Diversity, Adversity, and Inclusiveness: Student Experiences of Linguistic Landscape

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This study aims to examine the display of languages and students’ experiences in an Asian university that offers an English medium of instruction (EMI). With this unique language policy, the university has embraced students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Two main questions are ‘What is the construction of signs on campus?’ and ‘How have both Thai and international students’ lives been shaped by the linguistic landscape?’ A digital camera and smartphones were employed to take photos of linguistic tokens, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insight into student experiences and perspectives. The analysis of 815 linguistic items revealed that their main construction types consisted of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs. While Thai was indicated as the dominant language due to its official and frequent use on the signs, English was indicated as a lingua franca on campus. Student experiences emphasised the vital role of English in international students’ transition to campus life and their inclusiveness in university activities. The displays of different languages represented diverse groups of university members. However, an adverse effect on international students was also revealed when their language was solely displayed on signs. Thus, bilingual and multilingual signs were well received by university members.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Signs, Student Experience, Diversity, Bilingual, Multilingual
Introduction

Research into the linguistic landscape (or LL) has become one of the key areas in sociolinguistics; however, its current coverage is still underexplored. The most frequently found areas include studies of the linguistic landscape in tourist attraction spots and the main cities or city centres (Singhasiri, 2013; Backhaus, 2005; Alomoush & Al-Naimat, 2020), which are all public spaces. Recently, institutional contexts, such as educational settings with a certain unique context, have drawn more LL researchers’ attention to their linguistic landscape. For example, Gorter and Cenoz (2015) categorised sign functions in multilingual schools in Spain, while other researchers (e.g., Yavari, 2012; Hynes, 2012; Jing-Jing, 2015; Siricharoen, 2016; Choi, Tatar, & Kim, 2019) focused on higher education institutions.

Primarily, studies of the linguistic landscape have involved the use of languages on signage, especially signs in public spaces. Landry and Bourhis (1997) are considered pioneers in introducing linguistic landscapes as a field of study. Their 1997 research report is recognised as the first place where the term ‘Linguistic Landscape’ was introduced and discussed in research that focused on high school students’ perceptions of public signs in Canada. Landry and Bourhis (1997) stated that the LL study originally focused on three areas, namely, language planning, ethnolinguistic vitality, and vitality perception of language minorities. Regarding the theoretical framework of ethnolinguistic vitality, they offered a definition that has been extensively acknowledged by key researchers in the field (for example, Backhaus, 2005; Huebner, 2006). They define the linguistic landscape as:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25)

Despite wide acceptance, other key researchers, such as Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, and Trumper-Hecht (2006), pointed out that the definition offered by Landry and Bourhis (1997) has overlooked the vibrant nature of LL studies. Accordingly, Ben-Rafael (2009) defined the ‘Linguistic Landscape’ as a notion referring to the public space marked by linguistic items and the observable languages in a designated area. Shohamy and Gorter (2009) added that LL was the study of languages that appeared in cities, markets, shops, schools, governmental and business buildings, campuses, beaches, and moving vehicles.

Another key term in a LL study is the word ‘sign’, which is defined as a notice giving information, directions, or a warning, such as a road sign or a shop sign (“Sign”, 2019). In this study, it is used interchangeably with the word ‘signage’. Apart from linguistic meanings, the messages on signs can also reveal how diverse languages and cultures are in the specified area (Akindele, 2011). However, written languages or linguistic objects that are examined may appear not only on road or shop signs but also in other forms, such as announcements, notices,
posters, or advertisements. In addition, linguistic tokens not only function as markers of geographical and social boundaries but also reflect the status and power relations in the community (Huebner, 2006).

Researchers in this field have been drawn by the variety of languages and texts displayed on signs in both private and public spaces. In Asia, Japan is often mentioned as one of the countries known for the use of various written discourses in city areas (Backhaus, 2005). Jing-Jing (2015) stated that the use of signs has made the city stylish, modern and cosmopolitan. The constant growth of signs not only gradually creates a distinctive landscape in the city but also creates a “linguistic cityscape” or “linguistic landscape”.

