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Theoretical and conceptual insights from linguistic landscape research: Implications for English language teaching

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, research on linguistic landscapes (LL) has slowly but steadily expanded, offering new ways of understanding how language, identity, and power take shape in the spaces where daily life unfolds. What began as simple documentation of languages on shop signs, street names, and public notices has since grown into a field that asks deeper questions. Signs are no longer seen as just texts on walls. They have come to be recognized as part of how communities express themselves, negotiate belonging, and work through questions of power, inclusion, and visibility. In a world where movement and multilingualism are part of everyday life, LLs provide a grounded way of noticing how these realities are made visible, sometimes quietly, sometimes quite forcefully, in the streets and spaces people share. This paper revisits some of the key ideas that have shaped this body of work. Through a narrative literature review and thematic analysis, it brings together a range of perspectives and approaches that have been used to make sense of LLs. Nine themes emerged through this process: foundational definitions, language policy and planning, ethnolinguistic vitality, semiotic and multimodal perspectives, political economy and power, globalization and mobility, translanguaging and multilingualism, identity and place-making, and methodological innovation. Each theme shows that public signage is never just practical. It carries traces of social histories, local struggles, shifting identities, and ongoing negotiations over who belongs, who is heard, and how people relate to the places they inhabit. The paper also reflects on how these insights might matter for English language teaching, especially in the Japanese context. It suggests that paying attention to LLs could help learners develop not only greater language awareness but also a more sensitive understanding of cultural diversity and communication in real-world settings.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape (LL); Narrative Literature Review; Thematic Analysis; English Language Teaching (ELT); Japanese Context

1. Introduction

Language has never just been about passing along information. It carries pieces of people's identities, echoes of their cultures, and often, quietly and almost unnoticed, it reflects the beliefs and ideologies that shape how they see the world. These dimensions of language rarely announce themselves loudly. Instead, they tend to surface in the familiar places people move through every day, in the streets they walk, the markets they visit, the schools they pass, and the institutions they navigate.

It is precisely in these everyday spaces that Linguistic Landscape (LL) research has found its grounding. What began as a simple practice of recording languages on signs has grown into something far more revealing, a way of understanding how language works beyond its surface. LL invites people to notice how language gives shape to space, signals belonging, and offers insight into the complex, often uneven, social realities of multilingual communities (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Signs that may seem ordinary —a street name, a shop sign, a public notice,

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have come to be read as deeply social texts. They help tell the story of who is visible, which languages are allowed to speak, and how communities quietly negotiate power, identity, and belonging in shared spaces.

In the past two decades, LL has attracted increasing scholarly attention, partly due to the heightened mobility, migration, and multilingualism that characterize today's globalized world (Backhaus, 2006a; Gorter, 2013). Researchers have recognized that LL offers more than just a record of languages on display; it provides a lens for examining how space, language, and power are intertwined in the fabric of everyday life. What began as a somewhat peripheral interest has evolved into an interdisciplinary field, drawing contributions from applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, education, semiotics, and language policy (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Blommaert, 2010). LL studies have also drawn attention to how public signage is rarely neutral. Choices between languages, scripts, and designs are ideologically charged, reflecting and often reinforcing social hierarchies. Both top-down signage (produced by institutions and authorities) and bottom-up signage (created by individuals, businesses, or grassroots actors) function as sites where identity, authority, and community values are negotiated (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Huebner, 2006).

In recent years, LL has gradually gained attention not only as a topic of research but as a resource for language learning and teaching. What makes LL interesting in the classroom is not just that it reflects language in public space, but that it brings learners face-to-face with how language is actually used around them. This becomes especially meaningful in EFL contexts, where students often have few opportunities to encounter English outside their textbooks. Signs, advertisements, public notices, and even graffiti offer a different kind of exposure, one grounded in the realities of the communities learners already know. In such encounters, English is no longer just a target language; it is part of the local environment, sometimes visible, sometimes contested, and sometimes quietly blended with other languages (Dagenais et al., 2009; Sayer, 2010). For learners, working with these materials tends to do more than simply introduce new words. It creates space for them to think about how languages interact, how they blend, compete, or sit side by side, and how these dynamics shape the lives of the people who use them.

At the same time, LL research itself remains somewhat scattered. Research studies have come from a variety of disciplines and regions, each offering valuable insights, but often without a shared frame of reference. As a result, the field has grown in multiple directions, sometimes without connecting threads. What is still missing is a more sustained attempt to bring together the theoretical approaches, methods, and applications that LL research has generated. Without this, LL risks remaining a collection of local case studies rather than contributing fully to discussions about language education.

This review takes on that task by drawing together key theories and concepts that have emerged in LL research and by discussing their implications for English language learning and teaching. It looks back at how scholars have defined and redefined LL, and how it has been shaped by the realities of globalization and multilingualism. In pulling these strands together, the review aims to give a clearer picture of how LL has grown as a field and how it might continue to shape how teachers, learners, and researchers think about language, not just inside classrooms, but in the wider world where languages are lived.

