

# Using young learners' language environments for EFL learning

## Ways of working with linguistic landscapes

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In this article we explore how primary school learners of English in Germany engage with examples of English that they were asked to locate in their local environments (their linguistic landscapes, LLs). In association with each located image, the learners completed a standardised worksheet in German that asked for brief written comments about its location, the reason why they had selected the image and why they thought that English had been used. Their written reflections demonstrate that these children are remarkably sophisticated in their analyses of linguistic, social and cultural aspects of what they found. They show that with nuanced pedagogies primary school children can benefit greatly from leaving the classroom to find language examples in the worlds around them.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, primary school, language awareness, EFL learning

### Introduction

English has now spread so widely beyond its inner circle contexts that it is often literally visible as part of the language environments of most young learners of English, a (potential) visibility captured in the term 'linguistic landscape'. So far, the uses of this potential resource have been mainly researched with adult learners. Those studies that have explored children's engagement with linguistic landscapes have mainly sought to raise children's general language awareness and to increase their awareness of urban diversity (Dagenais, Moore, Sabatier, Lamarre, & Armand, 2009). They have not focussed directly on how such young EFL students' learning might connect with their immediate and experienced (non-classroom) worlds. To address this gap, we focus on the perspectives of young

learners in relation to the presence and role of English in an environment beyond the classroom where English is often referred to as a foreign language.

In the first part of this paper, we present the concept of linguistic landscape and its potential as a pedagogical resource for language learning. We discuss ways that working with data obtained from linguistic landscapes outside the classroom can possibly contribute to language learning in the classroom and simultaneously raise learners' awareness of where English can be found and how it is used. We explore this potential through an empirical study of German primary school learners' perceptions of English language as they worked with examples of English embedded in their local linguistic landscapes. We examine the children's comments on the use of English in their environments and analyse what aspects of their individual landscapes they reflected on.

### **The linguistic landscape: Identifying opportunities for (language) learning**

The term 'linguistic landscape' (LL) was first introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as a way to refer to the language displayed "on public and commercial signs" (p. 23). More broadly, it has been defined as "any display of visible written language" (Gorter, 2013, p. 190) and this definition has had as its complement the much broader scope of "inscriptions of all kinds appearing in society, such as those on clothing, newspapers and personal items." (cf. Wienold, 1994, p. 640 in Barrs, 2013, p. 6). LLs can be studied from many different perspectives. These perspectives include issues that range from those related to their creation and use to viewers' perceptions of signs as well as people's relationships with a particular linguistic landscape and their attitudes about the languages that are being used there (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2008, p. 269; Chesnut, Lee, & Schulte, 2013, p. 103; Gorter, 2013). Recognising that people live in an increasingly globalised world, "a pure monolingual linguistic landscape is a rarity" (Gorter, 2013, p. 191). Rather, depending on social context or geographic area, LLs are often bilingual or multilingual. One consequence of this is that with its growing presence worldwide, English often features prominently among the languages that are publicly displayed, particularly in urban environments.

Most research in the field of LLs to date has "approached the linguistic landscape from applied linguistics or sociolinguistics, including a language policy perspective" (Gorter, 2013, p. 191). As a result, much of this work remains focused on linguists' perceptions of LLs in particular locations (Dagenais et al., 2009, p. 253). It is only recently that LLs have begun to be explored from an educational perspective and to receive attention as "a site of language and literacy learning" (Malinowski, 2015, p. 95). Shohamy and Waksman (2009), for instance, have

argued for the potential of educational work with LLs and in doing so they made connections with the social, political and activist potential of this kind of educational work in addition to its role “as a powerful tool for [...] meaningful language learning” (p.326). With regard to language learning, Cenoz and Gorter (2008) also pointed out that the LL can be a source of “authentic, contextualized input [...] in the sense that it is not especially designed for teaching languages” (p.274) as it results from people seeking to achieve other purposes. Consistent with calls “for more detailed accounts of linguistic landscapes being used as a form of pedagogy in practice” (Chesnut et al., 2013, p.103), there has been some recent engagement with pedagogical exploration of LLs and a growing interest in identifying their potential as a resource for additional language learning (Barrs, 2013; Chern & Dooley, 2014; Chesnut et al., 2013; Hancock, 2012; Rowland, 2013; Sayer, 2010).

