

Reclaiming Classroom Space: Linguistic Landscapes as a Tool for Multilingual Education

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Abstract

Language policies that restrict the use of students' home languages in educational settings often marginalize minority linguistic communities and reinforce dominant monolingual ideologies. Nevertheless, educators working within these constraints may find meaningful ways to incorporate their students' full linguistic repertoires into the classroom environment what is increasingly referred to as the *schoolscape*. This study explores how two English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners, working in K–12 contexts in Israel and the United States, intentionally reconfigured both the visual and auditory dimensions of their classrooms to resist top-down monolingual mandates. Their efforts exemplify how educators can draw on a range of semiotic and sensorial resources to challenge dominant language ideologies and promote greater equity in linguistically restrictive and socio-politically charged contexts. While the examples presented are grounded in specific cultural and institutional settings, they offer pedagogical insights that can inform ELT practices globally. By creatively engaging with their classroom environments, these educators demonstrate how localized resistance can contribute to a broader, more equitable vision of language education.

Key words : linguistic landscapes; schoolsapes; multilingual education; English Language Teaching (ELT); language policy; inclusive pedagogy; primary and secondary education

Introduction

Educational settings are increasingly shaped by stark partisan divides and accountability-driven discourses, which often lead to top-down mandates that enforce monolingual policies and limit linguistic diversity in the classroom. These challenges are especially pronounced in fragile or politically conflict-affected regions, where instability influences not only access to education but also the language of instruction. In many English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts, such conditions reinforce hegemonic norms of English-only or English-dominant instruction (Kester & Chang, 2022). However, these restrictive dynamics are not limited to conflict zones. Across the globe, educators frequently find themselves operating within linguistically contested and constrained environments. These overlapping conditions pose significant obstacles to adopting multilingual and linguistically sustaining approaches in ELT practice

Given the diverse range of ELT settings today, it is increasingly important to explore and implement teaching practices that are both flexible and effective across various contexts. One

promising approach gaining traction is the use of linguistic landscapes (LL) the visible and audible representation of languages in public spaces. These landscapes include visual and sensory elements such as written text, imagery, sounds, and spatial design, all of which contribute to how meaning is constructed in an environment (Melo-Pfeifer, 2023). Linguistic landscapes have been viewed not only as a subject of analysis but also as a powerful tool for initiating grassroots change that supports linguistic inclusion (e.g., Solmaz, 2023; Melo-Pfeifer, 2023). When educators intentionally incorporate their students' multilingual and multicultural backgrounds into the classroom environment, they can foster more inclusive, engaging, and adaptable ELT practices that extend beyond individual classrooms and resonate globally.

This article examines the role of linguistic landscapes (LLs) in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, focusing on how educators in two distinct contexts creatively engaged semiotic and sensory resources to enrich their visual, linguistic, and auditory environments. These efforts took place amid linguistically restrictive policies and complex socio-political dynamics. By analyzing these teacher-led initiatives, we demonstrate how their practices reshaped both the visual and oral dimensions of classroom life fostering collaborative spaces where students exchanged linguistic knowledge, built connections through shared meaning-making, and deepened their understanding of diverse cultural identities. Though rooted in specific educational settings, the approaches presented offer adaptable strategies for other constrained environments. Ultimately, we aim to show how educators can leverage students' multilingual and multicultural backgrounds as assets, even under limiting conditions. We conclude by considering how these context-sensitive practices might be applied more broadly to promote equity, inclusion, and multilingualism in ELT classrooms around the world.

Integrating Linguistic Landscapes into Language Learning Environments

Studies show that linguistic landscapes (LLs) can be a powerful and engaging tool in language learning. When students interact with the language found in their everyday surroundings such as signs, posters, or public notices they're not only expanding their vocabulary but doing so in a real-world context that makes learning more meaningful. This kind of exposure helps them use language more naturally in everyday situations and also strengthens their reading and writing skills. LLs bring together words and visuals in ways that support different kinds of learners (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). They also encourage students to think critically by observing, comparing, and reflecting on the messages different signs convey, making language learning more interactive, thoughtful, and connected to the world around them.

