Linguistic Landscape as a Pedagogical Tool in Teaching and Learning English in Oman

Francisco Perlas Dumanig  
The University of Hawaii at Hilo  
fdumanig@hawaii.edu

Maya Khemlani David  
University of Malaya  
mayadavid@yahoo.com

Abstract

English language learning does not only happen within the four corners of the classroom, but it may occur even within the learner’s immediate community. Learning English can be enhanced through various resources like the available linguistic landscape. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25) the term linguistic landscape (LL) is defined as 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 LL of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. As such, it contributes to an additional language-learning tool for language learners. It is, therefore, the focus of this study to examine the use of the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource in teaching and learning English. This study examines explicitly the shop names and signage in Oman. To carry on the study, fifty (50) shop names and signage in Al Buraimi, Oman were collected and analyzed. The findings of the study reveal that the linguistic landscape does not only provide awareness about the English language, but it also enhances the learners’ English language skills. This study supports the notion that exposing learners to the linguistic landscape provides awareness of the languages used in public signs, which indicate or give evidence of what languages are locally relevant (Kasanga, 2012). This study offers new insights on how classroom activities can be extended to the streets of the learners’ community.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English in Oman, English language teaching and learning, linguistic landscape, shop names, and signage

Introduction

Linguistic landscape (LL) is defined as the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs in government buildings in a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). It provides a scene where the public space is symbolically constructed (Shohamy & Gorter, 2008) and indicates what languages are locally relevant, or gives evidence as to what languages are becoming locally relevant (Kasanga, 2012). The LL of a community reflects the people’s language, identity, and cultural practices.

Road signs and other LL provide a clear, easy, and visual way in promoting language and culture and, at the same time, provide excellent authentic materials for language learning in real-life situations, and tell more about the culture of a place. Many studies about LL use photographs of public signs as data to understand the multilingual, multicultural, and multiliterate sociolinguistic ecology of a place (Spolsky, 2009). Studies reveal that the languages
used in streets, shops, and billboard advertisements are useful for enhancing language learning, both in a second or in a foreign language. Therefore, LL can be used as a tool in language teaching and learning, which provides opportunities to learn another language or languages within the learners’ immediate community. The accessibility of LL makes learning easy and convenient. Using LL as a tool may prove that language learning materials are not only found within the four corners of the classroom, but many such materials are available outside the classroom. Using LL as language learning materials can be more authentic, practical, and familiar to the learners. Because of its authenticity, practicality and familiarity, many studies have found that LL is a useful material in learning a second or foreign language. In a study conducted by Chestnut, Lee and Shulte (2013), they concluded that LL created more impact in learning English in Korea, and it developed the students’ intercultural communicative skills.

While LL research has continued to expand and explored how languages are displayed in many places around the world, scholars further examine how to use the LL research to enhance the pedagogical approaches in language teaching and learning (Rowland, 2012; Thornbury, 2012; Sayer, 2010; Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). In a study conducted by Thornbury (2012), learners were engaged in a simplified analysis of the languages used in the local LL. This allowed the English language learners to explore the LL in their community, which showed that language learning is not beyond their reach. LL serves as an educational tool that is useful for some authentic literacy activities, allows learning to move beyond the classroom and links learners’ life in school to their community (Bradshaw, 2014, p. 160). Similarly, Cenoz and Gorter (2008) argue that there are benefits for exploring LL, which results in five areas of learning, such as incidental learning, pragmatic competence, multimodal literacy skills, multicompetence, and the symbolic and emotional power of language.

Sayer (2010) believes that using LL as a pedagogical resource is like a “real-world experience” for learners. He says:

“As an EFL teacher, I often struggle to find ways to connect the content of my language lessons in the classroom to the real-world students’ encounter outside the classroom. We know that exposure and practice are two essential elements for L2 acquisition; however, in most EFL settings throughout the world, students’ opportunities for exposure and practise beyond the classroom walls are limited” (p. 143).

In places where English is not widely spoken, the linguistic landscape provides opportunities for learners to continuously interact in English through the linguistic landscape of their community.