2. Material and methods

This review took shape as a narrative literature review, chosen deliberately for its capacity to engage with the evolving and interdisciplinary character of LL research. From the outset, it was clear that LL could not be captured through a fixed set of procedures. The field, which cuts across applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, language policy, semiotics, and education, has unfolded unevenly, reflecting the shifting realities of multilingual and multicultural societies. A narrative approach, therefore, offered the space needed to trace not only established knowledge but also the more subtle undercurrents shaping the field.

The work began by clarifying the questions that would guide the review: How has LL been defined and theorized? What frameworks have researchers drawn on to make sense of it? How has it been mobilized to explore issues of globalization, multilingualism, and power? What does it offer, practically, for English language education, especially in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language? These questions served less as strict boundaries and more as invitations to follow where the literature would lead.

As the reading progressed, the complexity of the field quickly became apparent. Studies were gathered from major academic databases, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, but finding relevant works was not simply a matter of keywords. Often, it was necessary to trace citations and follow threads that led to less obvious but important contributions. Foundational works were revisited alongside newer studies emerging from different parts of the world, each bringing its own take on how language marks public space.

The process of reading and organizing these works did not follow a strictly linear progression. While distinct patterns gradually emerged, notable contradictions and tensions also became evident, reflecting the complexity and multidimensional nature of the literature. Rather than forcing the studies into predetermined categories, they were allowed to cluster where they naturally aligned. In this way, the themes did not emerge mechanically, but through noticing and reflecting.

In the end, the review became more than a synthesis of existing knowledge. It revealed the richness and unevenness of LL research, highlighting both its contributions and its silences. More importantly, it reminded researchers and educators alike that LL is not only something to study, but something to use, a way to enrich teaching, deepen learning, and rethink the everyday spaces where language quietly shapes how people live and connect.

3. Results and discussion

Through careful reading and analysis, nine major thematic categories have emerged, each shedding light on a key dimension of the LL phenomenon. The key themes are the following: (1) Foundational Definition and Conceptualization; (2) Language Policy and Planning; (3) Sociolinguistic and Ethnolinguistic Vitality; (4) Semiotic and Multimodal Perspectives; (5) Political Economy and Power Relations; (6) Globalization and Mobility; (7) Translanguaging and Multilingualism; (8) Identity, Ideology, and Place-Making; and (9) Methodological Innovations and Analytical Frameworks. Finally, these insights informed a critical reflection on LL's areas for future discussion and investigation and pedagogical applications for the EFL classroom in the Japanese educational context, particularly highlighting authentic language engagement, critical thinking, and intercultural competence development.

3.1. Foundational definition and conceptualization

Over time, the attention given to language in public spaces has become much more than a matter of simply recording which languages appear where. What may have begun as straightforward documentation has slowly given way to something deeper. The signs, street names, billboards, and advertisements that fill the streets are now understood as part of the social and cultural texture of everyday life. They do not just point the way or sell products; they speak, often quietly, about who belongs, whose histories are remembered, and how communities relate to the places they inhabit. In its early stages, research into LLs tended to approach these signs as visible reflections of linguistic diversity, without always considering the social relationships and histories they carried.

It was the work of Landry and Bourhis (1997) that offered the field a clearer way forward. Their well-known definition of linguistic landscapes — the *"visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region"*, became a useful starting point for researchers. However, what made their contribution resonate was not just the definition itself, but the recognition that signs are doing more than pointing to language presence. They are also quietly arranging relationships between groups, hinting at hierarchies, identities, and power that often go unnoticed unless one is looking closely. According to Landry and Bourhis, the LL fulfills two fundamental roles: *informational* and *symbolic*. Signs, in their framing, carry not only an informational function, providing linguistic cues about which languages are spoken or dominant in a specific geographical area, but also a symbolic one, with meanings shaped as much by history and social dynamics as by the words printed on their surfaces.

As more scholars began spending time with LLs, the field slowly shifted, finding ways to move past early tendencies to simply list languages on signs. Gorter (2006) was among those who approached these spaces differently. His work leaned into the idea that signs are more than records of who speaks what in a given place. They hold traces of how people manage language, how they navigate multilingual encounters, and how local identities settle, or unsettle, within public spaces. Under Gorter's influence, LLs were no longer treated as static, but as lived spaces where language choices, large and small, carried meaning, shaped by the interplay of policy, history, and the habits of everyday life.

This more careful attention to what signs do, rather than just what they display, was taken further by Backhaus (2006b). Backhaus' work in Tokyo revealed something familiar to anyone who has walked a city street: signs rarely follow a single pattern. Official regulations, of course, leave their mark, but so do the small decisions of shopkeepers, advertisers, and passersby. Backhaus spent time noticing these details, distinguishing between what might be expected, the official signs, and what emerges informally (unofficial signs), sometimes improvisationally. Backhaus' study offered no single explanation for the complexity found. Instead, it showed how signs became part of the city's fabric, revealing quiet negotiations and subtle compromises over who and what should be made visible.

