

# English around us: A linguistic landscape activity to raise ELF awareness

## 「私たちの周りにある英語」: ELFに対する認識を高めるための言語景観アクティビティ

Mohd Farez Syinon Bin Masnin, マスニン・ムハッマド・ファリス・シノン・ビン

Center for English as a Lingua Franca, Tamagawa University, Japan  
farezsyinon@lab.tamagawa.ac.jp

### ABSTRACT

*Despite the gradual acceptance of English as an international lingua franca and efforts to decolonise the English language teaching field, native-speakerism is still prevalent in many parts of the world, including Japan. Challenging this notion and raising awareness of the actual use of English as a lingua franca requires teachers to be creative. This paper proposes an activity that aims to raise awareness towards ELF among Japanese university students by first making them aware of the use of English in their local linguistic landscape.*

**KEYWORDS:** English as a lingua franca, ELF awareness, Linguistic landscape activity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“ネイティブ講師と距離が近い。つまり、世界と近い。”

Roughly translated, it means, ‘You are in close proximity with native (English)-speaking teachers. Thus, you are close to the world.’ I remember feeling confused and appalled reading the above statement on a promotional poster of a private university’s Department of Global Communication on the train I was using for my daily commute in Tokyo. The idolisation of native English speakers (NESs) in Japan or other countries, especially in Kachru’s (1985) Expanding Circle, is not new. However, claiming that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), in particular, can bring the world closer to you is exaggerated because it implies that NESTs or native English speakers represent a big part, if not the whole world. This idea is far from the truth, considering the fact that the number of native English speakers, according to Ethnologue (n.d.), is only about 5% of the whole world population, or around 35% of the total number of English speakers (both native and non-native speakers included).

In this age and day, the English language has undoubtedly become a de facto

international lingua franca and “an all-pervasive feature of a globalised world” (Widdowson, 2017, p. 101). It penetrates various layers of the international community, such as aviation communication, English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses in universities worldwide, the internet, and international academic journals. Apart from that, the existence of various Englishes worldwide, native or non-native varieties, has been recognised and extensively studied. Reflecting on these, ideally, we would expect a global society that is more aware of the implications of having English as an international language. One such implication is the understanding and acceptance that NESs’ social, cultural, and linguistic norms and assumptions should not be the sole standard that dictates how English should or can be used by people of different linguacultural backgrounds. As Honna (2008) states,

Actually, when Japanese speak English with Singaporeans, there is no room for American or British English culture. It would be clumsy if the Japanese had to represent the American ways of behaviour and the Singaporeans the British version while speaking English to each other. (p. 6)

However, changing something that has been around and believed to be the norm for decades is challenging. For a very long time, the teaching of the English language to speakers whose native language is not English has always been strictly NES-centred. In EFL-based language teaching, for instance, the first language and learners’ culture are often perceived as hindrances and interference for the learners to achieve linguistic competency (Galloway & Rose, 2018). In addition, becoming like a native speaker is perceived as an ideal goal to achieve and diverging from the so-called standard English is seen as a defect and ought to be corrected or penalised. In Japan, native-speakerism (Holliday, 2003) in English language education is a deeply entrenched ideology that has led students to be constrained by NES norms (Murata, 2016) and have negative attitudes towards non-native speakers of English (Kimura, 2019).

Therefore, as English language teachers in this globalising world, we need to think of different and creative ways to make our students aware of the actual use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) around the world. In this paper, I propose an in-class linguistic analysis activity called ‘English Around Us’.

## 2. USING LINGUISTICS LANDSCAPE IN LANGUAGE LESSONS

The term linguistic landscape is made popular by Landry and Bourhis (1997), which refers to the language used on “public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (p. 25) of a particular area. These signs serve informative and symbolic functions that mark “the relative power and status of the linguistic communities” (p. 23). As Japan is often perceived as a homogenous nation, one might think that the linguistic landscape may not be as diverse. However, recent studies have proved otherwise. One such study is a survey

of official and nonofficial multilingual signs at the JR Yamanote Line stations in Tokyo by Backhaus (2006). Findings showed that 2321 out of 11,834 signs were multilingual, with English being the dominating language (97.6%). Other languages found on the multilingual signs include Asian languages (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Thai), European languages (e.g., French, Portuguese, Spanish), and Middle Eastern languages (e.g., Arabic, Persian).

