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Multiple language signage in linguistic landscapes and students' language practices: A case study from a language immersion setting

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ABSTRACT

This article describes qualitative findings from an explorative study of the interplay between languages in school signage and students' language practices in early total Swedish immersion in Finland. The relationship between languages and identity has been studied before, but mainly in non-immersion contexts. Previously no priority has been given to studies of the ways linguistic landscapes may inflect immersion students' language use and shape their linguistic identities. Our data include photographs and field notes taken in a primary school and a focus group discussion with three eleven-year-old students. The study reveals a dominance of student's L1 (Finnish) and L2 (Swedish) in the linguistic landscape. A content-based categorization of the focus group discussion shows that the students notice also other languages in the signage. However, the students mainly associate their multilingualism with bi- and multilingual discourses outside the school. Therefore further research is needed to explore linguistic landscapes and linguistic identities in immersion settings.

1. Introduction

Multilingualism, multiple language acquisition and linguistic identity are essential features of a new research orientation in Swedish immersion education in Finland (see e.g. Björklund, Mård-Miettinen, & Mäenpää, 2012; Björklund, Pakarinen, & Mård-Miettinen, 2015). From this new research orientation, a large research project on the interplay between language practices, multilingual identity and language ideologies in language immersion has emerged. The current study is part of the project and aims to examine how linguistic landscapes in schools functions as one of the multilingual practices within the immersion context and how linguistic landscapes contributes to shaping linguistic identities in a dual language setting.

The question of the relationship between languages and identity has been addressed in many studies on language acquisition but until today almost no priority has been given to studies on linguistic identities among *majority* speakers in dual-language settings (incl. immersion education). In addition, there have not yet been studies on the relationship between linguistic landscapes and the ways students as majority speakers relate the use of several languages to their construction of linguistic identities. Therefore, our study serves as an explorative study to investigate how signage in different languages in a primary school contributes to the co-construction of fifth grade immersion students' identity as bi- and multilingual persons. The research questions are:

1. How are multiple languages displayed in the linguistic landscape?
2. What level of awareness of the multiple language use in the linguistic landscape do immersion students show?
3. Are there connections between the multiple language use in the linguistic landscape and students' acts of linguistic identity?

We find that there are several reasons why immersion classrooms are particularly well suited for examining how an educational multilingual setting can have effects on multilingual behavior and construction of linguistic identities among majority-speaking students. Firstly, immersion programs are originally developed for majority-speakers with little or no contact with the immersion language before enrolment in the program (see e.g. Swain & Johnson, 1997). This holds true also for students in one-way immersion programs (for definitions of one-way and two-way immersion programs, see e.g. Fortune & Tedick, 2008) for Finnish-speaking students in Finland, where Swedish immersion has during the last decades evolved as a way to get Finnish-speaking students familiar with Swedish. Regardless of the Swedish language's position as the other national language in Finland, it is societally a minority language (In 2014, 88.7% of the Finnish population was registered as Finnish-speakers, only 5.3% as Swedish-speakers; OSF

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2015). Early total Swedish immersion starts with children aged 3–5, and data gathered from parents show that 92.6% of them estimate that their child does not understand Swedish at all or knows only a few words in Swedish when enrolling the program (Bergroth, 2007). The same study also shows that there is virtually no child who can produce a whole sentence in Swedish when the program starts. Thus, the immersion classroom becomes by far the most important domain for students to pick up and use the immersion language besides their home language(s). Secondly, in contrast to 'traditional' language teaching (i.e. 2–3 language lessons per week) the target language (i.e. the immersion language) is used as the language of instruction during a great part of the program. In our case, where Swedish immersion education has developed into a multilingual direction, and several languages are introduced and used in a similar way as the main immersion language (Swedish), it is likely that all languages become a well-integrated and natural part of students' daily lives. Thirdly, within a sociocultural perspective on language teaching and learning, interaction and communication in multiple languages in immersion classrooms is crucial for giving students – as representatives of majority speakers – access to natural and authentic uses of multiple languages and possibilities of (re)constructing linguistic identities. The linguistic landscape of a school forms an essential part of this identity construction since it is very present in the daily interaction and discourse that surround immersion students. Its impact is probably two-fold; signage that is not produced by immersion students may have an effect on their identity construction, whereas students' own production of signage in different language becomes part of the surrounding linguistic landscape.