In higher education, LL studies range from the study of a language policy, its representation on campus, the examination of language ideologies, functions of signage, to residents’ perceptions and interpretation of languages displayed on signs. The study by Yavari (2012) investigated the relationship between LL and language policy of two European universities, and found different policies and practices of the target universities. Choi, Tatar, and Kim (2019) collected ethnographic data at a Korean university that has adopted English as an official language. Their study suggested that linguistic landscape was not an object reflecting languages’ predetermined values, but that it was an intertextual product interpreted by readers.

In Thailand, the study of the linguistic landscape was pioneered by Huebner (2006), who previously focused on city areas such as Bangkok. Other locations, such as higher education institutions, are still underexplored, especially universities that aim to accommodate both local and international students due to globalisation process. Mae Fah Luang University (MFU, hereafter) is one among many that belong to this type of institution, and also has a unique foreign language policy that makes its campus an appealing research site for linguistic landscapes. Thus, an empirical study of the construction of the linguistic landscape and how students’ lives have been shaped by it can be provided for further debate on multilingual settings. This study set out to provide a descriptive analysis of the campus linguistic landscape focusing on the actual construction of campus signs and the exploration of local and international students’ experiences of the linguistic landscape on campus.

Method

Research site

Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai campus is in northern Thailand, where three countries, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, converge. Established in 1998, this comprehensive medium-sized university has six missions, one of which is to promote the internationalisation of the university (Mae Fah Luang University, 2017). Accordingly, its main language policy, using English as the medium of instruction, has been implemented for more than two decades. This has led to the mobility of staff and students with nationalities other than Thai.
Regarding the courses offered, only a few of them, namely, the School of Health Sciences, the School of Law, the School of Nursing, and the School of Dentistry, have offered their instructions mainly in Thai, whereas all the rest are conducted in English. In 2017, the university staff consisted of 92% Thai, and 8% of other nationalities. However, the number of international students between 2014 and 2018 increased from 150 (3.35%) to 229 (6.43%) (Division of Registrar, 2018); hence, the university needed to be well prepared to deal with the increasing number of international students.

**Samples of Signage and Interview Participants**

To ensure the validity of the data collection, three areas of consideration were employed, as offered by Backhaus (2007). These included the geographic limits of the target areas, a clear determination of the signage, and the differentiation of various types of signage. In the present study, the target areas represented the living areas (a dormitory, canteens, and buildings that support students’ living) and studying areas (a library, building blocks containing classrooms, and offices). The photos included the signage along the roads, pathways, and corridors, for example, inscriptions on the buildings, plate names on the shops, signboards at the parking spaces, buildings names, posters, commercial adverts, notices, or announcements on the bulletin board.

The interview section of this study was voluntary, and after the announcement seeking volunteers, eight students, including seven international students and one Thai student, volunteered to participate in the interviews. Two group interviews were held according to the participants’ schedules. Interviewees were from bachelor's and master’s degree programs and represented both international and local students, with one each from Myanmar, Nepal, and Thailand, three from Cambodia, and two from China. Their fields of study covered the science and social science disciplines. Thus, to a certain extent, their experiences could reflect the experiences of both local and international students.

**Instruments**

To gather the data for the research, two main instruments were employed: a digital camera and smartphones, and semi-structured interviews.

**Digital Camera and Smartphone**

In most LL studies, digital cameras are the main instrument for photographing signs, nameplates, and advertisements in specified areas. Currently, although new tools, such as LinguaSnapp, have been developed to document linguistic landscapes (Gaiser & Matras, 2016), cameras are still a common instrument for LL studies. In this study, apart from a digital
camera, smartphones were also used because of their capacity and the quality of the photos, which were comparable to those of a digital camera.

Semi-structured Interview

The content areas and questions of semi-structured interviews were developed from the research objectives and questions. The two main areas of the interview were to determine how the signage influenced (1) students’ living and (2) students’ learning. Accordingly, interview questions were formed around these two key areas and evaluated by three experts on their ability to evaluate item-objective congruence (IOC). There were only two items with the lowest IOC value, at 0.66; hence, they were revised based on the experts’ suggestions, and a pilot test of the questions was conducted to reduce the ambiguity of the interview questions.