In educational settings, the concept of the linguistic landscape (LL) is often referred to as the "schoolscape" the school-based environment where physical space and language, both written and spoken, come together to shape and reflect language ideologies (Brown, 2012). Schoolscapes can serve as powerful tools for cultural exploration, helping students build their sense of identity, appreciate cultural diversity, and recognize the linguistic rights of both indigenous and immigrant communities (Bagna & Bellinzona, 2021). LLs have also been shown

to support advanced language learners in developing linguistic and cultural awareness. For example, Jiménez-Caicedo (2023) engaged Spanish language students in New York in LL analysis and ethnographic inquiry to help them better understand the social and cultural dynamics of Spanish-speaking immigrant communities. Solmaz (2023) demonstrated how LLs can help students explore the interplay of language and other symbolic forms in constructing meaning revealing the power structures, ideological frameworks, and cultural values of the communities in focus. In regions marked by conflict, attention to the linguistic and cultural aspects of LLs can also act as a vehicle for change, fostering empathy and understanding across divided groups and contributing to peace-building efforts (Schvarcz & Khawaja, 2022). These educational approaches show that LLs are not only tools for language learning but also bridges for connecting across cultural and linguistic boundaries both inside the classroom and beyond.

Several studies have pointed to the influential role of linguistic landscapes (LLs) in shaping students' attitudes toward minority languages (e.g., Duarte et al., 2023). A key strand of this research examines how the surrounding schoolscape impacts multilingual learners. For instance, Dressler (2015) investigated signage practices in a Canadian elementary school offering a German–English bilingual program. While the signage aimed to support bilingualism, Dressler found its impact was limited due to restrictions on how and where signs could be created and displayed. She suggested that incorporating informal and student-generated signage could broaden the scope of bilingual representation and help overcome these constraints. Although increasing visible signage is a meaningful step toward promoting multilingualism, other research emphasizes the importance of broader, systemic changes. Menken et al. (2018), for example, documented how intentional changes to a school's visual landscape alongside shifts in teaching practices and institutional ideologies fostered the development of dual language bilingual programs in several New York City schools. Their findings highlight the need to consider pedagogy, policy, and language programming alongside physical signage when working toward a more equitable and linguistically inclusive schoolscape.

Taken together, these findings underscore the powerful potential of linguistic landscapes (LLs) as tools for promoting multilingualism and encouraging critical reflection on language rights and cultural representation within school settings. LLs not only offer authentic opportunities for students to engage with diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, but they also position educational spaces as platforms for questioning dominant narratives and challenging inequitable language practices. The examples presented in this article further demonstrate how teachers can intentionally design LLs that foster meaningful language learning, resist monolingual ideologies, and invite deeper reflection on the cultural and social dimensions of language particularly in linguistically restrictive and conflict-affected environments.

ELT in Israel , the United States and india

Our examples are drawn from two very different classroom settings: a secondary school in Israel and a primary school in the United States. Each case shows how teachers found creative ways to navigate institutional restrictions and challenge limiting language policies in thoughtful, practical ways. While the challenges in each context differ, both stories offer valuable insight into how educators can make room for multilingualism in everyday teaching.

In Israel, schools are often divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. Even though Israeli society is rich in languages including Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, English, Amharic, and dozens of immigrant heritage languages (Meiretal., 2021) the education system tends to promote a monolingual model. Hebrew is the main language of instruction in schools serving Hebrew-speaking students, while Arabic is used in Arabic-speaking schools. Within this structure, even multilingual students in Hebrew-speaking schools often don't see their home languages reflected in classroom life. This reflects a long-standing belief in Hebrew as a unifying national language, an ideology that has deeply shaped educational norms. Despite these divisions, Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking students sometimes come together in higher education, especially in English language courses. In those settings, English becomes a shared goal and a bridge for cross-cultural connection, offering a space where students begin to learn with and from each other.

The U.S. context brings a different but familiar set of challenges. Although the country has no official national language, English dominates public education. Over the past several decades, political debates about immigration and accountability have shaped language education policies often leaning toward English-only approaches. In states like Tennessee, where schools are seeing rapid demographic changes (Park et al., 2018), support for multilingual students is often limited. While programs like ESL and dual-language immersion exist, they are unevenly implemented and not always accessible. Policies tend to focus narrowly on English proficiency, sometimes at the expense of recognizing and valuing students' home languages (Flores, 2019).