Taken together, the early contributions of Landry and Bourhis (1997), Gorter (2006), and Backhaus (2006b) nudged the field toward something more reflective. What might once have been treated as background noise, the words on a

shop window or the lettering on a street sign, began to be read differently. These were not just signs, but traces of the ongoing social work of communities making space for themselves, however unevenly, within the places they inhabit.

3.2. Language policy and planning

The relationship between public signage and language policy has always been more than straightforward. Signs do not simply communicate; they reveal how language is managed, both formally and informally, in everyday life. Spolsky and Cooper (1991) were among the first to show this with clarity. For them, language policy was never just a matter of official laws or government documents (*explicit directives*). It was also embedded in everyday interactions (*implicit conventions*), shaped by the social habits and expectations of communities themselves. Their study of Jerusalem captured this complexity in a way that has since become foundational. Through the city's signs, they traced the visible layers of its multilingual reality—Hebrew, Arabic, and English coexisting, but not always equally. What stood out was not only the presence of these languages but the tensions, compromises, and informal adjustments behind their arrangement. The signs, in many cases, spoke to an uneasy balancing act between what was officially mandated and what was negotiated on the ground (Spolsky & Cooper, 1991).

This attention to the politics of visibility was taken further by Shohamy (2006). Shohamy's work brought into sharper focus the idea that LLs do more than reflect language policy, they enact it. The decision to include or exclude certain languages in public spaces is rarely innocent. It is tied to questions of power, identity, and authority. For Shohamy, signs are not only practical tools but part of how societies make visible their linguistic ideologies. They carry the imprint of choices made by institutions, yet they are also shaped by communities that may accept, adapt, or quietly push back against these choices. What Shohamy's work brought to the field was a sense that language policy is not just something written in official documents; it is continuously shaped, reworked, and sometimes contested in the streets themselves (Shohamy, 2006).

Shohamy and Gorter (2009) deepened this line of thinking by paying closer attention to acts of resistance within the landscape. Signs, they argued, do not simply transmit official policies. They can also open up spaces where those policies are questioned or even subverted. Communities often find ways, sometimes subtle, sometimes direct, to make their languages visible even when official frameworks do not. By looking across different contexts, Shohamy and Gorter showed that LLs are rarely passive. They are spaces where power, identity, and language policy meet, not always smoothly, but often through ongoing processes of negotiation and quiet contestation. Signs, in this sense, become part of the everyday social work of claiming space, identity, and voice (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

Taken together, these studies helped reshape how scholars have come to view public signage. It is no longer seen simply as text on walls or shop windows. It is part of the slow, often invisible process through which language policies are lived and felt. Whether reflecting official mandates, everyday practices, or acts of quiet resistance, LLs continue to reveal the complex ways communities negotiate language, power, and belonging.

3.3. Sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic vitality

The presence of languages in public spaces is often tied to questions of vitality, not just whether a language is spoken, but how visible it is to those who move through a community. Landry and Bourhis (1997) were among the first to connect this visibility to what they called *ethnolinguistic vitality*. For them, the ability of a language to sustain itself depends on more than the number of its speakers. It also relies on whether that language appears in everyday life, shaping how communities see themselves and are seen by others. Through their early work, they showed how LLs influence these perceptions. When a language appears regularly on signs, posters, and public notices, it does more than provide information. It quietly affirms that the language has a place where it is present, valued, and expected to continue. Their research suggested that this kind of visibility feeds directly into speakers' sense of belonging and confidence, reinforcing a collective belief in the future of the language (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

Cenoz and Gorter (2006) carried this conversation further, focusing on communities where language visibility is more fragile. Their work in the Basque Country showed how signs could become part of the quiet but steady work of language revitalization. In places where minority languages risk slipping into the background, the landscape itself becomes a resource. Cenoz and Gorter showed how the presence of Basque in public signage does more than decorate public spaces. It helps position the language as legitimate, as belonging, both to those who speak it and to those who encounter it from outside. Their careful observations of urban and rural spaces highlighted how visibility strengthens not only status but also the emotional connection speakers have to their language. For many, these signs are more than text. They are small but meaningful signs of recognition (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006).

A similar concern shaped the work of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), who examined LLs in the multilingual context of Israel. Their research paid close attention to how power and hierarchy play out through language visibility. In cities marked by the co-presence of Hebrew, Arabic, English, and other languages, signs rarely speak neutrally. Some languages dominate, while others find space only in certain neighborhoods or specific types of signage. What emerged from their analysis was the sense that LLs reflect more than demographic realities; they reveal the everyday politics of space, voice, and recognition. For Ben-Rafael et al., signs were never just informational. They were part of how groups negotiate, and sometimes contest, their place within the social fabric of multilingual communities (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006).