From the early years of research in the linguistic landscape, much of the literature has been focused mainly on sociolinguistic studies concerning language policies, especially in multilingual societies or settings. However, in recent years, some studies have been conducted on the pedagogical potential of the linguistic landscape. The existing body of research on this topic generally suggests that using linguistic landscape as a tool in language teaching helps raise students' language awareness, especially towards the innovative way of language use in society (Sayer, 2010) and the social functions of languages (Rowland, 2012; Chesnut et al., 2013). It also benefits students in acquiring pragmatic competence (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008) and enhancing language skills (Dumanig & David, 2019). Since the linguistic landscape is a form of actual language use, it helps bridge classroom lessons with authentic, real-life language use (Sayer, 2010) in contexts the students can relate to (Floralde & Valdez, 2017).

This paper aims to add to the limited literature on how linguistic landscape analysis activity can be incorporated into a language classroom, particularly English. The lesson plan introduced in this paper is the one I created for my Japanese university students, most of whom are false beginners (CEFR A1-A2) due to their prior English language learning in junior and senior high schools.

### 3. OVERVIEW OF THE 'ENGLISH AROUND US' ACTIVITY

The primary objective of the 'English Around Us' activity is to make students aware of the existence of English in their local linguistic landscape by having students discover the purposes of English being used on posters in public spaces in Japan. This activity can help students move away from the belief that English is a language of a foreign land that is very distant from them or not within their reach by looking at how the English language is being exploited to reach whatever goals or purposes the posters have. Since fluency is not the main aim of this activity, it can be adapted based on the level of the students.

#### 3.1. Preparation

Assign students homework of taking a picture of a poster in public places to be used in the activity stage. Give the students at least a week, so they will have more time to find a good poster.

The requirements for a poster are as follows:

- posted in a public space (e.g., trains, buses, stations, shopping malls, cafes, restaurants)
- either contains a few English words (written in the roman alphabet, not *katakana*) or is entirely in English
- not brand names (e.g., Platinum, Muse)
- not Romanised Japanese words (e.g., Ekiden, Shimokitazawa)

- not too short (e.g., No Entry, Toilet)

Below are some examples of good posters that can be used for this activity.

**Figure 1**

*Example of posters in public spaces in Tokyo*



The sign on the left-hand side is a poster in a shopping mall, Lumine, near Tachikawa Station, which contains some English words such as ‘CHRISTMAS FOODS’, ‘PRE-ORDER’, ‘Order Now’, and ‘CHECK’. The sign on the right-hand side is a poster inside Shinjuku Station, written entirely in English.

To ensure students choose appropriate signs for the activity, you may ask them to submit their pictures earlier to be checked and confirmed.

### 3.2. Activity

The activity is divided into five stages: lead-in, individual activity, group activity, presentation, and wrap-up. Ask the students to bring their laptops for this lesson.

#### 3.2.1 Stage 1: Lead-in (15 minutes)

The lead-in for this activity is slightly longer because it also includes a short group activity which is crucial for the next step. After all, it gives a general idea to the students about how they should analyse their posters in the following individual activity stage.

First, show a picture of a poster containing some English words and share a short anecdote, such as when and where you saw the poster. After that, ask the students about the poster's purpose and elicit answers from two or three students. I often use the poster below for my lead-in because it is suitable for analysis. Note how the content words such as ‘CHRISTMAS FOODS’, ‘PRE-ORDER’, and ‘Order Now!’ are written in English, but

details on how and where to make the pre-order are entirely in Japanese. This gives more room for the students to think critically in analysing the poster.

