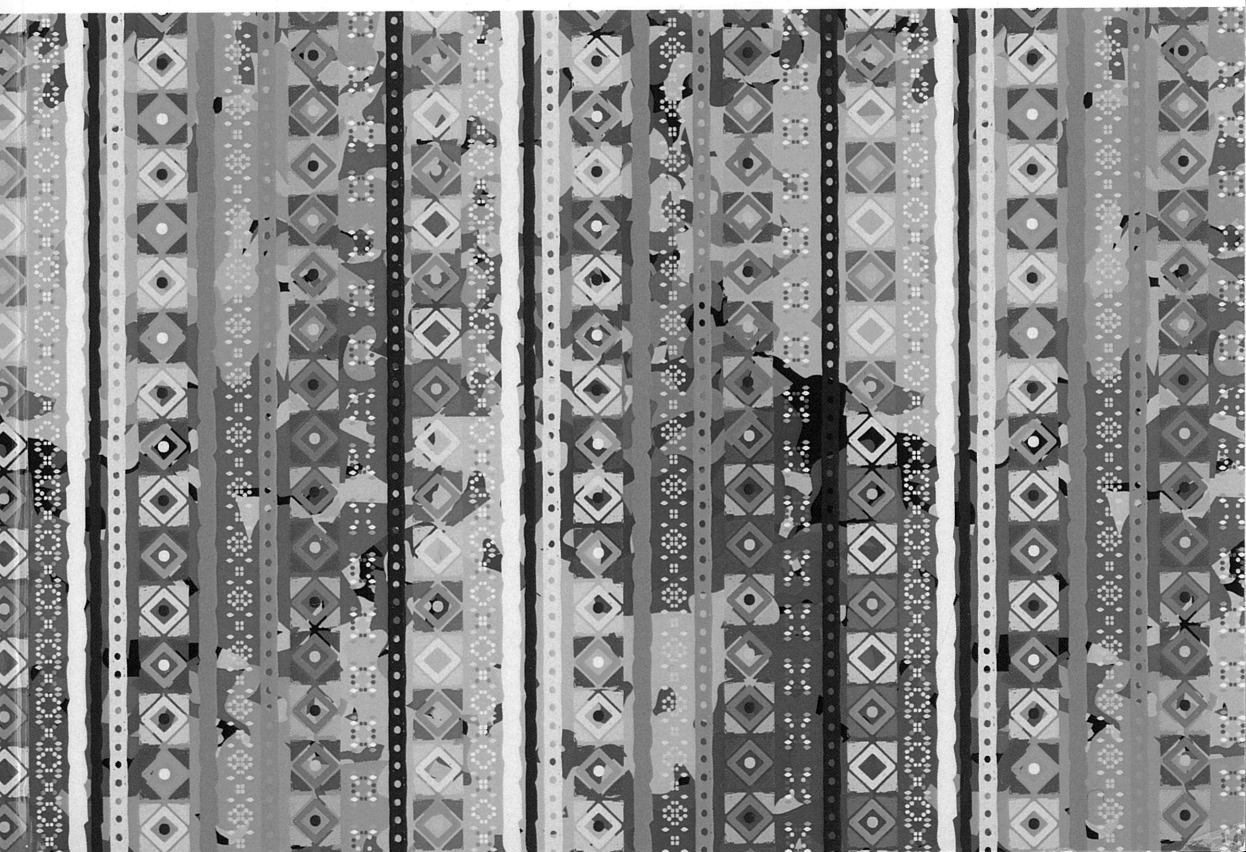


BADANIA NAD JEZYKIEM I KULTURĄ

Tom III

Brudne, odrażające, niechciane w kulturze



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Revaluation of graffiti as unwanted texts in language acquisition¹

Keywords: graffiti, language acquisition, literacy, edusemiotics, linguistic landscape