However, engaging with this potential is complex. It presents challenging choices and offers intriguing opportunities for both teachers and learners in working out how to go beyond and beneath the surface of language since

the LL is an ideologically loaded space shaped by both local and global forces and displaying a full range of communicative modalities. It exists as an authentic, dynamic, public mega-text. It serves real world purposes; it is constantly changing; and it is accessible to all.  
(Rowland, 2013, p.502)

To date, research into the contribution of LLs to additional language learning has focused on their potential (mainly as input) because of the different aspects of language and language use that they reveal (for an overview see Gorter, 2018). For instance, Cenoz and Gorter (2008) explored the potential use of LLs as a source of input in SLA, and in the acquisition of pragmatic competence. In contrast, Sayer’s (2010) project that analysed public signs in a city in Mexico was accompanied by a series of suggestions about ways that teachers could use “the social meanings of the English” (Sayer, 2010, p.143) of this LL in the EFL classroom. However, there is still little evidence about how language learners, particularly child language learners, perceive or interpret LLs. Recent studies have been conducted mainly with adult learners in university contexts. For example, by engaging Japanese university EFL students with their LL, Rowland (2013) explored their development of symbolic competence, critical language awareness and literacy skills. A further approach to using linguistic landscapes for university-level language learning was applied in a study by Barrs (2013), in which examples of English that had been documented by Japanese university students were used to compare linguistic aspects of Japanese and English words. Chesnut et al. (2013) documented Korean university students’ experiences when carrying out LL research. Finally, Burwell and Lenters (2015) focussed on the school context, exploring “questions of language, identity and representation”

(Burwell & Lenters, 2015, p.202) and the social meanings of language in the LL of grade 10 students' neighbourhood in Canada. So rather than concentrating on language learning, their aim focussed on "deepening understanding of diversity and multilingualism." (Gorter, 2018, p.3).

Based on the findings of such studies and projects, a number of benefits of work with linguistic landscapes in support of language teaching and learning have been proposed. For example, working with the LL is claimed to provide opportunities for language learners to notice multiple features of a language, to engage creatively and critically with diverse aspects of the language being learned and to explore key aspects of the use of that language in context (Sayer, 2010, p.153; Rowland, 2013). It is assumed that this may support the development of L2 knowledge and language awareness and enable learners to gain new or deeper insights into social, cultural and economic values associated with that language, e.g., English as a global language. In advocating such approaches, the proponents build on well-established principles of recent approaches to language teaching. As Sayer (2010, p.153) acknowledges in relation to this issue, providing students with opportunities to construct meaning and to develop their own understanding through individual and active exploration is a familiar feature of approaches to language teaching "that promote learner autonomy through the use of student-centred activities." Such student-centred, meaning-focussed approaches have been a shared feature of additional language teaching and general pedagogy in 'western' cultures since the early 1970s, and in some instances, earlier (cf. Nunan, 1988; Rogers, 1969).

If the proposed benefits of these approaches are as claimed, working with LLs has the potential to promote additional language learning and at the same time the development of critical literacy. Given the nature of the projects summarised above and the populations with which they were conducted, the evidence in support of these claims seems stronger for adult than for child learners. Nevertheless, since many of the principles of these approaches are familiar to teachers of additional languages to learners of all ages, it is likely that the benefits could also occur in primary school programmes. However, activities that create opportunities for students learning 'foreign' languages in the classroom to achieve such combined outcomes through the study of their own (local) LL have only rarely been explored: "the value of LL projects for language learners in EFL classes has more often been proposed than demonstrated" (Rowland, 2013, p.497) – and this is especially true for young learners.

It is this lack of detailed studies directly involving exploration of learning from LLs that motivated the call by Chesnut et al. (2013, p.103) for both more detailed investigations of the practices involved in these kinds of projects as well as "for detailed studies of students' experiences investigating linguistic landscapes."

(Chesnut et al., 2013, p. 105). One reason for such studies is what Chern and Dooley (2014) drew attention to, namely “to find ways of encouraging students to capitalize on the English that is an increasingly abundant source of input in linguistic landscapes” (p. 122). A second reason is identified by Malinowski (2015) in his call for nuanced studies that engage with the point made by Dagenais et al. (2009) (see below) that the potential availability of the resources does not mean that the learners are aware of them. This potential lack of noticing of LLs that results from their apparent backgrounding in the lives of learners means that we are not in a position to know how viewers may respond to the linguistic features available in their environment. In other words, we cannot draw inferences from the observations of linguists related to LLs for how untrained viewers respond to LLs – or at least we do not know whether we can.

