Submission to *V Simposio InternacionalEncuentros etnográficos con niñas, niños, adolescentes y jóvenes en contextos educativos*

**Language appropriation and re-creation: Transforming a linguistic landscape project in cyberspace**

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*- ¿Jaguar you?*

*- No, I’m, zorri*

This caption accompanied a meme displaying a jaguar interviewing a fox, which was shared by Eduardo with his class. The short dialogue is a play on words combining English and Spanish: The word “jaguar” in Spanish sounds like “how are” in English, and the word “sorry” in English sounds like “zorri” (or “zorro”) in Spanish. Because the meme utilizes both Spanish and English, only bilingual speakers can understand the joke. By sharing this meme, Eduardo asserted his right to appropriate the English language, use it for humor and play, and mix it with his Spanish language to create something new. He showed me that his relationship with English was far more complex than I had imagined.

This paper describes a collaborative project conducted with 27 adolescent students enrolled in an English class at a secondary public school in Panama City, Panama. The project was conceptualized within the tradition of linguistic landscape studies (Shohamyet al., 2010), and aimed to critically examine the use of the English language within the students’ neighborhoods and communities. Linguistic landscape analysis involves an investigation of the languages displayed in public spaces such as store windows, advertisements, traffic signs, posters, billboards, and graffiti. This analysis helps us uncover “the symbolic function of language in which meanings of signs are interpreted in terms of power relations, language status, cultural affiliations and identity negotiations” (Dagenais et al., 2009, p. 262). Linguistic landscape analysis can fulfill an important pedagogical function in the language classroom, as it helps students build awareness of the social value of different languages in their communities (Gorter, 2018).

Following a Freirian problem-posing approach, my initial purpose was to engage with the students in a collaborative investigationof the use of English in urban public spaces,interrogating representations of power and privilege within the Panamanian context. However, as the project progressed, the students started to modify, adapt, and re-shape our collaborative inquiry. Instead of restricting themselves to physical public signs found in their neighborhoods, they began to explore uses of English within the Internet and in social media. They completely re-formulated the project to reflect communicative practices in cyberspacethat were more relevant and significant to their everyday social lives (Blommaert, 2016).In the process, they asserted their right to speak, write, and play with the English language in novel and unique ways.

The collaborative nature of this ethnographic investigation allowed for the students’ transformation of the project, which in turn helped me reformulate my own understandings of their relationship with the English language. Our dialogues led me to question my pre-conceived notions of “community,” as the students demonstrated that uses of language in their virtual communities were perhaps more relevant than in their physical neighborhoods. Most importantly, our collaborative reflections helped me to grasp the students’ dynamic relationship with the English language, which involved a complex process of active engagement, resistance, and innovation.

**References**

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