Abstract: The aim of the article is to theoretically substantiate the use of graffiti in the learning process and practically demonstrate how graffiti texts could be included in language acquisition (especially in the language as a first language lessons). Graffiti examples are taken from the linguistic landscape of Latvia to discuss with secondary school pupils the language use in the city, emotions in language, as well as to enhance understanding of linguistic and visual images on the various levels. The education context of Latvia is presented first, then the edusemiotics theory is briefly explained, followed by the general description of graffiti as a public sign. In the practical part, three ideas for work with graffiti during lessons of the Latvian language are proposed. The end of the article offers an assessment of examples and conclusions. Graffiti as authentic text is a tool to attract the pupils' attention and to speak about both specific linguistic issues and the issues important to the pupils. Methodologically practical examples showed that including graffiti texts in the learning process is not an impossible or a deprecatory idea.

Traditionally, during the language learning process, used texts correspond with the teachers and creators of the learning materials ideas about examples of good practice – templates that pupils need to learn and then apply in practice independently. Predominantly these are texts with standard language use or language adapted to the age and language skills of the pupils. However, the fact that pupils outside school perceive and create texts that do not correspond to these examples of ideal language use contradicts this. Pupils often live in two textual spaces: in the learning and the real language environment.

This does not mean that during the learning process the language must be secularized or only texts from social contexts and real communicative situations must be used. However, keeping up with the modern communication and text creation habits, we need to re-evaluate the inclusion of undesirable or ambiguously judged texts in the learning process. This would help pupils bring the aforementioned textual spaces closer to each other.

¹ This article has been produced within the framework of the postdoctoral research project "Linguistic Landscape of the City as a Multifaceted Resource in the Baltic States: Linguists', Entrepreneurs' and Students' Perspectives" (No 1.1.1.2/VIAA/1/16/011).

The article focuses on graffiti texts as authentic signs of urban linguistic landscape. These can be offered to pupils in a methodologically well-considered way when acquiring language (informal language, figurative language, linguistic tools for expressing feelings, lexical groups) and sociolinguistic issues (language choice, multilingualism, language prestige). The aim of the article is to theoretically substantiate the use of graffiti in the learning process and practically demonstrate how graffiti texts could be included mostly in the Latvian language as L1 acquisition in forms 6 to 9, but also in Latvian as L2 or foreign language learning process.

The education context of Latvia is presented first, then the edusemiotics theory is briefly explained, followed by the general description of graffiti as a public sign. In the practical part, three ideas for work with graffiti during language classes are proposed. The end of the article offers an assessment of examples and conclusions.

Educational context in Latvia

During the 2015/2016 academic year, Latvian as the first language (L1) is taught in 707 educational institutions. Latvian as a second (state) language (L2) is taught in 189 primary and secondary schools, in which pupils also study minority languages in parallel (mainly Russian, but also Polish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian and Belorussian).² In schools that implement the minority education program, other subjects are taught either in minority languages, Latvian or bilingually. The foreign languages most commonly taught in Latvia are English, Russian, German and French.³

In Latvia, all subject curricula and programs for the entire secondary educational process are being developed, piloted and improved by experts, teachers and methodologists (including the paper's author) as part of the ambitious reform project "School2030" organized by the National Centre for Education of the Republic of Latvia.

The challenges of language education in the near future are related to a number of significant changes in teaching approaches and in the paradigm of conceptual ideas. First of all, in all subjects four competences of importance to the process of personality development have been identified:

- 1) thinking and creativity,
- 2) self-evaluation and self-regulation,
- 3) cooperation and participation,
- 4) digital competence.

The active practice of these competences improves pupils' abilities to organize their own learning processes by collaborating with each other and purposefully using appropriate learning strategies, diverse learning resources and digital tools. They are

² *Mazākumtautību izglītība: statistika un tendences.* (in Latvian) <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/sabiedribas-integracija-latvija/mazakumtautibu-izglitiba-latvija/mazakumtautibu-izglitiba-statistika-un-tendences>. Accessed 21 September, 2018.

