example of the analysis similar to that proposed in this project. It was chosen to supply an example to students. The third source was chosen because it is based on the materials similar to the region of my students’. Working through these sources informed the students about the linguistic landscape and its study.

3.3.2 Stage 2

This stage was the most time- and effort-consuming but it was the most informing as well because it involved the collection and analysis of the material of the linguistic landscape. Every student selected a street of their liking from the list proposed by instructor for collecting the material from it. They went to their streets and made photos of all the signboards, billboards, advertisements, etc. After the collecting stage, they uploaded all the pictures to their PCs or laptops and commenced categorizing the elements of the landscape by putting them to separate folders the following way:

- Create separate folders for each type of verbal message (signboards, billboards, advertisements, etc.).
- In each folder, open the following folders according to the use of languages:
 - Exclusively in Russian.
 - Exclusively in Bashkir/Tatar.
 - Exclusively in English or other foreign languages.
 - The same text in Russian and Bashkir/Tatar languages.
 - Same text in Russian (and/or Bashkir/Tatar) and in a foreign language.
 - Other cases
- In each of these sub-folders with languages, highlight the pictures where words are accompanied by an image and those that are not.
- Within the “accompanied by an image” subfolder, select the wordings whose meaning is directly related to the image and those which are not.

This kind of categorization allows distinguishing the different subtypes of verbal messages on the landscape and analyze them in an orderly manner without missing any relevant examples.

In the same stage, students were supposed to prepare the preliminary results of their analysis by giving responses to the following questions:

- Which languages are predominantly used in the linguistic landscape of your street? In what combinations? In what mediums? (Give specific figures, how many examples turned out in each folder).
- In case the same information is given in several languages, which language is visually more meaningful?
- How often and how does text enter into a relationship with an image?

At the end of Stage 2, students submitted the materials they collected during the field research and the preliminary results. The pictures were supposed to be sent to instructor's email / linked to a file-sharing service / uploaded to a flash drive. The preliminary results were submitted to an instructor's email in an MS Word file.

3.3.3 Stage 3

In Stage 3, students wrote the results and discussion sections. The results included a more extended and coherent text of the initial results. The results were supposed to be revised after instructor's grading and improved accordingly. The discussion was meant to be a coherent section answering the following questions:

- What is the role and function of each language in the linguistic landscape of the city? In what instances is each language used?
- Why does one or another language prevail?
- How competently/intentionally are foreign languages used?
- How successful is the interaction between the text and the accompanying image?
- Can we say that the linguistic landscape on your street fully reflects the multi-ethnicity of the region?
- What are the possible trends of further development of the linguistic landscape of the city (which languages will become more/less influential, how will their role change)?

Answering the questions was based on the results they had arrived at. Students were offered to make a forecast of the future landscape development.

4 RESULTS AND LIMITATIONS

4.1 Outcomes

The outcomes of this project showed that the initial expectations were largely met. All the students managed to complete the assignment relatively successfully and timely. They all had positive feedback about the task and found it engaging and informative. The students confirmed that they became more confident in setting and reaching their goals, learned to plan a project, and to collect materials in the field. This fact testifies that the goal to engage students and teach them to complete practical assignment has been achieved.

It is hard to say if students started to consider the scientific career as promising, though. They certainly realized the difference between the “armchair” and “dirty feet” types of research, and some could conclude that the best results can be achieved if both approaches are combined. Yet, again, there is no conclusive evidence as to whether this goal was achieved.

4.2 Limitations and Solutions

Despite the overall positive results of the project, there are certain limitations we had to encounter during the project. One of the major ones is safety considerations of the field research. We had to admit that a young person making pictures of every sign on the street may look suspicious. Even though it is not explicitly prohibited by law, such activity may draw the attention of the law enforcement, such as police, who may approach the student to enquire about the reason of taking the pictures. Another consideration is the safety of students being outside. Safety, therefore, is a serious issue, and to address it, we have designed a field researcher’s check-list before starting the collection of the material:

- Always carry an ID with you when performing the field research.
- Always carry a student ID with you when performing the field research.
- Always carry a written explanation issued by your instructor about your activity.
- Always inform your instructor and parents/relatives about the field research time and place.
- Make sure that you collect the material in daytime only and avoid any suspicious personalities outside, if any.

These measures may seem excessive because all the streets selected for students are in the city centre, and they are safe any time of day or night. It is also unlikely that the police or any other law enforcement representatives would check the student's ID. Fortunately, nothing like this happened during the project. However, we believe that these precautions are necessary for ensuring the safety of students.

Another limitation is that each student can cover only a small portion of the landscape. The constraints of time do not allow giving students larger portions. For this reason, students may find it difficult to see the big picture. To address this limitation, we have decided to offer a final class where students present their outcomes, while the instructor makes a summary of the findings.

4.3 Future Directions

Overall, the outcomes of the project could be considered positive. Yet, they are not sufficient to say that all the goals are achieved. Several directions of further development could be named, therefore:

- Improve the current projects by addressing its limitations.
- Start other hands-on research-based projects in other disciplines taking into account the existing experience with this project.
- Add the promotion of scientific careers.

The new hands-on projects will enable schools to train students better prepared for future employment, while the promotion of scientific careers coupled with the research-based project will raise the prestige of the profession.

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