The abovementioned study by Dagenais et al. (2009) is one of the few studies of LLs that has been conducted with young learners. It is a pioneering longitudinal study with primary school children in grade 5 (10–11 years) in Montreal and Vancouver, Canada, to find out how the LL can be utilised for the development of language awareness. In the study, the children took pictures of signs with different languages in order to examine how different languages were represented in their multilingual communities. Dagenais et al. came to the conclusion that such activities can help develop children’s critical literacy. Importantly for our purposes, they noted ways in which LLs can contribute to learning that go beyond learning about the form of language. They suggested that by involving young learners in “examining how languages are in contact in the linguistic landscape – and in competition, children may develop a new understanding of the dynamics in their communities.” (Dagenais et al., 2009, p. 266) Again, importantly for our purposes, they noted that “the LL, for all of its richness in this particular neighborhood, was relegated to the background of [the children’s] gaze and came to their attention only through direct pedagogical intervention” (Dagenais et al., 2009, p. 264), which “serves as a prescient reminder of the need for informed, intentional, and direct pedagogical intervention for learning in the LL.” (Malinowski, 2015, p. 99)

While Dagenais et al. (2009), in their educational approach to LL research, take the perspective of young learners into account, studies with children are still rare and, to our knowledge, do not focus directly on language learning, even though the role of LLs in early language learning has begun to be discussed. For example, in a study carried out in the context of a larger study on Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE), Lopriore and Krikhaar (2011) noted that the “local linguistic landscape” could be one of the relevant “contextual factors for early language learning” (p. 67), and Rixon (2015, p. 33) suggested that LLs should also be considered as a means of informal learning for young learners of English (see Roos & Nicholas, 2019). However, as we have outlined above, there is little

evidence of whether LLs can be useful resources for children learning English as a foreign language or how learners of this age can benefit from educational approaches involving engagement with LLs. One aspect that is of relevance in this regard is an understanding of the resources that children are able to bring to the task. The significance of this issue has been suggested by others. Muñoz (2014), for instance, points out that we do not have sufficient information about the nature of “children’s development of consciousness about language” and how it intersects with (foreign) language learning. “For example, to what extent are YLs aware of the learning processes in which they engage, of their own skills as learners, or of the conditions that are favourable for their FL learning?” (p.24). These issues have to be kept in mind when asking children to reflect on language and their own language learning in the context of a task that requires them to engage with features of their local language environments – which is precisely what we asked them to do in the study that is presented in the next section.

### **Young learners engaging with the linguistic landscape: A study**

With the aim of exploring the benefits of using LLs for early EFL learning, we report on an empirical study carried out with young German learners of English. The learners were 8–11 years old and in the 3rd to 5th grades of school. The learning of English as a first foreign language at primary level has become the norm in Germany. Whereas the starting age varies between grades 1 and 3 according to the state in which the school is located, all students in this study had started learning English in grade 1.

Our starting question was “What insights into English can young learners gain outside the formal experiences in their classrooms and how could they benefit from exploring features from linguistic landscapes that they locate outside their classrooms?” We studied young learners’ engagement with their linguistic environments in diverse contexts that go beyond the default understanding of large urban environments reflected in the construct of ‘the city’. We worked with nearly 200 primary school learners of different ages in or around four different cities of different sizes and degrees of urban and populational diversity. The profile of these different learner groups is as follows:

- 23 learners in grade 3 (8- to 9-year-olds) in 1 class
- 89 learners in grade 4 (9- to 10-year-olds) in 5 classes
- 86 learners in grade 5 (10- to 11-year-olds) in 4 classes

As a result, this study is based on data from 198 German learners of English from 10 classes at 7 different schools in and around the cities of Paderborn, Lippstadt, Hamm and Münster in East Westphalia, Germany.

### Data collection and analysis

The data were collected using a worksheet that was distributed by the teachers. The worksheet was written in German and was designed to enable the children to reflect in their first language on the uses of English that they had located in various places outside their classrooms (Chern & Dooley, 2014). This kind of reflecting on English in German is quite different from, for example, translation or learning rules in one language about another language. Here the analysis of aspects of the learners' own environment served the purpose of supporting and extending the children's learning of English while at the same time expanding their critical literacy. In this dual-purpose process, the children's learning about the words or expressions that they had encountered was being extended by their reflections on the worlds in which those words were embedded and what the words that the learners identified told them about the worlds in which they were living. Our bilingual approach was designed to ensure that the children's possibilities of expressing complex and nuanced ideas about the selected words and the relationships between those words and their worlds would not be restricted by any limits in the learners' written skills in English.