Several studies have proven that the use of LL in teaching English as a second or foreign language provides the language teachers and learners more ideas on how to practically learn and teach the language within their reach. Moreover, integrating LL and language teaching can be used as a practical teaching approach. It encourages learners and teachers to become aware of their surroundings and the environmental prints that they see daily. Linguistic landscape serves as a functional tool in language teaching and learning since it exposes the learners on the actual use of the language.

The use of LL provides opportunities for foreign language learners of English to extend their learning outside the classroom, particularly in Oman. Apart from Arabic, English is also gaining more popularity in Oman because of the economic, business, and educational
benefits it brings. In the Omani educational system, English has been introduced as a subject in schools, colleges, and universities throughout the country, although, English language teaching (ELT) in Oman is a relatively new enterprise. Historically, English was introduced to the Omani education system in the '70s and later became a lingua franca and the only foreign language in Oman that serves multiple purposes, both locally and globally (Al-Issa & Al Balushi, 2012).

According to Al-Busaidi (as cited in Al-Jardani 2012, p. 41), the use of English in Oman has become an “institutionalized domain” which is used in business, media, and education. Furthermore, English is also used as the medium of instruction in private and public higher education (Al-Isaa, 2005). Despite the development of English in Oman, English is considered as a foreign language, since it is still used in limited domains of communication.

Currently, English as a foreign language in Oman has played a role in economic development and educational advancement, particularly in developing the English language skills of learners. Despite the aim of the government to enhance the students’ language skills, the use of English is still insufficient due to its limited functions. Such a limitation influences the students’ English language learning development because it is not enhanced outside the classroom. Consequently, many Omani learners of English still lack proficiency in English although it has been introduced as a subject in primary and secondary education, and used as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level.

This study argues that the limited opportunity of Omani learners of English outside the classroom can be enhanced by the English LL, which is immediately available within the learners’ community. It is, therefore, the focus of this study to examine how LL facilitates in teaching and learning English in Oman. More specifically, this study analyzes the linguistic structure of selected LL, particularly the shop names and signage. Furthermore, this also examines the impact of LL in teaching and learning of English, and the students’ perspectives on the usefulness of LL in English language learning.

**Methods**

This study employed the qualitative approach as its methodological framework, particularly in collecting and in analyzing the data. To obtain a comprehensive data gathering, three phases of data collection were conducted. The first phase focused on the collection of pictures of 50 shop names or signage in Al Buraimi, Oman, for a period of six months from September 2016 until March 2017. There were three hundred pictures of shop names and signage, but only 50 were used in the study as they have already shown the trend on the language use and patterns in the LL. The shop names and signage were chosen because they were the most visible LL in the city. Pictures were taken to examine the patterns of language use as reflected in the LL of the city. The second phase was conducted in the classroom where 90 first year and second year Bachelors in English Language and Literature students were asked to list down all the English words that they read and remembered within the city of Al Buraimi; however, only 80 were finally selected because the other 10 participants listed a number of words not found in the LL (shop names/signage) of the city. These participants were selected because their English language proficiency can still be classified as low. This is understandable since English is a foreign language in Oman, and students have very limited exposure to the actual use of the English language in the real context. Before the students listed the words, they were asked first to familiarize the LL of the city for a period of one
month although most of them lived in the city for many years. This phase was done to find out how LL contributed to students’ English language awareness and language learning outside the classroom. The third phase was the structured interviews of 50 Bachelors in English Language and Literature students to examine how the LL helped them to learn English. The 50 interviewees were the same group of students selected to do the other test. In this phase, students were asked to answer the interview questions, and they were given the options to opt-out if they were not interested. Out of 90 participants, only 50 answered the interview questions.

The participants were conveniently selected from the researcher’s classes in Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics, and Research Methodology. Before the participants were asked to take part in the study, they were required to sign a consent form to take part in the study. This means that students were allowed to opt-out if they were not interested.