³ *Valsts pārbaudes darbi 2016./2017. gadā.* (in Latvian) <http://visc.gov.lv/vispizglitiba/eksameni/statistika/2017/>. Accessed 21 September, 2018.

able to inductively build knowledge and develop a deep understanding of the subject to be learned, while also being able to reflect on this knowledge, the path to its acquisition, and its relation to the subject as a whole. In the case of language learning, it is important that pupils develop the skills to discuss individual language issues, language itself and the language learning process.

Secondly, in developing subject standards, special attention has been paid to the improvement of textual literacy (i.e., the ability to read, write and use texts) also taking into consideration pupils' linguistic biographies and repertoires (e. g., Mills 2016, Lazdiņa 2017). This means developing multilingual competences and practices in teaching practice. In order to facilitate wider and deeper understanding of educational topics, the programs provide for learning of terms, definitions and texts not only in Latvian, the official language, but also in other languages familiar to pupils and used in various sociolinguistic domains in Latvia (Latgalian as regional variety in Latvia, Russian, English, German, etc.).

Thirdly, there is a turning point of the Latvian as L1 program's methodology, offering thematic principles which highlight the communicative (functional and interactive) approach and around which the learning process can be organized. Themes are age-appropriate and give pupils the chance to work with varied texts such as literary works, film clips, encyclopaedia entries, posters, advertisements and classified ads in the city and on social media, blog entries, Facebook posts, etc. Each form language program is based around six various themes. For instance, the one theme of third-form language program is "I am a Language Detective", the sixth-form theme is "Language at School", the seventh-form theme is "Social Media and Networking", while the ninth-form theme is "Cinema Language and Language of Cinema". Until now, pupils learned Latvian through grammatical themes (e.g. word creation, verb, sentence, text, etc.) using texts that were not always related to one another. This methodological practice has not yielded the desired results: pupils' interest in the subject, as well as average exam ratings, are not high enough.⁴

While assessing the changes incorporated into the new language education documents, it appears that the examples of the programs of the Latvian language as a L1 have clearly and sufficiently demonstrated the need to use authentic texts and involve pupils' linguistic repertoires.

Theoretical framework

Edusemiotics is a new interdisciplinary scientific field that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. It improves the sign theories and ideas of semioticians, linguists, and culture studies practitioners (e. g. Ch. S. Peirce, F. de Saussure, U. Eco, M. Bahtin,

⁴ *Standartizēto eksāmenu rezultāti, 2016–17* (in Latvian).

http://visc.gov.lv/vispizglitiba/eksameni/statistika/2017/dokumenti/2017_09_Latviesu_2.png. Accessed 21 September, 2018.

J. Kristeva) in keeping with the experience and communication habits of modern people.

Edusemiotics combines applied semiotics with education philosophy and the theoretical and methodological basis of certain subjects (Danesi 2010, Kukkala, Pikkariainen 2013, Sametsky, Stables 2014, Sametsky 2017). The theory focuses on purposeful use of signs in the learning process and the acquisition of signs in formal and informal environment. This is especially important in modern education because the pupils' ways of communication on the web and text creation techniques (e. g., video blogs, memes, posts on Facebook) require knowledge about the perception, interpretation and use of the multimodal text (a text where the meaning is expressed through verbal and visual information) for their own purposes. Even though in many cases indirectly expressed meaning of signs reaches the subconsciousness of the reader, the ability to understand, interpret and use signs (especially polyphonic signs with a large potential for associations and polysemy) does not come naturally, it is to be acquired and improved. Scientific articles and essays repeatedly stress that the experience of perceiving and interpreting multimodal signs acquired in the learning process later helps pupils understand the meaning and sense of other signs outside the learning environment and operate with the information acquired (Semetsky 2017). Ecological linguistics and critical pedagogy express similar ideas, highlighting the importance of pupils' activity and interaction in the learning process, acceptance of diversity (linguistic, ethnic; interpretation, meanings, etc.), and quality of language acquisition (see more van Lier 2004, Norton, Toohey 2004).