The (age-appropriate, German language) worksheet given to the children contained an introductory paragraph indicating that the children's local environment would contain many different languages and that English is one of them. It explained briefly the purpose of the task, namely that the children would be asked to think about where they encounter English in their everyday lives and what they notice when English is used. The activity was then outlined. It required the children to locate and photograph English in their environment and to use the worksheet to reflect on what they had found. Examples of objects that might contain English were given that were all in public spaces.

The children completed the activity in two steps. As the first step, they took a photo or otherwise created an image of an 'example of English' that they could find in their environment. This procedure put students in the role of "language detectives" who "collect the data by taking photographs" (Sayer, 2010, p.152). It has been successfully used in other LL projects with learners of different age groups (Dagenais et al., 2009; Rowland, 2013; Sayer, 2010). As it could not be expected that all of the children would have a (smart phone with a digital) camera available, they were told that they could also draw or glue cut-out pictures (e.g., from a magazine) onto their worksheet. The students were asked to note what they had

located and where they had found the examples. In a second step, the students were asked to report and reflect on their examples: Using the worksheet, they wrote about why they had selected the particular example and why they thought English had been used (cf. Rowland, 2013). In some cases, the teachers also led class discussions about the children's reflections on the examples of English that they had found and made notes for us of what the children had said.

These two steps are also mirrored in the analysis of the data: the children's answers in the first part of the worksheet provided general information about the examples that they had photographed or otherwise recorded and the places where they had located them. These formed the basic data of the first part of the analysis. As the second step, the learners' comments on why they had selected a particular example of English and why they thought that English had been used were grouped into categories according to "common themes" and patterns that emerged from the data (cf. Barrs, 2013; Muñoz, 2014; Sayer, 2010). The results were then analysed with reference to the proposed benefits of working with LLs in order to identify in which of the areas that the literature has identified the project was able to initiate language learning processes (cf. Rowland, 2013).

## Results

There are implications for our understanding of LLs that come from working with young children. The field of LL dominantly collocates with terms such as "sign" and "urban" and reflects the perspectives of the (adult) linguists who work with them. While both signs and urban environments are part of our contexts, these sources and locations are expanded in work with young children by the environments in which those children live, learn and play. This expansion of scope included most prominently the children's homes and examples of English that they located there, either among their own possessions or in artefacts brought into the house by other family members. Following Chern and Dooley's (2014) idea to encourage students "to engage independently with their linguistic environment" and "to discover images [in our case 'examples of English'] and to capture those that interest or appeal to them" (p.115), the children were not restricted in where to look for examples of English. This approach to data collection means that the examples generally reflect the children's perspectives rather than deliberately reflecting the frames that have been introduced by linguists working in this area.

In presenting the results, we begin with the kinds of examples the children found and where they had located them. Then, we examine the reasons why the children reported selecting them and finally discuss the children's comments on why they think that English had been used.





research – not just because it is apparently a space that contains various artefacts on which English is inscribed, but also because this provides insights into how the children’s landscapes and their lives are related, are woven into each other (see Tran, Starks, & Nicholas, 2020). Other examples of English were found in various locations in the children’s home town or in specific places that the children would frequent such as the local supermarket or the school.

**Table 1.** Selected examples and locations

Selected examples – What?	
Advertising and general signs on/in shops	45%
Toys and hobbies	13.5%
Clothes and accessories	8.5%
Books, magazines, newspapers	7%
Food and drink	7%
Other (e.g., postcards, posters, decorative objects)	19%
Selected examples – Where?	
Private home	45%
Personal environment (e.g., supermarket or school)	33%
Other (e.g., internet, mobile phone, diverse locations while on holiday, amusement park)	22%

What the examples make clear and what is also mirrored in the written reflections of the children, as we will see below, is that LLs are powerfully and individually constructed. A trained linguist may seek to make sense of the larger collective aspects of LLs, but (at least) for young children, there is a vital, personal and differentiated aspect to the engagement with LLs that has not been foregrounded in previous research: It is not necessary to leave the house to encounter examples of English. The spread of the landscape referred to by Gorter (2013) extends not only beyond historical national boundaries but also into the intimate worlds of learners, including what they read, play with and eat. What the children select as examples reveals and underscores this perspective.