The work of Landry and Bourhis (1997), Cenoz and Gorter (2006), and Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) continues to shape how LLs are read today. Across different contexts, these studies point to the ways in which public signs help communities not just reflect who they are, but actively shape who they might become. Visibility does more than mark a presence; it helps sustain it.

3.4. Semiotic and multimodal perspectives

Over time, LL research has moved well beyond the analysis of written text alone. Increasingly, attention has turned to how signs operate not just linguistically but also visually, spatially, and symbolically. The LL is now understood as a space where meaning is rarely carried by words alone. The way signs are designed, placed, and encountered matters just as much as the languages they display. Scholars working with semiotic and multimodal approaches have emphasized that reading public signs means paying attention to more than just what is written. Visual cues, layout, spatial positioning, and the broader environment all quietly shape how signs are interpreted and how they structure social life.

Scollon and Scollon (2003) were among the first to offer a systematic approach to this perspective through what they called *geosemiotics*. Their work foregrounded the idea that signs are never isolated texts. They are always part of a larger physical and spatial arrangement. Meaning, in this view, comes not only from what a sign says but where it is located, how it is oriented, who it addresses, and even how it relates to other signs nearby. The size, positioning, angle, and materials of a sign often influence its effect just as strongly as its words. Scollon and Scollon showed that signs participate in shaping meaning through their relationship with the built environment and the social practices that surround them. Their work helped shift LL research toward a broader understanding of how language, space, and materiality come together in everyday public life (Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

Following this line of thought, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) added further texture by introducing the concept of *semiotic landscapes*. Their work highlighted how text, image, typography, color, and layout work together, often inseparably, to create meanings that go far beyond the literal content of signs. They showed how visual choices, whether intentional or habitual, carry ideological and cultural weight. The use of certain colors, the style of a font, or the arrangement of symbols can signal belonging, power, commercial intent, or cultural values. For Jaworski and Thurlow, these visual dimensions are not background details. They are central to how signs are understood and how they help construct social identities within public space. Their work made clear that LL studies, if they are to grasp what signs do, need to account for these layered visual and material resources (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

Together, these studies opened up LL research to ways of seeing that reach beyond language alone. They suggested that public signage is not just a display of words but part of a more complex and layered system of meaning-making. Every sign participates in this system, sometimes subtly, sometimes directly, helping to shape how space is experienced and how social relationships are made visible in the everyday landscapes people move through.

3.5. Political economy and power relations

For many scholars, the LL offers more than just a snapshot of multilingualism. It opens up questions about the deeper social and economic forces that shape public space. Signs, from this perspective, do not simply inform. They mark, often subtly, the workings of power, reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies, economic interests, and ideological struggles. Approaching the LL through the lens of political economy has drawn attention to how language visibility often mirrors, and sometimes intensifies, broader patterns of inequality.

This was the concern at the heart of Calvet's early work (1990, 1994), which explored how LLs serve as everyday reminders of who holds power and who does not. Calvet showed that the languages most visible in public spaces tend to be those aligned with economic, political, or cultural dominance. Calvet's studies in cities like Paris and Dakar illustrated how French, as a former colonial language, maintained a privileged position, occupying the most prominent spaces in signage. Local languages, in contrast, were often pushed to the margins or excluded altogether. For Calvet,

these patterns were no accident. They reflected historical relationships of power and continued to shape how communities navigated questions of status, belonging, and linguistic legitimacy (Calvet, 1990, 1994).

Huebner (2006) took these questions into the world of globalization, turning to Bangkok as his case. What he found was a city where English had carved out a dominant position in the commercial landscape. The signs, often aimed at tourists and international visitors, positioned English as the language of modernity and opportunity. However, beneath this, Huebner traced a quieter pattern, local languages, though still present, were increasingly relegated to the background. What emerged was not just a shift in language use, but a shift in what counted as valuable or modern. Huebner showed that the LL offered more than a picture of who speaks what; it offered a map of the city's changing economic and social priorities (Huebner, 2006).

Leeman and Modan (2009) brought this conversation to the streets of Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown. Their work paid close attention to how public signage intersects with questions of development, gentrification, and community identity. They showed how signs could, on the surface, celebrate cultural heritage while quietly serving commercial and political interests. In their account, the LL was not simply a reflection of community life, but part of the machinery that reshaped the neighborhood. Signs became tools in the negotiation of space, sometimes preserving cultural markers, sometimes helping to erase them (Leeman & Modan, 2009).

Collectively, these studies ask readers to read signs differently. They show that LLs are not passive backdrops. They are places where power settles in, sometimes softly, sometimes sharply, shaping how communities, histories, and identities are seen and remembered.

