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Public Space Signs as Authentic Materials in the Process of Learning a Second Language

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to examine and demonstrate the role that signs and public-institution inscriptions play in the process of learning Georgian as a second language, and to offer practicing teachers techniques and methods for their effective use. The presentation outlines the purposes of employing signage and the activities designed to achieve these purposes, as well as a lesson plan that serves as a practical guide for teachers on how to integrate such materials into lessons of Georgian as a second or foreign language.

Keywords: *Public space signs, Second language, Authentic language materials, Speech practice, Lesson plan.*

Introduction

Signs offer authentic, contextually meaningful language input that supports vocabulary acquisition and practical language use. They also convey cultural knowledge, helping learners develop both communicative skills and intercultural competence.

The characteristics of the signs are:

a) Authentic Content

They consist of natural and frequently used words and phrases, making the learning material practical, as learners recognize that they can use it in real-life situations.

b) Visual Support

Signs and inscriptions are often accompanied by logos, images, or other graphic representations and colors, which facilitate comprehension and interpretation of meaning.

c) Cultural Knowledge

They frequently include authentic elements of the local culture (including graphic symbols), which help learners study the culture in addition to the language (e.g., “Come In, Savior,” Restaurant “Multicolored”).

d) Vocabulary Expansion

A key benefit is the enrichment of learners' vocabulary, including informal lexical items.

Working with this type of material exposes learners to functional lexical units and phrases such as: open/closed, discount, entrance/exit, prices, product names, services, and more.

The relevance of this topic is defined, on the one hand, by the fact that contemporary language-teaching approaches emphasize the importance of providing learners with authentic materials alongside classical, traditional textbooks; and, on the other hand, by the lack of such resources—and of experience integrating them into classroom practice—in the context of teaching Second Language. In this paper, we offer teachers practical ways to incorporate this approach into the language-teaching process.

Literature Review

Numerous studies highlight the effectiveness of authentic materials in second-language learning. For example, Alex Gilmore, in his work *"Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning,"* emphasizes that incorporating such materials supports the development of cognitive, social, and cultural competences. He underlines that learners are exposed to authentic texts, which considerably enhances their preparation for real-life communication. (Gilmore, 2007).

According to research, integrating authentic materials into the learning process significantly increases learner motivation, especially when the selected material is engaging and appropriate to the learner's language proficiency level. Authentic materials help learners understand and use real language. They enhance learners' motivation and create a more natural learning environment. This approach underscores the importance of communicative methods, in which the use of real language is essential (Nunan, 1988, 1999).

Cenoz and Gorter (2008) have conducted noteworthy studies on the use of signage in second-language learning. They argue that shop signs help language learners acquire new words and expressions unconsciously and naturally, within real-life contexts.

It is also important to take into account M. Bouckaert's perspective on the teacher as a creator of instructional resources. According to the author, teachers play a vital role as creators and adapters of learning materials, applying sound pedagogical principles to design, choose, and modify classroom resources that suit their learners' needs and local contexts. Through this process, teachers strengthen their professional identity, deepen their pedagogical knowledge, and develop the capacity to customize materials effectively, encouraging creativity and a richer understanding of the relationship between teaching and learning. Fundamental pedagogical principles that guide material development include

analyzing learners' needs, ensuring logical sequencing and progression, contextualizing content, maintaining a learner-centered approach, and allowing flexibility for continuous improvement based on student feedback and emerging educational trends (Bouckaert, 2018).

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research method, specifically desktop research. It offers approaches grounded in the authors' own teaching experience. The subject of the research is signs and examples of the Georgian language.

Discussion

Public space signs differ in content, function, and linguistic characteristics. Below, we present the categories into which such public-space inscriptions can be grouped:

A **sign** is a board or panel with an inscription. It indicates an organization or business located within a building, as well as any inscribed (or illustrated) board that provides information about a street, crossing, intersection, direction, elevation above sea level, speed limit, parking area for vehicles, and so on. In terms of content, a sign belongs to the category of outdoor advertising (Construction Encyclopedic Dictionary).

Regarding inscriptions on signs and informational panels of establishments, they are noteworthy from lexical, grammatical, semantic, and sociolinguistic-cultural perspectives. Therefore, a **sign** attracts attention through visual features such as color, design, and context, whereas an **inscription** draws attention to the textual component.

Names of Shops, Cafés, Restaurants, and Other Public Establishments:

a) General: Shop, Market, Mall, Pharmacy, Pet Store, Dry Cleaning, Barber Shop, Bakery, Pastry Shop, Computer Services...