As Gorter (2013, p.196) rightly states, most LL studies “have as the main focal point the analysis of language(s) displayed on signs in public space.” In contrast, the children in our study largely construct the LL through the resources of their homes or other relatively intimate locations. The results illustrate that there is no one view of a LL, which also gives rise to the claim that the viewer should have a more significant role in how we define what constitutes an LL (see Tran, Starks, & Nicholas, 2020) in LL research. Taken together, the examples that the children located show connections to ‘their world’ and their experiences and make it pos-

sible for the outside observer to build up a picture of the landscapes that are available to young learners.

### English in the environment: Why examples were selected

As indicated above, the children were given the general instruction to locate examples of uses of English (anywhere) in their environment. While they also received the worksheet with prompts to respond to once their example had been located, the instruction was the very simple (but language focussed) one of find and photograph an example of English. The children selected their examples for different reasons, that ranged from unanalysed personal preferences (Example (1)) or pragmatic solutions to time management or effort issues (Examples (2) and (3)) to many comments that were directly related to thoughtful analyses of the role of English in their environment (Examples (4) and (5)). We present the comments made by the children in English for ease of understanding. Generally, these comments were made in German and our translations attempt to replicate the colloquial nature of the original comments. For each example, the grade level of the student and some contextualising information are provided.

I chose this example...

- (1) because I like it. (grade 5; advertisement for a carpet 'Wool Empire' from a magazine)
- (2) because it was easy to find. (grade 4; products in an advertising leaflet, e.g., chicken, hamburger, notebook)
- (3) because I saw it while I was eating my muesli. (grade 3; two packages of muesli, "Honey Wheat" and "Choco Chips")
- (4) because I noticed it when shopping. (grade 5; sign for a toy shop)
- (5) because I saw that the job ad. contained many English job names (e.g., "Job, Allroundkraft [General assistant], Account manager"). (grade 4; job vacancies in the local newspaper)

Comments such as the ones in Examples (3)–(5) seem to indicate that the activity supported the students in actively looking for, noticing and gaining new insights into the use of English in their environments. We assume, for example, that it is not usual for a grade 4 student to be consulting the employment section of a newspaper and they probably don't normally read their cereal packets while having breakfast. So the task itself influenced the way that the children engaged with the worlds around them, but the worlds that they engaged with were ones that were accessible to them without great effort, indeed often ones that they

frequented but now began to see in new ways. Students' perceptions of the use of English in their environment are reflected in their comments on why they thought English was used in the examples they had chosen. These comments are discussed in the next section.

### Why was English used?

The learners' reflections on why English was used in their examples reveal different aspects of the potential benefits of LLs as a resource for EFL learning. The learners learned about language, specific languages (German and English) or possible relationships between languages, specific social practices or possibly preferences, as well as the social and cultural values associated with specific languages, personal plurilingualism or social multilingualism.

The children's responses could be broadly classified into two categories. The first category groups together responses that refer to L2 knowledge and language awareness and the second category contains those responses that refer to insights into social, cultural or economic values associated with English.

#### *L2 knowledge and language awareness*

Children from all classes (ages 8 to 11) referred to the importance of English in the world and its wide use for international communication:

- (6) ... because this (English) is a language that people all over the world understand. (grade 4)
- (7) ... because it (English) is a world language and nearly everyone speaks it. (grade 5)

Regarding the use of English in Germany, the frequent use of English words seems to be both a normal phenomenon for these children, e.g., in the area of fashion, but also one that they perceive as an increasing trend, as can be seen in Examples (8) and (9):

- (8) ... because fashion magazines use many English words: "Outfit, Style, Sneaker, High heels." (grade 5)
- (9) ... that Germany now uses lots of English. (grade 5)

Many children demonstrated a consciousness of the fact that many of the English words that are commonly used in German either cannot be translated because they have become so widely used in Germany that other options are not viable (would appear in some way 'odd' to the general population) or because the con-

cepts that the words convey reflect aspects of lifestyle that have originated outside Germany, as illustrated in Examples (10)–(13):

- (10) Many English words cannot be translated. (grade 5; a package of sweets called “Yoghurt-Gums”)
- (11) “T-Shirt, Jeans, Cola, Computer” are English and German. (grade 4)
- (12) ... there is absolutely no translation for the word “fitness”. (grade 5)
- (13) What other way can you say “Online-Shop?” (grade 5)