3.6. Globalization and mobility

It is hard to look at LLs today without noticing the imprint of globalization. Signs have become more than simple markers of local languages. They carry traces of movement, of people, goods, and ideas passing through, settling, and reshaping the places they touch. What once might have seemed like a fixed or stable picture of local language use now appears much more fluid. Public signage often shows the entanglement of the local with the global, creating spaces where languages meet, overlap, and sometimes unsettle each other.

Blommaert (2013) was one of the first to make this shift feel urgent and showed how LLs were becoming harder to read using older categories. Blommaert's idea of *superdiversity* captured the sense that signs now reflected much more than who lives in a given space. They began to tell stories about migration, mobility, and the everyday encounters shaped by global flows. Signs were no longer just bilingual or multilingual in simple ways; they became patchworks, mixing languages, styles, and registers in ways that did not always follow predictable rules. Blommaert pointed to these landscapes as places where global shifts leave visible marks, sometimes subtle, sometimes chaotic, in the fabric of everyday life (Blommaert, 2013).

Coupland (2010) offered a slightly different lens by looking at how LLs respond to global tourism and *cosmopolitanism*. Coupland's observations focused on how signs often serve audiences who are just passing through, tourists, expatriates, international business visitors, and how these shapes both the look and function of public signage. The increasing visibility of English in tourist-oriented areas, for example, is rarely just a matter of convenience. Coupland showed how language use in these spaces signals openness, modernity, and a kind of cosmopolitan hospitality, but it also subtly reorganizes how places are imagined. Coupland's work on Wales, among other settings, highlighted how LLs participate in crafting a sense of belonging, not only for locals but for a much wider, mobile audience (Coupland, 2010).

In combination, these studies make it difficult to read signs as simply static markers of linguistic diversity. The LL has become one of the places where global flows and local identities meet, sometimes smoothly, sometimes awkwardly. The languages on display offer more than information; they trace the routes people take, the connections they build, and the tensions that often accompany movement across borders.

3.7. Translanguaging and multilingualism

It is hard to walk through many public spaces today without noticing that languages rarely stay in neat, separate lanes. Signs often carry traces of how people actually live with language, switching, blending, and adapting as they go. The signs themselves seem to absorb this flexibility, showing language not as something fixed by rules but as something shaped by the rhythms of daily life. *Translanguaging* has become a helpful way to make sense of these patterns. It shifts attention away from older ideas that imagined languages as sealed and self-contained. Instead, it brings into view the small acts of creativity, adjustment, and quiet negotiation that happen when people move between languages, not just in conversations, but on walls, shopfronts, menus, and all the bits of written life scattered across public space.

Gorter and Cenoz (2015) were among those who helped bring this sensibility into LL research. What stood out to them was just how rarely signs played by the rules of monolingualism. Languages, scripts, and styles regularly appeared mixed together, creating landscapes full of improvisation. However, for Gorter and Cenoz, these mixtures were not mistakes, they were simply part of how people got things done with language. Speakers worked with what they had, drawing on all the resources at their disposal to make meaning. In doing so, they quietly pushed against the old assumption that languages ought to stay separate. In the places they studied, linguistic boundaries were often soft, and signs became everyday spaces where communities negotiated meaning on their own terms (Gorter & Cenoz, 2015).

The edited volume by Blackwood et al. (2016) took this conversation even further by paying attention to how blended signs carry not only meaning but also identity. Across the chapters, contributors showed how hybrid signage often does more than simply communicate information; it tells stories about the people and communities behind it. These signs often carried the texture of daily life, signaling who belonged, how people connected, and how communities made space for diversity. In some cases, they were subtle acts of resistance, pushing back against neat categories and official definitions. Throughout the volume, translanguaging appeared not just as a communicative strategy but as a way of shaping belonging, claiming space, and making room for complex identities that do not always fit within tidy linguistic or cultural boxes (Blackwood et al., 2016).

At the same time, García and Wei (2014) offered one of the most influential formulations of translanguaging as everyday practice. For them, multilingual speakers rarely separate their languages in rigid ways. Instead, they draw fluidly from their full linguistic repertoires, blending and adapting as they go. García and Wei pointed out that this practice becomes especially visible in public signage. Signs, often without calling attention to it, show how people mix languages not as an exception, but as part of how they communicate meaningfully. In doing so, they gently push against the idea that linguistic purity is the norm. What becomes visible instead is a landscape shaped by flexibility, creativity, and the everyday work of making meaning across languages (García & Wei, 2014).

Together, these studies make it hard to think of LLs as static records of which languages are spoken in a place. They show something more alive, spaces where communities experiment, adapt, and blend languages to fit their needs, crafting signs that reflect not only multilingualism but the social worlds that sustain it.