Since there were three phases of data collection, three phases of data analyses were also conducted in this study. It started with a linguistic analysis on the road signs and shop names to provide an overview of the LL in Al Buraimi, Oman. The analysis was based on the collected pictures from the city’s shop names. Then, it was followed by the analysis of how LL helped the English language learners. The analysis was based on the students’ responses to the words and phrases that they recalled from the shop names translated from Arabic to English. The words that students recalled were verified by the researchers from the shop names and signage, and categorized as content words and function words. Lastly, the analysis focused on the perspectives of the students on the usefulness of LL in learning English. The analysis was based on the interviews conducted from 50 participants. The interviews were coded and analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

Language use and Patterns in the Linguistic Landscape in Oman

A regular pattern of language use is evident in the LL in Buraimi, Oman. The use of Arabic and English follows a pattern wherein the Arabic language comes first and is followed by an English translation. Such a pattern of language use is a result from the requirement made by the local government in 2011 wherein the head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry suggested that websites and signboards should be written in Arabic and in English to avoid excluding the non-Arabic speakers (Times of Oman, 2011). The objective of using Arabic and English was to accommodate the non-Arabic speakers who are mostly migrant workers from various parts of Asia. Such policy was implemented by almost all business owners, but it was not passed as a law in Oman. However, to date, such shop naming has become a practice by many shop owners to use both Arabic and English.

The use of two languages can be a manifestation that Omani society is becoming multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multilingual probably due to the presence of economic migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines and other neighbouring Arab countries, such as Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan. The majority of the non-Arab migrants do not speak Arabic, and English has become their lingua franca when communicating with other nationalities even to the Omani. The use of English in the LL of Oman can be an indication of accommodating the non-Arabic speakers in the country.
The findings of the study are congruent with the findings of Buckingham (2015) that the LL in Buraimi, particularly the shop names, follows certain patterns in language use such as the use of noun phrases (nominalized transaction verb), the use of multiple verbs and multiple nouns, and the use of article "the" to introduce an organization. It must be noted that the analysis of the LL patterns in this study is an introductory analysis that could lead to a deeper understanding as to how the LL is used as a resource in teaching and learning English as a Foreign language.

The shop signage in Al Buraimi, Oman has shown a pattern in the way shops are named. The pattern carries loads of meanings that can be linked to cultural assumptions. Although the names are translated into English, the Arab or Omani culture is evident in the way shop names are structured. The use of noun phrases or nominalized transaction verbs, multiple verbs, multiple nouns, and the use of articles to introduce an organization to name a shop is cultural. This entails that the Arab culture is always attached to the English shop signage.

The use of the noun phrases (nominalized transaction verb). The majority of shop names uses the noun phrases, which are nominalized transaction verbs. Such use of nominalized nouns is also common in spoken discourse among Omani speakers of English. The shop names can be a reflection of how English is verbally used in Oman. For instance, the use of names, like ‘retail of pets and their accessories’, “sales of watches, perfumes, and luxuries,” indicate the specific service and products that the shops offer. This method of shop naming may sound unfamiliar but is easier for customers to identify the shops that sell particular goods or products. This direct naming of shops may provide an easy understanding for other speakers of English who do not have similar language and pragmatic competence as compared to the native speakers. From the 50 photos taken, it shows that 35 shop names use noun phrases.

The use of multiple verbs. The use of multiple verbs can be seen in many shops in Oman particularly in the City of Buraimi. This style of naming indicates the services or jobs offered by shops like repair, construction, house cleaning, and office or clerical services. Since there are limited specialized shops in the city, the majority of the shops offer multiple jobs and services. The shop names explicitly indicate the services and jobs offered. It is evident that the use of the word “sale or sales” functions as a verb as in “articles sale & repairing” which means “to sell and to repair”. Another shop name like “Building, Cleaning Services, and Pest Control” indicates two verbs, building and cleaning. Using multiple verbs shows the various services and products that the shop offers to prospective customers.
The use of multiple nouns. Apart from the use of multiple verbs, it is also common to see some shop names containing multiple nouns. Such use indicates the specific products and services available in the shop. This style of naming commonly appears in shops that offer multiple products and not services. This is evident in mini grocery shops and those that sell chocolates, ready to use items and food products. Such use of multiple nouns reflects the numerous products sold at the shop for example “Wholesale of Confectionary, Nuts, Coffee & Bakery Products.”