## Figure 2

*An example of a poster for lead-in*



After that, divide the students into groups of three or four and ask them to discuss the following questions:

1. Who do you think is the target audience of the poster?
2. In your opinion, why are those English words used on the poster (instead of Japanese)?

For classes with a high level of English proficiency, you may ask them to discuss in English. However, for lower-level students, it is better to let them discuss in Japanese first and later summarise the result of their discussion in English. Give around 10 minutes for this group activity.

To end the lead-in stage, ask students from each group to share their answers. Give some feedback on their responses or ask other students what they think of the answers. From my experience, for the first question, many students tend to say that the target audience for this poster is Japanese people, to which I would ask, 'How about a non-Japanese person who can understand Japanese?' The teacher needs to encourage students to think more critically, so they will think beyond the dichotomy of "Japanese people" and "non-Japanese people" when they do their analysis and start including other factors, such as the languages spoken by the target audience.

This kind of critical thinking is essential because some posters with many English words may seem like they are targeting non-Japanese or non-Japanese speaking people. However, at a closer look, they are targeted at Japanese or Japanese-speaking people, or vice-versa. Thus, the answer to the following question on why English words are used on

the poster might differ depending on the target audience.

As for the second question on why English words are on the poster instead of Japanese, many of my students responded with somewhat predictable answers such as ‘English is cool’ and ‘English is more stylish’, implying that English words are being used merely as an accessory. However, I had students who made interesting remarks, such as Christmas being a modern celebration in Japan or of foreign origin; therefore, English is used to emphasise that. Some students also mentioned that Christmas is a celebration that is more popular among the younger generation, so English is used to appeal to people from this age group, implying that the younger generation is more familiar with or has more exposure to the English language.

Apart from introducing students to the activity, the teacher needs to encourage students to think critically in this lead-in stage.

### 3.2.2 Stage 2: Individual Activity (15 minutes)

In this activity, give students 15 minutes to analyse the picture of a sign they have taken beforehand by answering the following questions.

1. Where did you take the picture?
2. What is the poster about?
3. Who made the poster?
4. What are the English words written on the poster?\*
5. Who do you think is the target audience of the poster?
6. In your opinion, why are those English words used on the poster (instead of Japanese)?

Question 4 can be skipped if the poster is wholly or partially in English. Usually, these kinds of posters are informative or notice containing Japanese and translations in English or other languages. For question 5, encourage the students to be specific instead of general, such as “Japanese people” or “non-Japanese people”.

During this stage, the use of a dictionary should not be prohibited. Also, you can walk around the classroom and assist students if necessary. Instead of checking for grammar or spelling, help them make their content clear and easily understood.

### 3.2.3 Stage 3: Group Activity (20 to 30 minutes)

Once students have finished analysing their posters, divide them into groups of two or three. The purpose of this group activity is for students to get feedback from their peers, especially for questions 5 and 6. Students can broaden their perspectives and improve their analyses by getting feedback and ideas from their peers.

In groups, each student share their picture and analysis. After that, their group members give feedback. For classes with low proficiency in English, allow them to carry out their discussion in Japanese.

After the discussion, students can prepare a short presentation of their poster analyses. I recommend using Google Jamboard for this short presentation. Google Jamboard is suitable for short presentations because the interface is easy to navigate, and multiple users can simultaneously work on the same document from their laptops. Also, the teacher can check the students' progress from the teacher's laptop without having to



go to each student's desk.

Besides that, Google Jamboard helps save time for short presentations since all the slides can be projected directly from the teacher's laptop. Therefore, having the students transfer their presentation files or changing the projector cable from one laptop to another is no hassle. Setting up Google Jamboard documents is also effortless. I usually create the documents beforehand and send the URL links to the students. Each group will work on the same document, but each student will have an individual slide.

### 3.2.4 Stage 4: Presentation (20 to 30 minutes)

Each group will present in front of the whole class at this stage. Depending on the number of students in the class, it may take around 15 minutes and above. Based on my experience, each student takes approximately 1 to 3 minutes to present the analysis of their poster.