The comments show that English plays an important role in the children’s everyday lives and that this is reflected in their LLs. As areas extensively populated by words in English such as fashion, sports, technology or digital media have become part of the children’s everyday lives and speech, the question can be raised of whether English can generally be considered a ‘foreign’ language in the German context. The children seem to have already reached the conclusion that English is not entirely ‘foreign’, but they are nevertheless clear that German and English are different not just because of their names but also because of the different linguistic features that the children associate with the two languages. Comparing English and German, the children noted that English is ‘shorter’ (Examples (14) and (15)), an observation that was also made by adult learners reported in a previous LL study (Rowland, 2013, p. 501):

- (14) ... because it’s shorter in English: E-bike vs. *Elektrofahrrad*. (grade 5)

Referring to the English words she had photographed on her T-shirt, one student even concluded:

- (15) In German you’d need a bigger T-shirt, but not in English. (grade 5)

This comment makes another important point about the perspectives that non-linguists bring to their analyses of language. The ways in which words and worlds intersect in the lives of children are not automatically those of the technically-informed linguist, but they reveal the values informing perspectives on worlds and words that are crucial to making connections with learning-centred teaching.

All in all, the children’s comments referring to L2 knowledge and language awareness show how the activity led the children to attend to and reflect on different language-related aspects of their environments. Also, they illustrate their developing awareness of both English and its linguistic and social relationship(s) with German, thereby providing the learners with possibilities to learn more about their own language. Their comments are not only descriptive. There is a strong evaluative quality in many of the comments that indicates that the learners brought their critical faculties to bear on the task that was

set for them. In the process they revealed what may be surprising features of metalinguistic awareness.

*Insights into social, cultural and economic values associated with English*

When asked why English was used in their example, the most common answer was “because it sounds better”, as expressed in Example (16) below. In their reflections, the children from all grade levels also named many of the attributes commonly associated with English that are constructed as positive and that have also been named by adults in previous LL research, such as “modernity and internationalism” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008, p.282.), “an image of coolness” and the “idea of being fashionable” (Sayer, 2010, p.147). This is exemplified in the comments in Example (17) and (18):

- (16) ... because it sounds better like that. [grade 3; a toy (one from a set of collectible frog figurines), “Frogs & Co.”]
- (17) It sounds as if it comes from the big wide world. (grade 5; a clothes shop, “New Yorker”)
- (18) A T-shirt with ‘*toll*’ [fantastic] on it isn’t modern, but ‘cool’ is much more modern. (grade 4)

The third comment (Example (18)), which was noted in comparable ways by learners from other groups, also suggests that for these children living in Germany, German does not carry these “cool, trendy” attributes. This indicates the learners’ beginning sensitivity to connotational meanings of English. Considering similar observations that he made in relation to older learners, Rowland (2013) commented on the important role of instruction in this context, because it can provide a framework to promote the development of such emerging skills:

Although such observations [by the children] may appear unsubtle, they do indicate that with instruction in this area and with further opportunities to refine these skills of analysis (...) EFL learners could develop more sophisticated insights into how language [...] projects social meanings and social values through connotation. (Rowland, 2013, p.501)

That even young learners can develop an understanding of such meanings is revealed in some of the children’s comments that the use of English might influence their behaviour as consumers:

- (19) ... because many more people would buy it then than if German words were on it. (grade 4)

- (20) It sounds a lot cooler in English than in German, otherwise, I wouldn't buy it.  
(grade 5)

Comments such as these reflect basic abilities to interpret the intentions behind the use of English in a specific context (e.g., advertising) and could also be an indicator of a developing awareness that English can act as a symbolic resource (cf. Kelly-Holmes, 2000). As such, the comments could be considered as an initial step in "developing students' critical literacy skills" (Dagenais et al., 2009; Rowland, 2013, p. 498).