The theoretical ideas of edusemiotics account for the use of varied texts in the learning process without evaluating texts based on certain moral criteria or genre prejudices. The next section contains a review of graffiti texts as the signs of the semiotic landscape and elements of linguistic landscape particularly typical of the urban environment.

Graffiti in the city: semiotic landscape, linguistic landscape and graffiti-scape

In scientific literature the term *graffiti* is most often defined from the aspect of criminology, sociology and arts, significantly less often from the linguistic point of view. Graffiti are defined as:

- a vandalism, public nuisance, and a crime against the city (Hutchinson 1993: 138; Ferrell 1996; Wilson 1998);
- an element of subculture in opposition to the dominant culture; reflects the longing of a particular part of society for recognition and acceptance (Lanchmann 1988, 229; McDonald 2001);
- an omnipresent and cheap medium (Phillips 1999, 17; Siber 2005);

- a particular way of communication within a group of “one’s own”, a microcosm of communication (Senkane 2008, 298; Blume 1985, 140–145; Carrington 2009).

However, graffiti are defined not only by scientists but also by their creators, for example: “Graffiti are essentially letters. These are not faces, not a three-dimensional super madness when it’s impossible to understand what is written” (Tase 2006).

Silva believes the main features of graffiti are: *marginality*, *anonymity*, *spontaneity*, *particular features of creation* (place, composition, colours), *risk* and *temporality* (Silva 1987, 33). The features of graffiti identified by Tjukaeva can be added to the list: “handwriting as a writing technique for conveying and preserving information; text overtness and accessibility to all; principal disregard for conventional norms of communication and conduct; voluntarism and self-will in text creation; representation of personal experiences, emotions and feelings” (Tjukaeva 2005, 13).

Because graffiti are predominantly multimodal texts, depicting a rather relative boundary between a drawing and an artistic text, they fit in the sign system of the urban environment which is attributed to the semiotic landscape. Graffiti are scientifically analysed mainly in transgressive semiotics, characterizing their role and meaning in the transformation, interpretation of the public space and encouraging new interpretations (Pennycook 2009, 2010; Scollon and Scollon 2003).

However, in graffiti, verbal information in a particular language is important too, which is why graffiti along with other public written texts (e. g., direction signs, advertisements, business names, posters) are elements of the linguistic landscape. These language signs in the city depict language contacts, prestige, symbolic and economic value of particular languages, give indications about language use in spoken communication (Gorter 2006; Shohamy, Gorter 2009; Hélot, Barni, Janssens, Bagna 2012; Pošeiko 2015; Blackwood, Lanza, Woldemariam 2016). Graffiti in particular depict the area of language use which is affected the least, because even though they are located in public space, they are attributed to the private sphere of language use.

The fact that graffiti as linguistic or semiotic signs are so different from other signs due to their creation, expression and functionality has allowed to define a separate landscape, namely, graffiti-scape (Pennycook 2010, Pošeiko 2013).

Thus, on the one hand, graffiti are unauthorized urban texts, the creation of which is disapproved (especially on historical and cultural monuments, recently restored or new buildings). However, on the other hand, graffiti depict what people for some reasons do not dare make public otherwise. It may be anger or offence, happiness or an expression of feelings, thoughts, or doubts. In case of artistic graffiti, another important aspect is creativity, an opportunity to express oneself creatively using colours, font and style of letters. The opportunity to choose the language of the message is equally important. For example, in the second largest city of Latvia, Daugavpils, where Russians are the local majority, there are few language signs in the linguistic landscape where information is in Russian. Overall, the linguistic landscape does not reflect the ethnolinguistic situation in the city. But, if we look at language use in graffiti in the city centre or microdistricts, frequent use of the Russian language can be observed. Thus,

the study of graffiti in sociolinguistic studies and learning cannot be underestimated or ignored.