2. Definitions of LL and research in dual-language settings

After a study by Landry and Bourhis (1997), the notion of linguistic landscapes was mainly associated with research conducted in urban settings:

> "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 & Bourhis, 1997: 25)

However, the scope has recently been broadened to cover what Gorter (2013) categorizes as semipublic institutional contexts, such as museums and libraries, but also schools. One direction in linguistic landscape research, schoolscape research, concentrates on languages in educational environments.

Brown (2012: 282) defines the concept of schoolscape as "the school-based environment where place and text, both written (graphic) and oral, constitute, reproduce, and transform language ideologies". Thus, Brown, by observing the presence and absence of languages in schoolscape, concludes that it is possible to relate schoolscapes to power relations between different languages in a given context (see also Dressler, 2015: 143). Szabó (2015) provides another definition of schoolscape in his study of schoolscapes in Hungary. While comprising the core of Brown's definition, Szabó (2015: 24) adds a new dimension since schoolscapes are seen as "a reference to the visual and spatial organization of educational spaces, with special emphasis on inscriptions, images and the arrangement of the furniture".

Other studies on linguistic landscapes in educational environments have not used the concept of schoolscapes in dual-language settings. These previous studies include several contexts, for example place-based education (Brown, 2012), bilingual programs (Dressler, 2015) and bi- or even multilingual schools (Gorter & Cenoz, 2014; Linkola, 2014). Regardless of the context, the studies reveal that the dominant language of society majority language is also visually dominant in the school signage, especially in the shared spaces, and that the minority or regional languages are often displayed only inside classrooms or to some extent near these classrooms (e.g. Brown, 2012; Dressler, 2015). The results show also that the minority languages might be present on school signage in shared spaces, such as corridors, but having only a symbolic role (e.g. Linkola, 2014). In other words, the minority language is used alongside the majority language for example to highlight cultural elements. The focus of the previous studies has often been the balance between the majority and minority language(s) leaving the other languages outside the studies.

Based on the definition by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25), in our study, the languages of different signs in a school building form the linguistic landscape of the school. We are primarily interested in the dynamics between all languages, and do not focus only on the official language of the school[1] (Finnish) and the immersion language (Swedish). Each language's contribution to multilingualism is identified and included in our study, highlighting the students' reflections on the presence of different languages in the linguistic landscape of the school. As we as such do not center on language ideologies of the school, we use the concept of linguistic landscapes instead of schoolscapes, though we acknowledge that there are different ideology discourses surrounding the languages of the school. Like Szabó (2015), we have excluded oral texts and only focus on the inscriptions displayed on the walls of the school.

3. Swedish immersion and research on identity

The first Swedish immersion program in Finland started in 1987. The initial program was very much influenced by experiences from French immersion programs in Canada and Catalan immersion programs in Spain (Laurén, 1994). In Finland, Swedish immersion comprises early total programs that begin in kindergarten (children aged 3–5) and end in ninth grade of comprehensive school (at the age of 15). In contrast to Canadian programs, the first language (L1) of the program (Finnish) is introduced as a language of instruction already in preschool or in the first school year (10% of the instruction time) which aims to promote students' oral L1 skills and strengthening their cultural and linguistic identity (Björklund & Mård-Miettinen, 2011a). Literacy is, however, formally taught through the immersion language (Swedish, L2). Another difference is the number of languages taught in the schools.

In all immersion programs, there is a clear establishment of the immersion language and the students' first language. However, like many other European immersion programs (see e.g. Nissilä & Björklund, 2014), Swedish immersion includes one to three other languages as well. In most cases the first foreign language is English, whereas French, German, Spanish typically function as second and third foreign languages of the programs (Björklund & Mård-Miettinen, 2011b). Depending on the schools, these languages within the immersion program may be introduced earlier than in mainstream Finnish education as a way to strengthen the multilingual dimension of the program though the other languages of the program are not commonly used as extensively as language of instruction as L1 and L2 of the program[2] (for allocation of instruc-

[1] According to the Basic Education Act 628/1998, the language of instruction in basic education in Finland is usually either Finnish or Swedish whilst some of the teaching may be given through a language other than the students' native language. Because Swedish immersion education is given in schools with Finnish as the language of instruction and Swedish being the other language, we use the notions of *official language of instruction* and *immersion language*.

[2] We have chosen to define the languages of the immersion program as L1, L2, L3 etc. in line with the program structure but we recognize that the language repertoire of individual students may differ from that of the program.

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