The use of articles to introduce an organization. Some shop names also use an article “the” to introduce an organization or a specific service that the shop offers. Such shop names are common in offices or agencies that provide household services like supplying house cleaners and construction workers. The use of the article “the” somehow helps to provide a specific service that the shop offers and differentiates it from other shops. For example, “The Capital Manpower Recruitment.”
Implications of Shop Names in English

Currently, there is no policy as to how the two languages are arranged; however, there is evidence that most shops use Arabic first followed by an English translation. Regardless of how the shop names are structured and arranged, such practice reflects the importance of English in the Omani society. The grammar and spelling issues as reflected in LL signal the status of English in Oman. The visibility of English in all places indicates that English is slowly increasing its function and its role in an Arabic dominated society.

The translation of shop names in English promotes the importance of English in Oman. Exposing people to a language that is foreign to them is a form of educating people of the increasing language role that English holds. Studies support that raising the social function of a language is possible through the LL and education language policy of the country. Currently, Oman implements the use of English as the medium of instruction in colleges and universities and as a required subject in schools starting from the primary until high school. By combining both methods in promoting the language and its international role, there is a chance for English to increase its social function in Oman.

The findings of the study show that the patterns of shop naming in English in Oman is a reflection of the increasing importance and popularity of the English language in the country and can be used as supporting evidence to argue that English is slowly becoming part of the Omani culture. Noone (2018) argued that English is gaining popularity in Gulf learning Institutions. This initially presents the idea that Omani English is an emerging variety of English. Exploring further the use of English in other contexts will provide more evidence on the emergence of the Omani English variety.

In addition, the use of English LL in a non-English speaking country may be useful in teaching English as a foreign language. Using LL as teaching tools allows the learners to locally learn a global language. It raises the learner’s awareness of English and allows them to use a foreign language in a local context. This concept is discussed further in the following sections of this paper.

Linguistic Landscape: English Language Teaching and Learning

In a society where English is not widely spoken, English language teaching and learning bring more challenges to English language teachers. However, when English becomes visible through the LL, it makes the learning of English faster. Gamez (2015) found that English language learners’ exposure to English promotes English language development. In this study, LL translated from Arabic to English is argued to be useful for language learning and teaching.

To carry out the study, students were exposed to the linguistic landscape of the city and asked to recall the English words and phrases that they remembered. The results show that students can recall some English vocabularies and phrases. It shows that LL in English results in better retention, and it can be an effective strategy in teaching English as a foreign language. It reveals that teaching and learning of English in Oman can be enhanced outside the classroom through the English LL available in the area as tools for classroom instruction.

In this study, students were asked to recall the English words and phrases and instructed to categorize them as function words or content words. The findings show that students recalled the nouns more than the other grammatical categories. Out of 674 words
recalled, 577 (85.61%) are nouns, 56 (8.31%) are verbs, 27 (4.00%) are adjectives, 5 (.74%) are pronouns, 2 (.30%) are conjunctions, and 7 (1.04%) are prepositions. It also shows that 660 (97.93%) of the recalled words are content words and only 14 (2.08%) are function words. This indicates that content words are more easily remembered than function words.

The findings correlate with that of Gentner’s (1982) that learners easily learn the concrete nouns because as object-reference terms; they have a transparent semantic mapping to the perceptual-conceptual world. This is the reason why foreign language learners prove that nouns are easily learned as compared to other grammatical categories. This method of learning has practical implication in terms of pedagogy, particularly on how to teach English vocabulary for fast retention and recall before introducing other grammatical categories.

Table 1 shows the different grammatical categories recalled by participants from the English shop names. The words are further classified as function word and content word.