Subcategories: Wine Cellar, Khinkali House, Coffee Laboratory, Khinkali Academy, World of Honey, Cheese House, Language Center...

Signs containing geographical names: "Restaurant Abkhazia," "Restaurant Gagra," "Restaurant Ritsa," "Mingrelian Cuisine"...

Specific names: "Come In, Genatsvale," Restaurant "Mravalzhamieri," "Two Steps," "Nikora"...

Public spaces: Dezertiri Market, Navtlugi Market, Lilo Bazaar, New Year Village, Easter Village... Bombora Park, Mtatsminda Park, Mushtaeti Garden, Kikvidze Park, Alexander Garden, Orbeliani Square, Erekle Square...

B) Information about the service:

Knife Sharpening, Shoe Repair, Atelier, Tailor, Sewing Workshop, TV/Refrigerator/Washing Machine Repair Technician, Delivery Service...

C) Product and Section Names:

General Sections: Electronics, Household Appliances, Food, Seafood, Farm Products, Stationery, Construction Materials, Plumbing, Alcohol, Fruits and Vegetables; Women's clothing, Men's Clothing, Children's World, Gold Market...

Bookstore Sections: Children's Literature, School Literature, Scientific Literature, Religious Literature, Fiction, Translations...

Subcategories / Additional Features: products often include extra descriptors that attract attention, such as: Natural, Monastery-made, Handmade, Gori Apple, Marneuli Tomato, Kakhetian Wine, Mtskheta Pie, Mingrelian Khachapuri, Imeretian Cheese, Meskhetian Bread, Svan Salt, Grandmother's Bread, ... European Clothing, Dubai Chocolate, Dark Chocolate, r-Vegan Dishes...

D) Vocabulary Commonly Found in Retail Spaces: Wholesale/Retail, Section, Department, Open, Closed, Working Hours, Discount, Promotion, Cash Register, Shop Assistant, Security Staff, Display Window...

Customer Instructions / Notices: "Please inquire at the cash register," "Item return," "Loyalty card"...

Special Dates / Seasonal Promotions: New Year / Christmas discount, March 8 discount, Easter / summer discount, Black Friday, August hot prices...

Store Calls to Action / Promotional Phrases: "Buy 2 items, get the third free," "20% discount with a friend," "Register by October 16 to receive a 40% discount," 24/7...

The materials under analysis provide clear evidence of linguistic contacts. Of particular scholarly interest are instances of bilingual and multilingual texts. Within Georgia, inscriptions in Georgian-English are the most prevalent, although Georgian-Russian texts are also observable. In specific locales where enterprises operated by Middle Eastern immigrants are concentrated, signage frequently integrates Georgian and English alongside Turkish, Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew. It is

apparent that exposure to bilingual and multilingual inscriptions positively contributes to the language acquisition process for learners of Georgian.

ღიაა ("Ghiaa") - **Open**,

ოპტიკა ("Optika") - **Optics**,

თბილისი მოლი ("Tbilisi Moli") - **Tbilisi Mall...**

იყიდება ("iqideba") - **For Sale - Для продажи...**

Through exposure to bilingual and trilingual examples, learners of Georgian can easily link corresponding forms in Georgian and English, observe the structural distinctions between the languages, and utilize signs as an effective instructional aid. This approach enhances retention and supports learning and communicative practice in authentic contexts.

E) Teaching Grammar Naturally

Regarding grammar, the following list outlines how signs can be used for instructional purposes:

- a) **Imperatives** (e.g., *Use the elevator! Do not lean! Do not smoke!*))
- b) **Conditional clauses**: (e.g., *If you buy one, you will get the second as a gift*)
- c) **Adverbs of direction**: (e.g., *to the right, up...*)
- d) **Modal verbs**: (e.g., *You must continue straight ahead*)
- e) **Prepositions**: (e.g., *Please inquire at the cash register*)
- f) **Adjectives**: (e.g., *Biggest Sale*)...

Accessible Resource

Teachers can easily and cost-effectively create their own materials by taking photos of existing signs or drawing them, and they can also involve students in the process.

In the classroom, teachers can incorporate a variety of engaging activities. For example:

1. Working on Vocabulary

- a) Show students photos of real store signs and inscriptions and give them tasks such as: "Find the sign that indicates goods are being sold at a lower price than usual (discount)"; "You can come in and buy whatever you want (open)", and so on.
- b) Show students various photos (e.g., bakery, dry cleaner, pharmacy, notary office, law firm) and ask them to match each photo with the corresponding word prepared in the form of a sign (dry cleaner,

pharmacy, notary office, law firm) and ask them to match each photo with the corresponding word prepared in the form of a sign.