The next section offers three methodological ways for work with graffiti during language lessons of Latvian as the first language. However, it does not mean that the proposed variants or its parts cannot be applied in teaching a second language or foreign language. The first technique is related to understanding graffiti texts in general, offering pupils to independently study the graffiti-scape in the city, analyse the content and form of the texts. The pupils also create their own digital graffiti message on the Internet and present it in class. The second idea is related to applying the lingua-cultural approach in practice. It means that the pupils get to know the surrounding environment through graffiti, noticing locally important images in these texts and studying those at different levels (linguistics, literature, folklore, cinema). The third technique is related to the personal experience and the language of emotions of the pupils, discussing texts of confessing love, making feelings public, and the linguistic and visual tools used in such types of texts.

“Graffiti in our city”

The aim of the first learning activity is to attract the pupils’ attention to urban texts (graffiti), allowing them to empirically study their linguistic and visual formation and evaluate their necessity in public communication, offering other alternatives to these communicative texts. In this topic, the following linguistic issues can be actualized: *defining a term, language use, monolingualism and multilingualism, language contacts, slang, proper nouns* (pseudonyms, nicknames, toponyms), *spelling*. The activity presupposes independent work of the pupils, group work and research work outside the lesson. A comprehensive lesson plan is provided in the following paragraphs.

The topic of graffiti can be started with the question – what pupils understand by the word *graffiti* – and finding out the definition of the term in dictionaries (in languages known by the pupils, explanatory dictionary), writing down the most significant features. Then it makes sense to discuss graffiti in the city, where it can be seen most often and why in these locations in particular. How do graffiti change the perception of a place? The task can be facilitated by demonstrating an image, such as the example in Figure 1.

The teacher encourages pupils to share interesting/artistically creative or unpleasant/shocking examples of graffiti found in the environment. What exactly was surprising when looking at them (content, form or both)? Then the pupils’ attitude to graffiti texts and drawings in the city can be discussed, as well as normative documentation that determines the types of punishment and its enforcement for unauthorized creation of texts in the city. Depending on the age of the pupils, the teacher can ask the pupils to read these documents individually or in groups and express their opinion on their adequacy to the offence committed.



Figure 1. *This is/is not just vandalism*. Graffiti text in Riga (Photo: Solvita Pošeiko)

The next task is the creation of a mind map with possible reasons for creating graffiti texts or drawings, assuming that the authors know that graffiti are illegal. Pupils can, in groups, write down possible alternatives to the texts or activities for each motivation named earlier.

Then the pupils together with the teacher agree on graffiti assessment and analysis criteria, paying special attention to the language of graffiti (e.g., intelligible/unintelligible, visually simple/artistically complex, monolingual/bilingual/multilingual, order of languages in the text, correct/incorrect spelling, slang/neutral language, theme). Pupils have an empirical task – in a location of their choice or a specific location, take photographs of all the graffiti, a specific number of graffiti, or graffiti texts on a specific theme (e.g., tags, romantic texts, artistically created texts) and analyse those according to the criteria formulated earlier. During the presentation of the work completed, the pupils together make conclusions on the typical features of the content and language of graffiti texts, discuss the most original individual cases. The teacher monitors the precision of the analysis of the work results and encourages students to explain possible motives for choosing a particular language(s), to express their opinion on language prestige among graffiti writers and on the influence of spelling mistakes on understanding the text. If necessary, other linguistic issues can be elaborated upon. Then the teacher can ask to compare the results of the pupils' research with the results of a scientific work of a researcher (local or foreign), writing down conclusions on the similar and different results of the works.

In the conclusion of the topic, the pupils create their tag or graffiti text on the Internet using special free software. As a result, a digital exhibition can be created on a common social network profile, blog or other shared website of the class, or an exhibition of the works at the school premises.