Data Collection Procedures

Photos of campus signs were collected in both living areas and study areas in the second semester, which was between January and May 2018. After the analysis of the sign data and the emergence of some key issues, the preliminary findings were employed to further develop interview questions. Subsequently, interviews were conducted, and student volunteers chose the date that they were free to join two separate group interviews. The interviews were conducted in a friendly, relaxed environment and nonthreatening atmosphere. The interviewer gave a brief, casual introduction to the study, showed appreciation for the interviewees’ participation, and ensured anonymity. Volunteers were also informed of their rights; for example, if they did not feel comfortable answering certain questions, they were not required to.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using a script-based approach, i.e., the signs were first categorised by script, which refers to the languages displayed on the signs. As suggested by Gorter (2006), a sign coding scheme covers the investigation of how a language appears on the sign, where it is placed, what size and how many languages are included, the order of languages displayed on bilingual or multilingual signs, and the importance of languages. Accordingly, the data in the present study was categorised into three groups: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual. Monolingual signs refer to a sign containing one language, and bilingual signs are signs containing two languages. On multilingual signs, more than two languages are included.

Results

Display of Languages

The analysis of 815 pictures, including signs, posters, notices, and documents posted around selected areas on the campus, was conducted to answer research question 1, “What is the
construction of the signs on the campus?” It was revealed that the main construction consisted of monolingual signs (n=446, 54.72%), bilingual signs (n=349, 42.82%), and multilingual signs (n=20, 2.45%) (Table 1).

**Table 1: Constructions of the LL Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Number of signs</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual signs</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>54.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual signs</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>42.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual signs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>815</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Table 2, of the 446 monolingual signs, Thai was used on monolingual signs the most (n=248, 55.73%), followed by English (n=194, 43.37%), and Chinese (n=3, 0.67%). This is likely to reflect the key status of the national and official language, while the status of English was also well observed through its next frequent use on campus. Regarding bilingual signage, of all 349 bilingual tokens, the majority were Thai-English (238, 67.44%), followed by English-Thai (98, 28.48%) and Chinese-English (6, 1.71%). Just as in the monolingual signs, pairing the display of English with other languages such as Thai and Chinese showed its vital status on campus. Besides, an analysis of 20 multilingual signs revealed that the Thai-Chinese-English sequence was found the most (7, 35%), followed by Thai-English-Chinese (5, 25%) and Chinese-Thai-English (2, 10%). Regarding the combination of languages as appeared on the tokens, Thai, English, and Chinese shared their parts as the top three on multilingual signs.
Table 2: Types and Languages on Campus Signs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of signs</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Number of signs</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Grand total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monolingual</strong> signs:</td>
<td>thai</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>55.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>43.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chinese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>french</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>446</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>446 (54.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bilingual</strong> signs:</td>
<td>thai-english</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>67.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-thai</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>28.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chinese-english</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thai-chinese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-french</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>349</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>349 (42.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multilingual</strong> signs:</td>
<td>thai-chinese-english</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thai-english-chinese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chinese-thai-english</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-spanish-french</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-myanmarese-thai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-chinese-thai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>english-thai-chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chinese-english-thai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20 (2.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>815 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Figure 1, examples of monolingual signage are displayed: (1) Thai, (2) English, and (3) Chinese.
Figure 1. Examples of Monolingual Signs

Figure 2 shows examples of bilingual signs displayed in different paired languages: (1) Thai-English, (2) Thai-Chinese, and (3) English-French.
Figure 2. Examples of Bilingual Signs

Figure 3 shows examples of multilingual signs with different display sequences of languages: (1) Thai-Chinese-English, and (2) English-Thai-Chinese.

Figure 3. Examples of Multilingual Signs
Language Issues

Two language issues were indicated. Firstly, it was found that some signs contained errors or typing mistakes. For example, when two languages were displayed on a sign and were meant to deliver the same message, but typographical errors sometimes occurred, distorting the intended one.

Secondly, it was also revealed that there were attempts to address people from different linguistic backgrounds by using different languages on the signs; for example, Pinyin or Chinese Romanization was also used a sign. It was an example of how the pronunciation of a Chinese word was written using Roman or English alphabets. In Figure 4 below, the English script was used to write the phrase “Thank you”, and “Xìexie”, which also means “Thank you” in Chinese.

Figure 4. Use of Pinyin or Chinese Romanization

Students’ Experiences of the Linguistic Landscape

The interview account, which was based on student experiences and their viewpoint towards signs on campus, revealed five key issues as follows.