### Table 1

| English words recalled by students according to grammatical categories | Function Word | Content Word |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Nouns                                                                 | 577 (85.61%)  |               |
| Verbs                                                                 | 56 (8.31%)    |               |
| Adjectives                                                            | 27 (4.00%)    |               |
| Prepositions                                                          | 7 (1.04%)     |               |
| Pronouns                                                              | 5 (.74%)      |               |
| Conjunctions                                                          | 2 (.30%)      |               |
| Total                                                                 | 14 (2.08%)    | 660 (97.92%)  |

Teaching and learning vocabulary do not only involve knowing about words; they also include the learners’ knowledge about lexical phrases. In this study, students were also asked to write the phrases that they recalled from the LL. The results show that students do not focus only on words, but they also recall some phrases in English, such as the noun phrase, verb phrase, and prepositional phrase. It reveals that the noun phrase recalled is 25 (36.76%), 42 (61.76%) for verb phrase and one (1.47%) for a prepositional phrase. Of the three phases, a noun phrase has the highest occurrence that students remember. The results of our analysis indicate that learners can easily recall noun phrases than that of other phrases. The table below shows the noun phrase, verb phrase, and prepositional phrase recalled by students.
Table 2

| Phrases Recalled from the Linguistic Landscape | Total          |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Verb phrase                                  | 42 (61.76%)   |
| Noun phrase                                  | 25 (36.76%)   |
| Prepositional phrase                         | 1 (1.47%)     |
| Total                                        | 68 (100%)     |

Students’ Perspective on the use of English Signage in Oman

To validate the results of the earlier findings on recalling the English words and phrases, the same group of students were interviewed as to whether the use of English translations of LL helped them to learn English. The interviews conducted with 50 students reveal that English translation has contributed to learning new vocabulary, spelling, and structure.

**Linguistic landscape and vocabulary learning.** From the interviews conducted, students believe that the LL translated from Arabic to English are helpful to foreign language learners in improving their vocabulary. Vocabulary is essential in language learning and “lacking either adequate word identification skills or adequate vocabulary will ensure failure” (Biemiller, 2005, p.1). The participants of the study feel that the frequency of seeing the English words through the shop names help them to learn more vocabulary. Teng (2010) argued that vocabulary is learned through repeated encounters of unfamiliar words and the context where these words are used to facilitate better vocabulary learning.

The findings also support that students remembered the nouns more than the other grammatical categories. From the participants’ perspectives, it can be said that the LL could be helpful for English language learners in enhancing their vocabulary.

In the interviews conducted, the participants mentioned:

“*The signage and road signs help me to understand new words in English and it helps me to speak English.*” (P6)

“*The signage is written in English help me to improve my reading and help me to learn new English words and it last longer in my memory.*” (P20)

“I learn English when I see the words through the signage and from it; I learn new words in English.” (P10)

**Linguistic Landscape and Familiarization of English.** From the interviews conducted, the participants believe that signage can help learners become familiar with the English language. This means that what the students learn in the classroom is enhanced by what they see in the linguistic landscape and eventually make them more familiar with the language. One factor that helps them learn the language is the frequency of exposure to the LL of the city. Word frequency is often treated as the quantifiable correlate of word familiarity and word length (Cesar, 2015).
Familiarization of the English language through LL helps the students learn how to use some words in the real context. Graves (2006) argued that words are learned faster when they are frequently used in context.

In the interviews conducted, the participants commented:

“The English language that can be seen in the signage helps us to be more familiar with the language. It helps to remember the words particularly if it is always seen on the road every day.” (P35)
“If I always see and read the words in English, they go to my memory, and I learn from it” (P2)
“When you see the English words, it helps to remind and to be more familiar with the word, and you will know more.” (P18)

Linguistic Landscape and Spelling. Correct spelling in English has been a problem among Omani students wherein most English words are usually misspelt. The spelling problems among English as foreign language (EFL) learners particularly the Arab speakers are due to cross-lingual transfer because they tend to apply the spelling patterns from their native language (Ringbom & Jarvis, 2009). It is evident that through the English LL, their typographical errors in some words were minimized.

In the interviews conducted, it shows that the signage available on the streets has helped students improve their spelling. Their frequent contact with words in the streets like the road signs, shop names, and advertisements written in Arabic and English make them more familiar with the spelling.

The participants commented.

“From the signage written in English, I learn new words and I learn the correct spelling of the word.” (P30)
“The English words I saw outside teaches me the spelling of some words in English.” (P24)
“English spelling is difficult to familiarize but if I always see the English word, I don’t forget it.” (P33)

Linguistic Landscape and English Language Structure. Omani learners of English are more interested in learning the structure or forms rather than the content. Learners are more inclined to correcting their usage of English through self-correction. Seeing the structural errors in the LL allows the learners to self-correct the errors without the teachers’ intervention. The learners’ knowledge of the rules is applied by learners on their own.