Encourage students to ask questions to make the session more interactive. If your students are shy, afraid of asking questions, or relatively passive, you may assign each group to ask at least once. Usually, students are more willing to ask as a group than as an individual.

In order to ensure that students are paying attention to other groups' presentations, assign a task for the students while listening. For instance, you may ask them to take a memo on why English words are being used on the posters or simply ask them to choose a poster or analysis that is the most interesting to them.

During this stage, the teacher will also have to pay attention to the presentations because the teacher has to summarise this when wrapping up the activity. In particular, a focus should be made on why the students think English words are being used on the posters.

### 3.2.5 Stage 5: Wrap-up (10 minutes)

To wrap up the activity, share the purposes of English words used on posters based on the students' presentations on the screen. Ask the students to reflect and share their opinions on the purposes listed with the person beside them.

## 4. DISCUSSION

In general, the photos of posters taken by my students can be categorised into two groups. The first group is official posters written in Japanese with English translation for informative purposes. The second group contains posters that use English words or phrases, mainly for commercial purposes.

**Figure 3**  
*Student A slide*

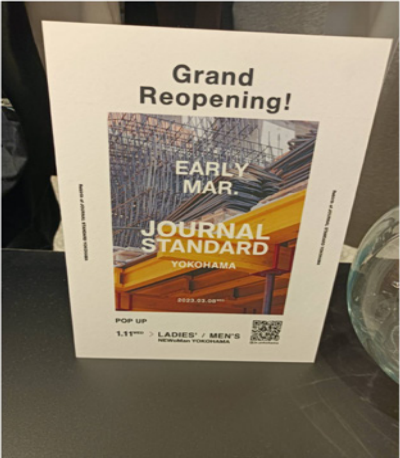


- (1) I took the picture at Kakio, my apartment.
- (2) The poster was made by Living environment office in Tama.
- (3) The purpose is to tell people about garbage collection schedule.
- (4) The target audience is people living in the apartment.
- (5) Because both Japanese and foreigners must follow the rules.

Thank you for listening!!!!!!

As shown in Figure 3, Student A chose a garbage collection schedule, an official poster made by the local government office. This is the kind of poster that most of my students had in mind when I asked about the use of English on public signs around them. It might seem trivial, but by having the students put conscious effort into analysing this kind of poster and asking critical questions, they can become more aware of English being an international language. Chances are that they do know that foreigners in Japan come from different linguacultural backgrounds and are not necessarily from English-speaking countries only. However, in most cases, we can see that an English translation is used by default for informative signs like this. A simple ‘why’ is all we need to ask to lead students into realising the social functions of English today, especially in Japan.

**Figure 4**  
*Student B slide*



1. I took this poster in NEWoman YOKOHAMA, Yokohama station.
2. The poster is made by this company's (JOURNAL STANDARD) staff.
3. The purpose is to announce that this store will reopen and to attract customers.
4. The target audience is fashion-conscious young people who don't understand English. They think it's cool that it's written in English.
5. They use English because it looks fashionable, stylish and simple.



As shown in Figure 4, Student B chose a promotional poster of a clothing store. Note how the student mentioned that the target audience is “people who don’t understand English”, but English is used in the poster because “it looks fashionable, stylish, and simple”. The realisation that English is being exploited creatively and innovatively in the students’ local sociolinguistic context is essential in raising awareness of ELF. It opens space for students to rethink their beliefs about English, especially regarding the ownership of the language.

I think many English language teachers in Japan might have encountered a situation where students are not motivated to learn English because they believe it serves no purpose to them if they are to spend their whole life working and living only in Japan. It can be argued that this mindset partly stemmed from their preconceived notion that English is a foreign language. It is foreign in the same sense that Thai or Swahili are foreign languages to Japanese, so unless one is interested in Thai- or Swahili-speaking cultures, there is no need to learn the languages. However, this is not the case with English because it is undoubtedly an international lingua franca.