3.8. Identity, ideology, and place-making

Public spaces are rarely just empty backdrops. They are places where communities mark out who they are, what they value, and how they see themselves in relation to others. Through signs and symbols, a neighborhood, a city, or even a small corner shop can carry traces of identity, history, and belonging. The LL, in this sense, becomes one of the ways communities quietly, and sometimes very deliberately, shape how space feels and how it is understood. The choices made about language, style, and placement do more than share information; they give meaning to the spaces people inhabit.

Lou (2009, 2010) offered a close-up view of these dynamics through her studies of Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown. What she found was that signs did much more than name businesses or offer directions. They shaped how the neighborhood was seen, by those who lived there and by those who passed through. Chinese-language signs, for example, did not just signal the presence of a Chinese-speaking community. They were part of how the neighborhood projected cultural heritage, a sense of authenticity, and even a kind of invitation to tourists looking for something distinctive. However, Lou also showed that these signs served multiple roles at once, expressing community identity while also positioning the neighborhood within a wider commercial and urban landscape. In Lou's account, the LL was not just decorative; it played a quiet but powerful role in how the neighborhood defined itself and was defined by others (Lou, 2009, 2010).

Ben-Rafael (2008) carried this conversation into a broader sociological frame. Ben-Rafael's work pointed to how public signs do more than reflect identity, they often carry traces of competing ideas, values, and histories. For Ben-Rafael, LLs are spaces where communities negotiate who belong, whose voices matter, and what values are put on display. Ben-Rafael's analysis suggested that the linguistic choices communities make are rarely neutral. They often reveal deeper tensions, between inclusion and exclusion, between minority and majority, between competing visions of what a community should look like. In multilingual and multicultural settings especially, these tensions are sometimes visible, sometimes subtle, but almost always present (Ben-Rafael, 2008).

Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) added yet another layer by looking closely at how signs work within postcolonial urban spaces. Their material ethnographic approach focused on how signs are not just read, but physically present, where they are placed, how they are designed, and how they interact with their surroundings. Working in a South African township, they found that signs could reinforce existing identities, but they could also contest them. Public signage, they

suggested, is not just about marking space but about shaping it. Signs help carve out territories, real and symbolic, and in doing so, they make visible the ongoing struggles over belonging, recognition, and power. For these two authors, the LL was inseparable from histories of marginalization and efforts at community empowerment (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009).

Together, these studies offer a way of seeing LLs as more than arrangements of words in public places. They are part of how communities tell their stories, sometimes proudly, sometimes cautiously, sometimes in tension with larger forces around them. Signs quietly shape how space is felt, how identities are negotiated, and how histories, both old and ongoing, are carried into the everyday lives of those who inhabit them.

3.9. Methodological innovations and analytical frameworks

As LL research has matured, so too has the need for careful, adaptable ways of making sense of the signs that fill public spaces. Over time, scholars began to realize that describing languages on signs was only the first step. What became increasingly clear was that understanding these landscapes meant attending not just to words, but to the messy, multimodal worlds in which those words appear. This shift has led to a wide range of methodological approaches, each offering tools for noticing the complexity of signs, their language, their form, their placement, and the quiet social negotiations they make visible.

Backhaus (2006b) was one of the first to offer a practical way of making sense of LLs. Working in Tokyo, he began to notice patterns that would later become central to the field. He drew a distinction between *"top-down"* signs — those put up by institutions, governments, or other official bodies — and "*bottom-up"* signs, created more informally by businesses or individuals. This simple but powerful distinction gave researchers a way to ask questions about voice and authority: *Whose signs are seen? Whose languages dominate? Where do they appear? Who are they speaking to?* What Backhaus offered was more than just a method. It was a way of paying attention, a way of seeing how the everyday mix of official rules and community practices shaped the look and feel of public space (Backhaus, 2006b).

Huebner (2006) approached things from another angle. Looking closely at Bangkok's streets, Huebner saw something others might have overlooked. Rather than treating the city's blended, improvised, and often chaotic signage as mistakes or irregularities, Huebner read them as part of a living system, an ecosystem shaped by migration, tourism, commerce, and the everyday hustle of city life. For Huebner, these signs were never just functional. They carried traces of how people made do, adapted, and communicated in a city where languages constantly rubbed up against one another. Huebner's focus on what he called environmental print drew attention to the small things, handwritten signs taped to shop windows, improvised notices, multilingual advertisements layered on top of one another. These everyday details, often easy to miss, spoke volumes about how communities navigate change, negotiate identity, and make space for themselves amid shifting social and economic forces (Huebner, 2006).