From the interviews conducted, learners believe that their exposure to the English language that they see within their immediate environment helps them improve their usage of the language. The participants commented:

“There is some signage that doesn't provide a good translation from Arabic; however, it helps me to know when to use such words so it is very useful.” (P12)
“I learned how to correct phrases and sentences on the signage I always see.” (P27)
“I sometimes correct some incorrect sentences used in the signage. I feel that it helps me to improve my English.” (P9)
Based on the tasks given to the participants in recalling vocabulary words and phrases and through the interviews conducted, it is clear that LL enhances the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Oman. If teachers will make use of the LL available within the learners’ immediate environment, English language teaching and learning could be easier and faster.

**Challenges in Language Teaching and Learning**

One of the perennial problems of English language teaching and learning in Oman is the lack of motivation of some students, which sometimes results in poor performance in English classes. Poor performance can be linked to the learner’s limited background knowledge of the target language. As a result, students could hardly relate their personal experiences to the language that they learn.

The findings of this current study show that English can be learned easily when learners have language schema. Using the English LL within the learners’ community allows them to relate the language that they learn to their daily experiences. This facilitates better learning because LL within their immediate environment becomes more familiar to them. Therefore, LL can be authentic and practical teaching materials that enhance the learners’ understanding of the language.

At present, several Omani learners struggle to learn English since most teachers rely heavily on foreign-authored textbooks. Making the text and class activities in the classroom relevant to the learners’ experiences will bridge the gap in learning English as a foreign language.

**Conclusion**

English language teaching and learning in countries where English is considered as a foreign language and has limited functions in society pose many challenges to both teachers and learners. However, if practical approaches in teaching are employed such as using any available resources within the reach of the teachers and learners, English language learning could be easy and fast. Studies show that public signs open opportunities for language teachers to maximize the potential of using real-life language in contexts relevant to students (Floralde & Valdez, 2017, p. 799). Based on the findings of this study, the use of English LL in an EFL context may contribute much in developing a better approach in English language teaching. In the case of Buraimi, a small city in Oman, the translation of the LL from Arabic to English has helped the learners increase their English language vocabulary where they easily remember and become familiar with English words and phrases. Students can develop their English vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical structure. Therefore, using the LL as a pedagogical tool in teaching English as a foreign language in Oman may benefit the teachers and the learners. This type of pedagogy wherein learners are exposed to the use of language in real context can be considered practical. It allows the teachers and learners to engage with the available resources of the community.

Although there are limited native English language speakers in Oman that Omani learners can interact with outside the classroom, it is evident that through the LL students are allowed to interact with the English signage and shop names. The findings of the study support the notion that exposing learners to the linguistic landscape provides awareness of the
languages used in public signs, and indicates or gives evidence on the languages that are locally relevant (Kasanga, 2012).

Oman government’s requirement to translate the Arabic language to English in almost all signage and shop names does not only accommodate the non-speakers of Arabic but also enhances the learners’ ability to learn the English language outside the classroom. It encourages self-directed learning wherein students take the responsibility to meet their own needs to learn a language (Brown, 2002; Chamot, 2001).

It can be said that the LL of a town or city written in English can be a useful tool for English language teachers and learners. Using the LL can be a useful and functional tool since it exposes the learners to English in an authentic context.

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**About the Author**

**Francisco Perlas Dumanig**, Ph.D. (corresponding author) is an Assistant Professor at the English Department, University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, USA. He used to be a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia. His research interests are in Language Teaching, Sociolinguistics, World Englishes, and Discourse Analysis. (email: fdumanig@hawaii.edu)

**Maya Khemlani David**, Ph.D. received the Linguapax Award in 2007 and is an Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, United Kingdom and an Honorary Member of the Foundation of Endangered Languages. She is currently Adjunct Professor in Jaipuria Institute of Management and Research Associate in Asia Europe Institute, University of Malaya. Dr. David has a special interest in discourse analysis, minority languages, and language maintenance. (email: mayadavid@yahoo.com)