Therefore, through this linguistic landscape analysis activity, we allow students to explore and consciously notice that English is already a part of their linguistic repertoire. It is being used increasingly in creative, innovative, and purposeful manners on commercial signs targeted to the Japanese people, and it is also used for informative purposes for non-Japanese speakers in Japan (both inhabitants and tourists), which implies that even if the students do not go overseas, the world is still coming to Japan. As long as globalisation is still happening and mobility and exchanges between countries are ongoing, English will remain the most readily available language for international communication in most settings.

## 5. FURTHER IDEAS

For classes with a higher level of English (CEFR B1-B2), you can assign an extension task of writing a brief reflection report in English as homework. They can write about things they have learnt or realised based on their own and other students’ analyses of posters and the use of English in their local linguistic landscape.

Other than that, for upper-intermediate and above, instead of analysing posters containing English words, you can ask them to analyse signs about the English language, such as promotional posters about English language courses offered by colleges, universities, or English conversation (*Eikaiwa*) centres. This activity can help them think critically about how the English language is perceived or promoted in Japan and reflect or react to that.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Linguistic landscape analysis activity has a great potential to raise students’ awareness of the use of English in the linguistic landscape of their locality, thus leading to a better understanding of ELF. The resources are also never-ending and ever-changing, making it very interesting for teachers and students. As explained in this paper, the activity

encourages students to think critically about the use and existence of English in the linguistic landscape of Japan and to reflect on their own beliefs and perceptions of the English language. However, further empirical research is needed to determine how and to what extent this linguistic landscape activity affects students' awareness towards ELF.

## REFERENCES

- Backhaus, P. (2006). Multilingualism in Tokyo: A look into the linguistic landscape. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 52-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710608668385>
- Cenoz, J., & Gorter D. (2008). The linguistic landscape as an additional source of input in second language acquisition. *IRAL-International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 46(3), 267–287. <https://doi.org/10.1515/IRAL.2008.012>
- Chesnut, M., Lee, V., & Schulte, J. (2013). The language lessons around us: Undergraduate English pedagogy and linguistic landscape research. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 12(2), 102–120.
- Dumanig, F. P., & David, M. K. (2019). Linguistic landscape as a pedagogical tool in teaching and learning English in Oman. *Modern Journal of Studies in English Language Teaching and Literature*, 1(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.56498/11201988>
- Ethnologue. (n.d.). *What is the most spoken language?* Retrieved December 10, 2022 from <https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/most-spoken-language>
- Floralde, R., & Valdez, P. N. (2017). Linguistic landscapes as resources in ELT: The case of a rural community in the Philippines. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 14(4), 793-801. <http://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2017.14.4.15.793>
- Galloway, N., & Rose, H. (2018). Incorporating global Englishes into the ELT classroom. *ELT Journal*, 72(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx010>
- Holliday, A. (2003). Social autonomy: Addressing the dangers of culturism in TESOL. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures* (pp. 110–126). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Honna, N. (2008). *English as a multicultural language in Asian contexts: Issues and ideas*. Kuroshio Publishers.
- Kachru, B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (p. 11–36). Cambridge University Press.

- Kimura, D. (2019). “Seriously, I came here to study English”: A narrative case study of a Japanese exchange student in Thailand. *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education*, 4(1), 70–95. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sar.17020.kim>
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R.Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23–49.
- Murata, K. (2016). ELF research - Its impact on language education in Japan and East Asia. In M-L Pitzl & O-T. Ruth (Eds.), *English as a lingua franca: Perspectives and prospects. Contributions in honour of Barbara Seidlhofer* (pp. 77–86). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Rowland, L. (2012). The pedagogical benefits of a linguistic landscape project in Japan. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 16(4), 494–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2012.708319>
- Sayer, P. (2010). Using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource. *ELT Journal*, 64(2), 143–54. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccp051>
- Widdowson, H. G. (2017). Historical perspective on ELF. In J. Jenkins, W. Baker, & M. Dewey (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca* (pp. 101–112). Routledge.