Scollon and Scollon (2003) took this kind of attention even deeper. They asked researchers not only to notice what was written on signs, but to look at how signs exist within space. Through their concept of *geosemiotics*, they showed that signs are never just read, they are encountered. A sign's size, its placement, its angle, its material, all of these shape how people interact with it. Their work made it clear that meaning does not just sit on the surface of words. It comes from how signs live within their surroundings, shaping, and being shaped by the places where they appear (Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) extended this even further by introducing the idea of *semiotic landscapes*, drawing attention to the ways signs weave together text, image, color, typography, and design. These visual elements, which might seem secondary at first glance, carry much of the weight when it comes to shaping meaning. In their view, the design of a sign is never neutral. It affects how signs are read, how they feel to those who encounter them, and how they position people and communities in relation to space. Jaworski and Thurlow made it clear that signs are not just there to decorate. They help shape how communities imagine themselves and how they are imagined by others (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

All in all, these approaches have made the study of LLs far more attentive and grounded. What may once have seemed like static collections of words now appear as layered spaces where meaning is made and remade. The frameworks offered by Backhaus (2006b), Huebner (2006), Scollon and Scollon (2003), and Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) have encouraged scholars to read signs not just for their surface content but for the quiet ways they help shape the social worlds around them, who belongs, how space is imagined, and what stories are being told without needing to be spoken aloud.

4. Emerging directions for future inquiry and exploration

The study of LL has unfolded in ways that few might have fully anticipated. What started out as a straightforward task, recording the words displayed on signs in public spaces, has grown into something much more textured. Researchers are no longer just asking what signs say. The questions have shifted to how language exists in space, how it circulates within and between communities, and how it carries traces of power, culture, and social change. The signs are still there, visible on walls, windows, and billboards, but attention has turned to the deeper stories they tell and the quiet negotiations they reveal beneath the surface.

Several directions have begun to take shape, some familiar, others still unfolding. One of the more persistent concerns involves the question of theory. Over the years, researchers have drawn on a wide mix of frameworks—*Place Semiotics, Multimodality*, and others. Each offers something useful. Each sharpens the lens in a different way. Still, these frameworks often remain disconnected. They speak in different languages, follow different logics, and as a result, rarely meet. That distance has left the field somewhat scattered. A more deliberate effort to bring these perspectives into conversation could offer more than clarity. It could build common ground, especially across disciplines that are already circling similar questions. The overlaps between sociolinguistics, education, and semiotic theory are not new. However, they are not always recognized or used as fully as they could be.

Another path forward lies in education, especially in places where English is taught as a foreign language and where authentic exposure outside the classroom is limited. In such settings, the LL is already present. It can be seen on shopfronts, in train stations, and on restaurant menus. These are not contrived materials; they are part of the environment learners move through every day. Despite this, LL is still rarely integrated into language teaching in a structured way. Much more could be done to draw on the language that already surrounds learners. There is space here to develop teaching models that are rooted in the local, shaped by real contexts, and open to adaptation. Classroom-based studies, small in scale, but rich in focus, could reveal how engaging with the public linguistic environment helps shape not only language skills, but also confidence, curiosity, and a more personal sense of linguistic identity.

Then there is the changing nature of space itself. The question of what counts as a *"landscape"* has started to shift. Language no longer appears only on physical surfaces. It now moves through digital platforms, through online signs, comments, captions, augmented overlays, virtual maps. These are not secondary to the physical world. They form landscapes of their own. They carry intention, design, and circulation. The challenge now is to approach these digital spaces with the same care that has been given to more traditional and physical settings. Understanding how language operates in these environments, what is seen, what is hidden, what is designed to disappear, may be one of the more urgent tasks ahead.

Taken together, these directions suggest that the field is not just expanding, it is shifting. The work no longer sits quietly within applied linguistics or urban studies. It stretches across disciplines, into classrooms, into streets, and onto screens. The questions have changed. The tools must now change with them.

5. Pedagogical implications for EFL in the Japanese context

In places where English is not part of daily interaction, the LL can become a quiet but steady link between what is taught in the classroom and what exists just beyond it. This link is often overlooked, despite being close at hand. In contexts like Japan, English appears regularly in public life, on signs, packaging, station announcements, but rarely in ways that demand attention. Still, it is there, embedded in the background. For learners, this presence offers more than surface exposure. It holds real pedagogical potential.

Public signage, whether found in shops, train stations, or on street corners, does not just sit there passively. It speaks, giving directions, warnings, invitations, and entertainment. These are not just random messages; they serve a purpose. Since they exist within familiar spaces, they are accessible. Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* points to the importance of language that is both comprehensible and meaningful. Signs meet that definition. They do not explain grammar, but they do something arguably more useful, which is they model how language functions in context.

The classroom, then, can become a space for drawing that outside language in. A menu becomes material for reading. A poster becomes a prompt for writing. A neighborhood walk, if followed by a reflective task, becomes a way into speaking and listening. These activities do not rely on polished or curated texts. They use what is already part of the learner's world and that matters. Developing skills is not the sole objective. The goal is to help learners recognize language as part of how people live, communicate, and navigate the spaces around them.