2. Role-Play

Show students a sign (for example: “*Discount Promotion Today Only*”). Ask them to create a dialogue between a customer and a shop assistant based on this information.

3. Group Project – Create a Store Sign

Ask students to work in groups to design a store sign that includes a logo and the appropriate text/inscription. Through collaborative work, students create the name and signage for a store, restaurant, café, or bakery in the target language. They can also incorporate common inscriptions such as “*No Entry*”, “*Open 24/7*”, and similar notices.

4. Error Correction

Show students signs that intentionally contain grammatical or spelling mistakes and ask them to identify and correct the errors.

5. Discussion on Cultural Parallels

- a) Ask intermediate and advanced students to discuss which signs might be specific to the target culture and how they are similar to or different from analogous signs in their own culture.
- b) Show students bilingual signs/inscriptions (e.g., English-Georgian) and ask them to share their opinions on why business owners choose to use bilingual signs (e.g., for modernity, prestige, attracting international customers, or other purposes).

6. Guess the Store

The teacher shows students only a slogan or the name of a store and asks them to guess the type of store and what it sells (for example, “*Clean House*” or “*Sweet Land*”).

Lesson Plan

Regarding the lesson plan, the lesson can be divided into the following stages: introductory activity, vocabulary work, comprehension practice, creative work, presentation, and feedback.

Level: A2–B1

Age Group: Teenagers and adults

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Topic: Learning everyday vocabulary, functional language, and cultural elements through public space signs and inscriptions

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- a) Recognize and understand frequently used words on store signs and comprehend the meaning of the inscriptions;
- b) Analyze the purpose of a sign;
- c) Create their own store sign using correct vocabulary and without grammatical or spelling errors.

Resources Needed:

- a) Photos of real store signs (printed or included in a presentation)
- b) Whiteboard
- c) Paper and markers for creating signs (or digital drawing tools)

Lesson Stages:

1. Introduction (5–10 minutes)

Activity: Discussion

- a) Ask students what types of signs they encounter in everyday life.
- b) Show several signs (e.g., “No Entry,” “No Smoking,” “Staff Only,” “Entry Fee Required,” “Under Renovation”) and ask students to explain the meaning of each and where they might see them.

2. Vocabulary Exercises (10 minutes)

Activity: Match the Signs

Show 8–10 signs along with a list of their meanings or corresponding situations.

Students should match each sign with its function.

For example:

- a) “Shop Assistant Wanted” - “Looking for new staff”
- b) “Closed” - “Currently not open”

3. Comprehension Exercises (10–15 minutes)

Activity: Sign Interpretation

Show students 3–5 photos (e.g., a clothing store window with its sign, a pharmacy counter with inscriptions) and ask them to answer the following questions:

- a) What can you buy here?
- b) What are you allowed/not allowed to do here?

4. Creative Task (15 minutes, individual work, pairs, or small groups)

Activity: Design Your Own Store Sign

Ask students to imagine they own a small business (e.g., a bakery, a beauty salon, a private kindergarten) and create signs for their establishment. The signs should include:

- a) The name of the business
- b) A short slogan or text about a current promotion
- c) Optional warning or informational signs (e.g., “Open from 10:00 to 20:00”)

Visual design is considered a plus, but students will not lose points, if they are unable to add decorative elements.

5. Presentation and Peer Evaluation (10 minutes)

Students present the signs they created to their classmates.

Classmates try to guess the type of store and provide feedback or ask questions.

Homework:

- a) Ask students to take a photo of a real sign in their neighborhood and present brief information about the establishment to their classmates, or have classmates guess what type of establishment it is (e.g., “Fresh Meat. Since 1991”).
- b) Translate an interesting sign from their native language into the target language.

Assessment Criteria:

The teacher evaluates, either verbally or in written form, the following components:

- a) Participation in discussions and activities
- b) Correct use of vocabulary in tasks
- c) Creativity and clarity in sign design
- d) Ability to analyze and describe signs orally or in writing

Both formative feedback and grading with points are effective.

Conclusion

Considering signs ease of use and accessibility, the variety of possible activities, and their potential to cover diverse learning goals, signs used in public spaces can be regarded as valuable learning materials and incorporated into second language teaching. Furthermore, studying this material can also be significant from the perspective of learning specialized or professional language. A learner of Georgian would, for instance, be better prepared to navigate service-sector interactions, which can be considered a secondary benefit of this teaching method.

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