“Verbal and visual images of graffiti”

The aim of the second learning activity is to focus the pupils' attention on the locally and nationally significant images/symbols in graffiti, trying to understand their meaning and transformation at different levels: in folklore, literature, cinema and cultural life. The following linguistic issues can be actualized in the topic: *proper nouns* (nicknames, names and surnames) and *pet names, image/symbol description, CV, social and regional language variations, regional words, archaisms*, including quotations in the text. The work presupposes independent and group work of the pupils, creative writing is included. A comprehensive lesson plan is provided in the following paragraphs.

In any city there is graffiti containing a locally and/or nationally significant image/symbol, which is used in various contexts with numerous interpretations. Figure 2 shows an example from a linguistic landscape of a region of Latvia (Latgale) where the nickname of a literary character is included (*Boņuks* from male first name Bonifācijs).

The analysis of a graffiti text begins at the linguistic level. The pupils' task is to write down the full name of the nickname seen in the graffiti text and identify the linguistic approach and linguistic tool that was used to create the nickname (Answer: diminutive form with the suffix -uk-). Information is found on the Internet (in the First Names database of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs⁵) together with the number of people named Bonifācijs living in Latvia. Then the pupils in groups write down the nicknames they know (of friends, relatives, celebrities) and the names from which they are derived; then they sort these nicknames according to the grammatical and thematic principle. All the groups exchange their conclusions on the typical principles and linguistic devices of nickname formation, the possibilities for sorting them, giving specific examples.

Continuing the acquisition of first names, the teacher asks whether the pupils know *Boņuks'* surname in Jānis Klīdzējs' youth novel *Cilvēka bērns* 'The Child of Man' (1956). When this is established, (the surname is Paulāns) the students research in which locations in Latgale this surname was used in the past⁶. As an independent project, the teacher can ask the pupils to study the origin and prevalence of their own surnames in Latgale and in Latvia, creating the surname's story.

A logical continuation of the work is to relate language to literature and cinema. First the pupils read a fragment of the aforementioned novel, watch parts of the film *Cilvēka bērns* (director Jānis Streičs, 1991), and review the learning material and the storybook *Ciemos pie Boņuka* 'Visiting *Boņuks*', writing down unfamiliar words and finding out their meaning. The teacher encourages them to pay attention to *Boņuks'* language, in particular to the use of the Latgalian language, specific words and original phrases. Then the pupils write a description of *Boņuks'* character, also including his most striking phrases as quotations. How easy or difficult is it to understand his

⁵ Database is available here: <http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/sakums/statistika/personvardu-datu-baze>. Accessed 21 September, 2018.

⁶ Latvian Language Agency has published book „Latviešu uzvārdi arhīvu materiālos: Latgale” (2018) about Latvian Surnames in Latgale Region from the past till nowadays.



Figure 2. *Boņuks*. Graffiti text in Rēzekne, Latgale region (Photo: Solvita Pošeiko)

language? Older pupils can create a CV of the actor who played *Boņuks*' (Andrejs Rudzinskis), first getting acquainted with publications and interviews on the Internet. It is also useful to discuss together the importance of talent and education in the field of cinema for a career of an actor.

Expanding their culture competences, the pupils get acquainted with the statutes of the Annual Latgalian Culture Award "*Boņuks*" (objectives, requirements for candidates) and express their ideas about the choice of the name for the annual award, substantiating their answers with the information gathered earlier and with other facts they may know (including the idea of the initiators of the ceremony about the name of the annual award). Then the pupils improve their skills of summarizing information, creating a timeline with a review of the annual award nominations and the laureates in each nomination. At the end of the summary, the students name the most active people, organizations and companies of Latgale and propose ideas for additional nominations, which could be included in the statutes of the award (maybe *The Most Active Youth?*).