Students’ transitional stage

In their first year at the university, local and international students were assisted in navigating the campus using the basic map provided by the university, and they had no problem understanding the directional signs because they were in English and many included universal symbols. However, due to the hilly grounds of the university, some students suggested that the map of the university should provide more details. For example, there should be specific wording on the map such as ‘You are here’. Along the way, signposts should display where different routes converge or link as a short-cut.
“Sometimes, we did not have a map in hand, so it would be more helpful if they put more signs pointing towards different directions. Additionally, walking is not that easy on this big campus.” (MA English, year 2)

Apart from directional signs, students’ experiences revealed that additional information is needed, for example, availability, accessibility, and the price of transportation. Hence, during the first year on campus, students, especially those whose first language was not Thai, needed sufficient information to help them go through the initial transitional stage on campus. Though the university has prepared an orientation pack for newcomers, some students may not get it until they join the orientation ceremony.

**Inclusiveness or exclusiveness: Language choices on signage**

Language choices on signs were indicated as a factor in including or excluding students from joining university activities. Some international students stated that they missed many of the university activities in their first year because the English version of the activities’ announcement was not provided. They suggested that both Thai and English versions of the activities that first-year students are required to attend should be provided. All of them mentioned that they would participate in the activities, so they could settle into university life. When only Thai is available, some international students who could not read it would miss many university activities. However, a student indicated that the official announcements made by the university staff and those from her faculty were normally found to have both Thai and English versions.

“It is easy because the university staff always have separate announcements for Thai and international students. Therefore, we are informed in English, and it is easy. However, I think (announcements) from other majors, especially, non-English majors, for our particular major, so… most of the (student) groups may be in Thai.” (MA English)

Thus, in terms of language choices, apart from the Thai version, the English version was seen as the most important in accommodating international students. While official announcements were found to be available in both Thai and English versions, those produced by individual members of the university, such as staff or students who were involved with student activities, were mainly in Thai.

**Language and order of significance**

Regarding what languages should be displayed on signage, all interviewees agreed on the significant role of English as a lingua franca; thus, apart from Thai, English is considered to be the second most important language on the campus signage. However, Chinese is the next language that they considered to have an important role due to the increasing number of Chinese students and teachers studying and working on campus.
“I think, English is enough because it is used worldwide. If it is in English, we can check our dictionary…All children, currently, can read English.” (BA Cosmetic Science)

Regarding the order of the languages to be shown, some students thought the presentation order did not matter as long as all key languages were present. However, some participants thought that Thai should be the first language, followed by English and Chinese. This order is managed according to the status of each language, Thai for its national status, English for its international status; however, Chinese is included to address the largest foreign members of Mae Fah Luang University.

“Thai first, but English should be second because I think English is more well-known. Chinese is important but I think it should be the third. Many foreigners can read Chinese, but I think more Chinese can read English.” (MA English)

**Diversity or adversity: the message conveyed**

Seeing one’s own language in another country can lead to a negative feeling for some students when the message is prohibiting you from doing something on the campus. Two participants stated that the appearance and order of languages did matter due to the message conveyed by the signs or notices. For example, a Myanmarese student and a Chinese student stated that if the message shown on a sign carried a prohibition message, it was more likely that the sign would be perceived as offensive by the speaker of that language.

“I saw a sign in Myanmarese. It says, “Do not smoke”. The language used would be considered informal in Myanmar. It is very strong, very harsh. Not suitable to use… So the idea in making the sign, I think, all languages should be put on the same sign…like Chinese, Thai, and Myanmarese in the same place.” (BA English)

Students explained that their attitudes towards seeing their own language displayed on signs were more positive if the message was aimed at giving general information, for example, giving directions or providing information or notifications. Thus, the message provided on signage should be taken into account when considering what order the languages should be presented. When messages conveyed warning or prohibition, Thai and English were considered appropriate, as the first was the national language, while the latter was the lingua franca.

**Message or meaning lost in translation**

Students indicated that they found some mistakes on signs in the English, Chinese, and Myanmarese versions. One observation was that signs with mistakes or errors were not official and were produced by other university members, such as individual staff or students, to address
certain issues or problems. A student was concerned that other students might take that as the correct way to use a foreign language and would repeat the same mistake.

“... I think they were not official... I am afraid that some students who have a limited understanding of English may keep that in mind and practice using it.” (MA English)

According to this student, mistakes and errors should be avoided by having someone check the language used so that students in the university would have correct examples of different languages. Students’ experience of errors or mistakes found on signs was in accordance with the analysis of signs on campus. Additionally, student experiences indicated that mistakes are found not only in English but also in Chinese.