At a descriptive level, learners were also aware that there are some limitations on the shaping of public LLs that connect with the ability of (potential) viewers to understand and use English:

- (21) It is assumed that people know the English words. (grade 5)  
(22) ... because I understand English, but other people, for instance younger children or older people don't. (grade 5)  
(23) Old people can't read English. (grade 5)

However, one learner revealed a very sophisticated reading of the multiple meanings of words when he noted in a comment that related to a local baseball club that using English may not always be a clever move:

- (24) The [name of town] baseball club is 'The Untouchables.' I don't think that they know themselves what that means. If they lose a match, they will have made themselves a laughing stock. (grade 5)

For all of the learners, there was evidence that they were aware of advantages of being proficient in English that extended well beyond the normal instrumentalism of seeking employment or taking holidays. Their comments reflect a deeper awareness of some of the other dimensions of mobility and globalisation that are not a standard part of our understanding of the capacities that young learners bring with them. This becomes obvious in Example (25) (as recorded during a class discussion by one of the teachers) in relation to the intakes of refugees in Germany:

- (25) We can also communicate with the refugees in English. (student from grade 5; teacher's notes)

All in all, the students' comments provide evidence that young learners of English in Germany can bring interesting and powerful resources to the analysis of the language in their environments and can benefit from working with LLs in various ways. The data show that the approach that was used has the potential to support

the development of language awareness and in the process can help provide insights into both lexical and social meanings of English.

### *Student feedback*

As Cenoz and Gorter (2008) suggest, “(a)n attempt to find out about the importance of the linguistic landscape is to ask learners about their perception of its role in language acquisition” (pp. 273–274). Thus, after they had completed the task, the students were asked whether they had previously noticed that English is often used in their environment and whether they thought that they would pay more attention to it in the future. Comments from the four grade 5 classes during such discussions that were noted by their teachers included:

- (26) It wasn't clear to me before (the activity) that I have more than 20 things in my room that you can see English on. If, for example, I open up my wardrobe, there are lots of T-shirts that have English words on them. Now I see that instantly.
- (27) I've seen it often, but I hadn't really noticed that English words have such a special impact and as a result stand out so much more.
- (28) I try to pay more attention to that (now) because I can learn more words. That (the LL) helps me do that.
- (29) We should pay more attention to it (the LL). Then we would learn English better. After all, it is a world language.
- (30) The English words didn't stand out to us so clearly until we did this activity in the English class.

We interpret Example (29) as suggesting that the activity has either reinforced for this learner (or perhaps opened up an insight) that English is more than just a subject in their curriculum and is involved in shaping the worlds in which the children are living. As Example (30) makes clear, the exercise of engaging with LLs is not one that begins with an empty slate but explicitly engaging with the LLs has created a new awareness of what makes up the linguistic landscape and perhaps also what can be made of that scape. Despite the issues of backgrounding referred to by Dagenais et al. (2009) and the need for sophisticated pedagogies referred to by Malinowski (2015), these learners reveal a general level of awareness of multilingualism in the world that existed before they undertook the task – and especially of the role played by English as an international language. This general awareness was often sharpened, but in some cases revised as a result of the activity. The effect of our pedagogic intervention was to focus the learners' awareness and allow them to consider multiple layers associated with things that they



were ‘vaguely aware of’, but had not attended to to any great extent. The intervention had the effect of altering the learners’ perceptions of their worlds. In our own experiences, this is captured in “Now that you have alerted me to these kinds of things, I see them everywhere!”

It has become obvious that there are many benefits in raising students’ awareness of English in their environment. Chesnut et al. (2013) concluded from the LL project they had carried out with adult learners that it made the adult students more aware “of the possibilities of examining the languages they see around them.” (p. 113) This conclusion can also be drawn in the case of the young learners examined here. Their comments show that the activity had raised their awareness of the English that surrounds them, the English in their worlds. The activity also raised the children’s awareness of the potential of LLs as a resource for EFL learning – both in the narrow sense of learning English vocabulary and the wider sense of learning about the world and some aspects of power relationships in it (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1987). Thus, the results of the study presented here echo findings for adult additional language learners. They also give valuable insights into the children’s perception of and their engagement with their local and varied linguistic landscapes. The examples that the children select help to reveal their perception of English in these immediate environments, but also in the wider social setting of Germany in the world. Clearly the learning processes and goals involved in engaging with LLs are not too complex and, as a result, out of reach of primary school additional language learners. On the contrary, primary aged children are capable of engaging with the social and cultural interpretation of LLs and of evaluating what they find there.