A similar pattern can be seen in **India**, where language policy officially supports multilingualism, but classroom practices often tell a different story. India is home to a vast range of languages 22 official ones, hundreds of regional tongues, and many tribal languages. The Three-Language Formula was designed to promote unity by encouraging students to learn English, Hindi, and a regional language. But in reality, the formula's application varies widely across states and schools. English-medium education, increasingly favored in urban areas, is seen as a key to upward mobility, often sidelining students' mother tongues. This mirrors the global trend of English gaining prestige, even as it contributes to the erosion of linguistic diversity in education.

Despite these differences, teachers in all three countries Israel, the U.S., and India face a common challenge: working within systems that often undervalue multilingualism. Yet, they also share a powerful opportunity. By using classroom strategies like **linguistic landscapes**

(LLs) where students' languages are made visible and celebrated educators can create more inclusive, culturally responsive spaces. Whether it's Hebrew and Arabic in Israel, Spanish and Kirundi in the U.S., or Tamil and Hindi in India, incorporating students' languages into the classroom environment helps build connection, pride, and a deeper engagement with learning. These small, intentional changes can go a long way in disrupting monolingual norms and showing students that their linguistic identities matter.

Insights from Two Classroom Contexts

The examples discussed here illustrate two different ways of navigating restrictive educational environments. The first focuses on how a class collectively transformed the physical classroom space to showcase its linguistic diversity. The second highlights how a teacher modified the aural environment to support students' language development, even while facing limitations on approved text selections.

Redesigning the Classroom Landscape

Let's step into a Grade 8 English classroom in a government-aided school in South India, where students aged 13 to 15 come from a wide mix of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Most students speak Tamil at home, but the class also includes speakers of Telugu, Kannada, Hindi, and Urdu. Their teacher, Ms. Rani (a pseudonym), noticed that although her classroom was full of language diversity, the environment reflected only English and Tamil just like most school settings across the country. Wanting to make her students feel more included and represented, she decided to turn her classroom into a space that celebrated all the languages her students brought with them.

To start, she gave her students a simple task: look around the classroom and label as many everyday objects as they could in their own languages. Since most students could read and write in their home languages, they were excited to participate. To make the activity more fun, she made it a group challenge whichever team could label the most items would win. The energy and enthusiasm were instant.

Next, Ms. Rani helped her students translate the words they collected into Tamil and English, and where needed, they also wrote out transliterations for scripts that others might not read easily. In the final step, students created their own signs some using colored paper and markers, others working on the computer. These multilingual signs were then laminated and slowly added to the classroom walls. For example, the wall clock ended up labeled in five different languages. Importantly, Ms. Rani let the students decide which words should go up first, which made them feel ownership of the process and ensured the labels had personal meaning.

Over time, Ms. Rani began using the displayed words in class activities. They practiced vocabulary, made sentences, played guessing games, and even explored grammar patterns across languages. The signs weren't just decorations they became useful learning tools. Students

referred to them during writing exercises or reading tasks, and they often sparked interesting discussions about how different languages express the same idea.

What started as a language activity turned into something much bigger. The classroom became a place where students felt proud of their roots. They were eager to learn about each other's cultures, and even the quieter students started speaking up more in English class. For those whose home languages were often ignored or even looked down upon, seeing their language on the wall was a powerful moment it helped change how they saw themselves and how others saw them.

Ms. Rani noticed a clear shift. Students were more engaged, more confident, and more willing to participate. The classroom atmosphere became warm, respectful, and full of curiosity. By simply recognizing and including the languages her students already knew, she created a learning space that was not only multilingual, but also deeply human. Her approach showed that in a country as diverse as India, language can be a bridge and when students see their languages valued, it opens the door to richer learning and stronger connections.