There is also room here for deeper reflection. When learners start looking more closely at how English is used in local settings, they begin to notice patterns that often go unexamined. In Japan, the use of *katakana-English* or hybrid expressions in advertising, fashion, or branding tells a story, not just about language, but about identity and aspiration. There is nothing random about these choices. They reflect cultural taste, global influence, and local adaptation. Discussing this in class moves the conversation beyond vocabulary. It opens space for thinking about how language travels, changes, and carries meaning that is not always obvious at first glance.

This kind of work also begins to build symbolic competence. Learners start to understand that language is not just something to memorize, it is something people use to shape impressions, to signal belonging, to define space. A simple sign might reflect decisions about tone, audience, or even power. Becoming aware of this shifts the learner's role. They are no longer just decoding messages. They are starting to see how messages are made.

What makes LL instruction valuable is not that it replaces traditional materials. It is that it gives learners a way to connect what they study with what they see. It brings relevance into the room. The walls of the classroom feel less closed. Language stops being something that exists only in textbooks or exams. It becomes visible in real places, used for real reasons, part of a world the learner already moves through, sometimes without noticing. LL gives reason to slow down, to look more closely, and to ask different kinds of questions about language. This alone can become a powerful form of learning.

6. Conclusion and synthesis

The literature on LLs has grown steadily more layered over time. What began as relatively straightforward documentation of languages in public spaces has unfolded into a field shaped by shifting questions, expanding methodologies, and changing social conditions. The early work focused on what was visible, on mapping the presence of languages across signs and spaces, but as more studies appeared, the emphasis began to shift. The focus turned toward how those languages got there, who put them there, and what their placement, design, and prominence might mean.

It is now widely accepted that public signage does more than communicate practical information. Signs reflect decisions, sometimes institutional, sometimes individual, and those decisions are rarely without social consequence. A language used at the top of a sign, in bold letters, may carry weight that another, placed beneath or omitted entirely, does not. These patterns tend to mirror larger structures: language hierarchies, histories of migration, state policies, and questions of cultural belonging all find expression in the most ordinary corners of the built environment.

As the field has matured, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the visual and spatial features of signage. Words alone rarely carry the whole story. Typeface, color, layout, wear, and placement quietly shape how a sign is read and what it reveals about the people behind it. These visual traces often mirror the linguistic ones, subtly reinforcing messages of authority, belonging, or exclusion.

At the same time, the movement of people, ideas, and everyday goods has made the boundaries between languages far less clear than they once seemed. Languages do not simply stay put. They travel, through migration, through media, sometimes through something as simple as a borrowed phrase in a conversation. Along the way, they pick up traces of where they have been.

In many urban spaces, this movement is quietly written into the landscape. Signs mix languages without much ceremony, layering them, bending them, or weaving them together in ways that rarely follow tidy rules. To some, this might come across as creative, even playful. However, behind the surface, there is often a subtle tension. The mix of languages may speak to a city's openness, but it can also expose the strains between preserving local ways of speaking and adapting to the expectations of outsiders, between what is meant to be seen and what gets tucked quietly into the background.

One recurring concern throughout the literature is the matter of visibility, specifically, who appears in the public eye, and who remains unseen. Dominant languages often occupy space freely, their presence rarely questioned. Others, especially those spoken by minoritized communities, must work harder to be noticed. Their presence, when it does appear, is often modest, tucked into corners, added by hand, or layered onto spaces already claimed. Still, these quieter traces carry weight. They speak to efforts to belong, to be recognized, even when the landscape offers little room. Handwritten notes, homemade signs, faded paint, these fragments tell stories of communities making space for themselves, even when the broader landscape does not.

There is no single way to study these things, and the field has responded with a range of approaches. Some frameworks are systematic and comparative; others are ethnographic and grounded in place. What they share is an interest in how language lives, how it shows up, how it is arranged, how it changes. That methodological openness has allowed the field to grow alongside the questions it raises.

Taken together, the work in this area offers more than a catalogue of signs. It invites a way of seeing language as part of the material and emotional texture of everyday life. Public signs are not only about language, but they are also about memory, belonging, identity, and power. Paying attention to them reveals what a place values, what it struggles with, and what stories it tells about itself, often without saying anything at all. LL is not a static object of study. It changes alongside the social worlds it reflects and shapes. Signs do more than decorate public space. They speak, sometimes subtly, sometimes forcefully, shaping how people move through, experience, and understand their environments. What LL research has increasingly made clear is that language, when seen in place, is never neutral.

Looking ahead, it is likely that LL research will continue to expand. There is still much to explore, particularly in underrepresented contexts and in relation to emerging forms of digital and multimodal signage. More than anything, however, the field will benefit from remaining attentive to the everyday, the ordinary signs, the quiet negotiations of meaning, and the overlooked corners of linguistic life. The challenge is no longer whether LL should be part of how people think about language and education; it already is. The real challenge now is how to use its insights to better understand, and perhaps even reshape, the increasingly complex linguistic worlds people inhabit today.

Compliance with ethical standards

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