## Conclusion and outlook

As English is a prevalent feature of German streetscapes, it offers EFL learners numerous possibilities for out-of-school contact with the language. This study demonstrates that if students are encouraged to bring examples of English into the classroom, the examples can create authentic learning materials which allow the children to engage with the English around them. However, the children’s comments also show that the engagement with the languages of their lives extends substantially beyond collecting examples of English to include reflections on and about German. They illustrate what aspects of their individual landscapes the young learners became conscious of, reflecting an increased awareness of the diversity of languages in the children’s local environments. The children’s comments also show how the concept of LL needs to be both widened and deepened in order to capture the children’s views of the language(s) that surround(s) them.

In this sense, the young learners' reflections provide insights into their understanding of the world and how languages operate in both wider and local worlds.

Of course, the conclusions we can draw from the study also have their limitations, as the project only took the form of a brief classroom intervention. Future studies with young learners that make use of different activities in longer teaching units may lead to additional insights into the benefits of engaging with LLs and could also be expanded to include other languages, especially heritage languages represented in the classroom.

Overall, however, the results of the study confirm that integrating work with LLs into English language classes with young learners can provide children with opportunities to learn about the 'foreign' language in ways that contribute to their general (language) learning, about their own culture and language as well as about themselves and their (cultural) identity. The findings thus broaden our understanding of how we need to understand LLs and what they offer for language teaching. This may also give rise to the idea of including the LLs in selected activities (see, e.g., Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015, pp. 76–77), as a recurrent element in language lessons or as a strand in curricula (see Starks, Macdonald, Nicholas, & Roos, 2019). While Malinowski (2015) built on Trumper-Hecht's (2010) reference to Lefebvre's three dimensions of "perceived", "lived" and "conceived" spaces to outline dimensions of engagement with linguistic landscapes, our study has shown that it is possible for even relatively young learners to engage with all three dimensions through their own reflections and analysis. In other words, Malinowski's (2015) proposal points to the interesting potential for and layers in working pedagogically with linguistic landscapes. Our study has shown that primary age learners of English in Germany do not require specific (additional) training to reflect on all three dimensions. They can reflect on what they perceive, their own lived interpretation of those perceptions and relate their own perceptions to the perceptions of others to form conceptions of the role of languages in the worlds in which they are currently living and also preparing to enter in their later lives.

Many of the observations about the examples that the children located echo comments made by LL researchers. However, what is strikingly different in their views of LLs is the inclusion of the intimate domains of the home and the objects that the children encounter on a daily basis. Linguists are overwhelmingly outsiders to the LLs that they are analysing and so what they see is the world that is presented publicly. The children in this study added to these worlds the insider perspective and analyses of their intimate worlds. These intimate analyses indicate that English has become part of the lived (and valued) worlds of (these) children in Germany. However, the analyses also indicate that this is not an uncritical valuing. The children's reflections show a nuanced view of current and future worlds.

They reveal an awareness of multilingualism as a shaper of their worlds and show that pedagogic intervention can sharpen this awareness. This sharpened awareness has consequences not only for understandings of the language being learned and its social positioning but also for understanding the dominant language of the society and its social positioning. The children's comments highlight the need to be nuanced in how we understand linguists' reflections because the children's comments show both shared and different experiences and analyses. Their comments remind us to see the external technical experts' analyses as just part of the picture of the place of LLs in the lives of learners and to understand that the prominence that LLs have in the lives of linguists can be complemented by a mundane daily engagement by those who live among those landscapes.

An intriguing implication of the data interpreted in relation to the role of English in social life is that from the young learners' perspective, it seems to be a normal, self-evident feature. The children are clearly used to having 'English' in their worlds, so much so that they, like the children in the study by Dagenais et al. (2009) do not actively attend to the examples that they encounter. So, for them, the frequent but not dominant presence of another language is part of their world, but is at the same time seen as 'different from' the world of their primary socialisation. For them, the 'foreign' is not some strange 'other', but also not something that they have yet paid much attention to. When given the opportunity to pay attention, their evaluations of themselves and their worlds are rich and powerful. They reveal a sensibility to both themselves and their society as capable of embracing and building on diversity.

Exploring young learners' reflections can provide pre- and in-service teachers with valuable insights into how children can interact with and read the English they encounter and develop critical language awareness. The results reported in this article demonstrate the sophistication that young learners can bring to the analysis of language examples and offer opportunities for expanding pre- and in-service teachers' perceptions of what young learners are capable of doing. Engaging with LLs in an active, learner-centred way can promote young learners' knowledge and understanding of the presence and role of English in their environment at an early point and initiate language learning and learning about language in an EFL context.

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