Voices of the Classroom: A Multilingual Journey in South India

In a quiet government primary school tucked away in rural Tamil Nadu, Ms. Lakshmi (a pseudonym) teaches a combined Grade 3 and 4 English class to children between 8 and 10 years old. Her classroom is as diverse as the local community most students speak Tamil at home, while others come from Telugu-, Kannada-, or Urdu-speaking families, and a few speak tribal dialects passed down through generations. English is taught as a subject using the state board's textbook, which, like many others, tends to stick to a rigid format. It focuses on grammar and comprehension but often misses out on the languages and life experiences that students bring with them every day.

Ms. Lakshmi saw an opportunity in that gap. Rather than simply delivering the textbook content, she decided to bring her students' voices quite literally into the learning process. She began adapting her lessons so that the classroom wouldn't just teach English but would also celebrate the rich tapestry of languages her students spoke.

Before each lesson, she would sit with the textbook and look for words or ideas that might feel unfamiliar to her students. She prepared bilingual word charts in English and Tamil, and then opened up the activity to the children, asking them to help her add words from their home languages. "What do you call this in Telugu?" she'd ask, or "How would your grandmother say this in Kannada?" Students eagerly joined in, offering translations and teaching each other new words. These multilingual glossaries were written on chart paper and displayed alongside the textbook content turning the classroom walls into a living, breathing word bank.

In class, Ms. Lakshmi followed a warm and consistent flow. She would read the English text aloud, then explain it in Tamil, pausing often to ask questions and listen to responses in any language her students felt comfortable using. When they came across a story about farming tools, children excitedly shared the names of tools used in their villages “mannvetti” (spade), “kodaali” (hoe), and others in different tongues. These weren’t just vocabulary lessons they were shared memories, exchanged proudly across languages.

She gently encouraged all students to speak up, especially those who were shy or new to the school. If a student gave an answer in Telugu, she’d smile and say, “That’s great let’s try saying it in English together.” Slowly, students who once stayed quiet began raising their hands, knowing their language was not just accepted but welcomed.

Though she kept an English word wall on display, as per the school’s requirements, the real learning happened through the voices in the room. English, Tamil, Telugu, and other languages flowed side by side, not in competition, but in harmony. Ms. Lakshmi created a space where students could be themselves where they didn’t have to leave their language at the door to learn.

Over time, she saw real changes. Students were more engaged, more confident, and more willing to take risks with language. The classroom felt alive with laughter, curiosity, and conversations that mattered. And all it took was listening to the languages that were already there.

Ms. Lakshmi’s story is a reminder that even within the constraints of a set curriculum, teachers can find ways to make learning personal and inclusive. In a multilingual country like India especially in the South language isn’t a barrier. When we let it in, it becomes one of our greatest teaching tools.

Conclusion: Embracing Multilingual Realities Through Classroom Landscapes

The stories and examples shared in this article highlight the subtle yet powerful ways in which linguistic landscapes can reshape English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms particularly in contexts where language use is tightly controlled by policy or shaped by broader social and political pressures. Whether in Israel, the United States, or South India, one message comes through clearly: when teachers value and include the languages their students bring to school, classrooms become more than just places for learning they become spaces where students feel they belong.

Teachers like Ms. Rani and Ms. Lakshmi show us that promoting multilingualism doesn’t require dramatic overhauls. Often, it starts with simple, thoughtful actions like labeling objects in multiple languages, encouraging students to speak in their mother tongue, or making room for students’ voices to be heard in whatever language they’re most comfortable. These everyday gestures serve as quiet but meaningful acts of resistance against monolingual norms. They create opportunities for participation, self-expression, and mutual respect especially for students who might otherwise feel excluded.

As our world becomes more connected and linguistically diverse, ELT needs to evolve beyond an English-only approach. When teachers bring linguistic landscapes into their classrooms, they not only support language learning but also validate the cultural and personal identities of their students. These multilingual schoolscape foster empathy, build confidence, and reflect the real, lived experiences of learners.

Ultimately, this is about more than teaching language it's about rethinking what inclusive education looks like. It's about creating learning spaces where students see themselves represented, respected, and empowered. When we treat students' languages as strengths instead of obstacles, we take a powerful step toward a more just, compassionate, and inclusive vision of education.

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