Discussion

The construction of the campus signs

The construction of signs on campus or the display of languages on signs was identified as being monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual. The findings showed that the dominant language in specified areas was Thai, and Thai-only signs were common on the MFU campus, emphasising the national and official status of the language. The same case was also found in a Japanese university in the LL study by Jing-Jing (2015), who surveyed the linguistic landscape on the Ito campus of Kyushu University, Japan, and found Japanese-only signs to be the most common. To a certain extent, the use of national or official languages on the two campuses could reflect the identity of the universities located in monolingual countries such as Japan and Thailand.

Regarding bilingual signs, Thai-English signs were the most frequently found, followed by English-Thai signs and Chinese-English signs. Yanhong and Rungruang (2013), who examined the signs in tourist spots in Chiang Mai, Thailand, also revealed similar results: Thai-English signs were the most common, and Thai was indicated as the dominant language since it was placed first or on the top. Likewise, Yavari (2012) found that English was the most visible language on campus signs apart from the official language of each university under study. Cenoz and Gorter (2012) stated that this resulted partly from an increased intake of international students at these universities. This also reflects the same situation as that in the university under study, which has been accommodating increasing numbers of international students and lecturers. Due to the status of English, an international language, the visibility of English on both monolingual and bilingual signs has created an international atmosphere on campus, though the display of English on campus has served different purposes from those found in tourist areas.

Elsewhere, regional or international cooperation is a driving force for the adoption of certain languages on campus signs. In Europe, for example, to achieve the objectives of the Bologna
process, English was adopted in academia among country members in Europe (Ferguson, 2012). Similarly, in Asia, English is a working language of ASEAN country members; thus, it has been adopted as the language of interaction. All universities in Thailand are in charge of preparing the future workforce of the country with different key skills, including language literacy. Accordingly, English language courses are required at MFU, and the prominent policy that allows opportunities for contact and the mobility of students and staff members with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds means that English is the medium of instruction.

As noted in Yavari’s (2012) comparative study of a Swedish university and a Swiss university, the dominant languages found were the national languages, Swedish and German, respectively; English was indicated as having priority over other foreign languages. Its high visibility in these two universities has portrayed the widespread use of English in academia, which is also true at MFU.

Regarding multilingual signs, Thai-Chinese-English signs were found the most (7, 35% signs), followed by Thai-English-Chinese (5, 25%) and Chinese-Thai-English signs (2, 10%). Of all the signs that were examined, the lowest quantity was multilingual signs; it was evident that these three languages, Thai, English, and Chinese, are vital for their roles as the national language, the lingua franca, and the language of the largest group of foreign university members. Similarly, the interview account revealed that, apart from Thai and English, Chinese was considered the next most important language to be displayed on the signs.

**Language Issues**

According to studies in Yemen and China (Al-Athwary, 2014 and Guo & Li, 2015 respectively), errors and mistakes could frequently occur when a language other than the native language was used in countries whose native language was not English. For example, Guo and Li (2015) studied errors on Chinese-English public signs in Changchun, an economic and cultural spot in China, and argued that mistranslation in public signs needed immediate attention, as it might affect the social and economic potential of the region. They stressed that public signs accommodated people’s daily lives and foreign visitors during their stay in China. This can be the case for a campus where not only local students but also international students will need a smooth transition into university life. Hence, linguistic tokens can play a key role in this regard.

**Student Experiences of Signs on Campus**

First, signs with the informational function needed to be in English, as they were vital for the first-year students’ transition into campus life. Student interviewees mainly agreed that an English version for all signs is necessary. Regarding the MFU case, to provide more support to all students, the English version of signs is essential, as it is recognised as the dominant world
language (Huebner, 2006), and its prestigious and international status is recognised all over the world (Ricento, 2015).

Second, providing the English version of signs on campus enhanced students’ inclusiveness. International students are stated as having a desire and expectation to interact with their domestic peers (James & Watt, 1992; Deakins, 2009). It was essential to encourage international students’ participation in university activities. This can show that universities are sensitive and aware of the needs of students, especially those who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Kyushu University, for example, attempted to be responsive to international students’ needs by setting up a committee to include English in all university signs (Jing-Jing, 2005). This is one strategy this university employed to internationalise its campus.