Finally the pupils write an essay on the topic *Boņuks manī* '*Boņuks in Me*', *Katrs Latgaliētis ir Boņuks* '*Every Latgalian is Boņuks*' or *Latgale kā Boņuka tēls* '*Latgale as an Image of Boņuks*', trying to relate the knowledge acquired to their own feelings and individual experiences, to knowledge about Latgale in the context of Latvia.

"Disclosure of emotions in graffiti"

The aim of the third learning activity is to improve the pupils' knowledge of the language of emotions, the ability to determine and use the verbal and nonverbal means of expression characteristic of it, depending on the genre of the text and the communicative situation. The topic presupposes the consolidation of the knowledge of the following linguistic issues: *linguistic choice for expressing feelings, forms of address, stylistic tools*. Reflecting on the feelings, on showing love and making it public using personal examples or examples of other people and literary characters while substantiating one's own opinion is also important. The work presupposes a free discussion,



Figure 3. *Es atkārtosos, bet es tevi šodien atkal ļoti milu!* 'I'm going to repeat myself, but today again I love you very much' and *Я люблю тебя* 'I love you'. From the left: graffiti in Latvian and graffiti in Russian in Riga (Photo: Solvita Pošeiko)

group work, and creative work. The steps of the lesson plan are provided in the following paragraphs.

The warm-up question of the topic – how do people show their feelings to another person? How did they do it before and how do they do it now? The teacher helps answer these questions, reminding the literary works read earlier and encouraging pupils to recall the ways of demonstrating feelings depicted in them. The teacher can allow the pupils to use the Internet, finding surprising examples of confessing love around the world. The pupils systematize the information discussed, creating a review of the similar and different types of texts and ways of expressing feelings at different times, including in their reviews the examples that they consider the most successful (specific songs, poems, experience stories, literary, cinema and theatre plots).

Then the teacher asks a more specific question – what do the pupils think about making feelings public, for example, publishing love letters of famous writers after their death, announcing falling in love with a specific person on social networks and confessing love through graffiti? The teacher, within their abilities, gives specific examples, one of which is the graffiti from Riga seen in the Figure 3.

The pupils perform a detailed analysis of the language use in each of the aforementioned types of text (publicly available love letters, posts on social networks and graffiti texts), paying attention to verbal and visual tools (heart symbols, emoticons, colours), forms of address, emotionally expressive and stylistic language (epithets, metaphors, similes), syntax and text structure. They make conclusions about what is characteristic of each type of text and which text type is laconic/impersonal and emotionally effective/interesting/comical, etc. The pupils argue on the factors that affect the choice of each type of text, linguistic and visual tools (the sender's and the

addressee's personality, experience, feel for language, time, money). Then the pupils in a group formulate arguments for and against making feelings public. If possible, think of text types alternative to public graffiti announcements. Finally the pupils write a text expressing their feelings to an imaginary figure (or a specific person) using a style and type of text of their choice (a poem, song lyrics, a love letter, a text message, an e-mail, a post on a social network, etc.).

Conclusion

The proposed learning activities suggest that graffiti can be used in language classes, focusing on them directly (first example), using them as a source of encouragement for elaborating on some linguistic issue or topic (second example) or by offering them as one of the types of texts under review to elaborate on the idea of a topic (third example). Graffiti as a type of text was not a goal in itself in any of these cases, but rather a tool to attract the pupils' attention and encouragement to speak about both specific linguistic issues and the issues important to the students. Thus, it can be concluded that including graffiti texts in the learning process is not an impossible or a deprecatory idea. The teacher's responsibility is to select adequate examples of graffiti without avoiding discussing graffiti with negative connotation, aggression and rudeness, allowing the pupils to deliberate graffiti with vulgar vocabulary, slang and inappropriate images. We cannot ignore the fact that graffiti exist in the city, but we can show pupils to find other ways and tools for expressing feelings, thoughts and affiliation, teaching them to take responsibility for the texts that are made public.

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