Third, Thai, English, and Chinese were indicated as having key roles to play on signage as a national language, a lingua franca, and the language of the largest group of foreign residents, respectively. This reflects that the campus has become more diverse and must meet the needs of existing students. Not limited to the educational setting, many scholars consider language diversity essential. For example, Phillips (2012) stressed that language diversity is entwined in the biological and cultural diversity of life, while Crystal (2000) highlighted that language needed to be promoted due to its relation to ecological diversity, identity, history, and human knowledge. As stated by Maffi (2005), a lack of language richness is related to a lack of cultural richness. Thus, linguistic diversity is probably beneficial to an educational setting such as MFU. From an ecological perspective, people’s views of bilingualism, multilingualism, and linguistic diversity can be either enhanced or inhibited by the display of languages in the LL (Phillips, 2012). Thus, the university may need to take this perspective into account when deciding on the management of signage concerning key issues such as design, language choice, emplacement, and information.

Fourth, messages on signs could lead to students’ negative attitudes towards the sign author, and in the present study, the author was the university. This depends on language choices and other factors, such as the emplacement of signs, which Scollon and Wong Scollon (as cited in Mautner, 2014) highlighted as a phenomenon where the texts and their immediate physical setting are regarded as a whole in processing the message. Mautner (2014) stated that texts are unusual because their meaning and performative potential are partly drawn from exophoric reference to their physical setting. This indicates the importance of how all components need to be thoughtfully designed and constructed. This reflected the concerns of international students who found that the texts with prohibition messages displayed solely in their own language seemed to negatively target them. Both Chinese and Myanmarese students perceived a prohibition sign written in their language as offensive. Thus, language choices and emplacement of signs needed to be vigilantly decided. English is generally considered neutral for in-group relations where people from different linguistic backgrounds come into contact (Rubdy, 2001). Accordingly, English can be a suitable choice of language to avoid triggering readers’ negative attitudes.
Finally, the languages used in the signs need proofreading before posting to promote the accurate use of languages on campus. The results of the interview raised concerns about linguistic items with mistakes and errors that could lead to misunderstandings and misuse of languages. According to Guo and Li (2015), when language errors occur, they potentially affect the international image of the sign’s author. Regarding educational institutions, errors and mistakes should be reduced as much as possible on signs. As Ferguson (2006) put it, ‘English is perceived as a gatekeeper to accessing education and employment; thus, competence in English and English medium education is greatly valued by educational stakeholders such as parents-to build up linguistic capital’ (p 185).

Recommendations

This study has highlighted the importance of the visibility and distribution of languages on campus signage. By adding the experiences of students or sign readers to the study, critical issues were revealed and triangulated. As a synchronic study, it was expected that the findings could be used as a basis for further comparative studies.

In terms of pedagogical applications, signs displayed in different languages are a valuable source for teaching and learning. Due to its authenticity, teachers have to be selective in choosing signs or texts displayed as cases for study in class. Moreover, teachers can raise students’ awareness of diversity regarding linguistic and cultural resources that can be observed on campus. Students are encouraged to draw understanding and awareness from school settings where their members with diverse backgrounds come into contact (Gorter & Cenoz, 2006). Teachers, students, and researchers are encouraged to make use of this linguistic and culturally rich environment as an opportunity to foster intercultural awareness and skills.

For policymakers or policy planners, the findings in the present study suggest that formal written regulations detailing language choices, production, and usage of signs on campus is key in addressing critical issues such as students’ transition, inclusiveness, and attitudes. Mistakes and errors in using foreign languages in both English and Chinese were evident on signs, so policymakers need to consider the extent to which these might affect students’ experiences, image, and the internationalisation or globalisation process of the university. The findings were expected to provide useful information for policymakers in examining or planning a language policy and its implementation on campus so that students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are well addressed or supported.

Conclusions

The best efforts have been made in conducting the current research; however, future research might wish to extend the existing scope by including other stakeholders. Educational settings are generally viewed as small; however, their unique environment can be a rich source for a
research study. Thus, it is recommended that more studies be conducted regarding the university’s language policy, the functions of signage, and the perceptions of all people involved in educational contexts. Hence, more insights can be gained from research in higher education institutions or educational contexts influenced by the internationalisation or globalisation processes.

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