Learning L2 Through the Linguistic Landscape

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ABSTRACT: This research investigates the students' awareness of the linguistic landscape (LL) they are exposed to in their daily life. This includes signs, posters, advertisements, billboards, etc. The researchers believe that the students are not aware of the amount of L2 available to them every day outside the classroom. As language teachers, the researchers trust that drawing students' attention to this language, which is more authentic and contextualized (Rowland, 2013; Dumanig & David, 2019), will open doors for autonomous language learning. For this study, the students completed a questionnaire that highlights their level of awareness and draws their attention to the LL around them. Then, they were asked to take pictures of bilingual signs and posters …etc. from the landscape they are exposed to on campus. The students worked in groups to compare and discuss the pictures that they had taken using a guided task designed by the researchers. The results show that most participants notice the amount of English language available in the real world, but they are not fully aware of its learning potential. Based on these results, the researchers provide practical suggestions for the classroom.

KEY WORDS: Linguistic Landscape, autonomous learning, Language Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

As the Omani society grows, the use of English in the Linguistic Landscape (LL) has also grown. The LL of a place includes all written forms of languages used in signs, posters, advertisements, billboards

…etc. According to Akindele (2011), Sayer (2010) & Bhandari (2023), the significance of studying the

Linguistic landscape of any society is that it shows the social layering of that society and the common cultural ideals. This research investigates the students' awareness of the LL that they are exposed to in their daily life. It is worth mentioning that noticing and understanding the LL is a life skill that promotes autonomous language learning which is one of the goals of the foundation program at Sultan Qaboos University. It also encourages students to utilize all available resources around them and stimulates reflections on their own learning experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 What is linguistic landscape?

As societies grow over the years, English serves as the '*lingua franca*'; an important commonplace tool that speakers of different languages use to communicate (Sayer, 2010). *Linguistic landscape* (LL) refers to the 'publicly displayed' texts including shop names, road signs, billboards and advertisements. This written language is as important as the physical landscape of the place we live in because it is a form of a highly authentic and contextualized language (Rowland, 2013). Grbavac (2013) highlights two basic terms, '*linguistic sign'* and '*public space'*, that form the basis of a linguistic landscape which is 'accessible to the crowd'. However, some scholars have used linguistic landscape to refer to a 'general linguistic context' (Chesnut. et. al., 2013). Others consider only the written form of language displayed in public (Gorter, 2006). This research discusses the linguistic landscape as defined above by Rowland (2013) and most other scholars in the field.

2.2 Uses of English language in the LL

The LL of a place can show a great deal of the ideas and attitudes a culture has about multilingualism. It can also indicate the most dominant language(s) and reflect the power of a certain language over others

(Sayer, 2010). There are two major functions for the LL, symbolic and informative as stated by Akindele

(2011). The symbolic function is that it demonstrates the status and value of a language (in our case English) to the members of the society compared to other languages. It also reflects the economic importance and value of these languages. On the other hand, the informative function is that it shows that some languages are used for communication and trade in that territory of linguistic groups. In some places, there are policies to follow when it comes to using language on public signage. Having a language widely used does not mean that it is favored by society. The reason for the wide use of English in LL can be a result of globalization (Akindele, 2011).

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It has become the language of business and sales, so many business owners use it mainly to attract customers. In addition, Sayer (2010) states that the purpose of using English is related to the audience as signs are mainly used to convey a message. Who the message is for can differ. The author suggests two groups of audience: foreigners and local people. If a certain sign is intended for a tourist; for instance, English will most likely be used. However, some different uses that can be related to fashion, sophistication, coolness, love or subversive identities have been identified (Sayer, 2010; Nikolaou, 2017).

2.3 Pedagogical benefits of the linguistic landscape (Why use LL?)
Many scholars agree that students' opportunities to practice English outside the classroom are limited. There is also a lack of connection between English learning in the classroom context and the authentic use of English. Language learning affordances in the classroom are restricted and contain 'a limited range of discourse and literacy practices' (Richards, 2015). Therefore, bringing the linguistic landscape into the classroom is one of the foundations to help learners develop an understanding of their 'sociolinguistic world', 'language use' and 'appropriateness' (Chesnut et. al. 2013). In his article, Sayer (2010) draws attention to the rationale of using LL in the classroom.

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

The interest in taking advantage of LL is shown in many papers where researchers explore its potential in the ELT classroom, whether primary or tertiary, and how it can be a valuable source for learning about basic literacy, such as word formation and function, vocabulary and spelling or higher order thinking including critical thinking skills and pragmatic competence (da Silva, 2023; Barrs 2020).

2.3.1 Language awareness
Linguistic landscape is crucial to build language consciousness about the form, structure and function of the languages as discussed in Hewitt-Bradshaw (2014). The author also suggests that drawing students' attention to the differences between the two languages, first and second language, would involve a pedagogical focus on grammatical structures and vocabulary of the two different language systems. Therefore, being able to differentiate between the two languages assists L2 learning as code-switching and code-mixing are natural processes in a multilingual situation. In addition, Kweldju (2021) and HewittBradshaw (2014) state that when students become aware that English available in LL is a valuable source for learning, they feel very enthusiastic and motivated to explore it further.

2.3.2 Incidental learning of language
A sociolinguistic perspective towards language learning suggests that exposure to language even with an unconscious attention to learning may be of value to L2 learning. Rowland (2013), in his study, addresses the issue of incidental learning in that participants identified grammatical mistakes in the landscape. He suggests that recognizing these mistakes involves a process of learning. Moreover, Dumanig & David (2019) state that their students were able to recall words and phrases they were exposed to in the LL. This suggests that LL can promote contextualized vocabulary learning.

2.3.3 Pragmatic competence development
Language teachers are responsible for raising students' awareness of the relationship between the communicative function of the language form and the linguistic context (Rowland, 2013). Cenoz and Gorter (2008) suggest that the value of investigating the pragmatic function of L2 in the EFL linguistic landscape exists. Based on this literature, Rowland's (2013) participants in his study of the benefits of LL categorize the language they encountered in their local LL into three categories, informational, regulatory and persuasive. This shows that his participants made a connection between the communicative desire along with the linguistic form of language and the context in which the communicative act took place.
The literature also shows that other benefits of the LL include enhancing critical thinking, developing
'multimodal literacy skills' and developing awareness towards the connotational features of language (Rowland 2013; da Silva, 2023). Therefore, considering all the benefits discussed, it is important to research the students' awareness of the LL around them. This will take us further into understanding how to bring the LL into the classroom, i.e. bringing reality (contextualized language) into the classroom.

METHODOLOGY:
Context
The research focuses on Linguistic Landscape in the Omani context, particularly Sultan Qaboos University. The researchers found that it is a suitable context for such research because English is widely used, and it is easily accessible to the crowd (students). Although English is available almost everywhere, SQU landscape was chosen for the purpose of the research for three main reasons. First, female students are less likely to leave campus to take pictures due to some restrictions for staying on-campus. Second, some

students (although a minority) come from remote areas where English is hardly used. Third and most importantly, considering the participants' language level, the LL at SQU is most likely error free unlike the LL off-campus.

Participants

Participants are Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) students from two different courses; FPEL0120 (beginners) and FPEL0340 (lower-intermediate) with a total number of 100 students. These two courses were chosen for the convenience of the researchers. Also, students in these two levels are in desperate need to utilize all available resources of English to improve their level.

Instruments

A mixed- method approach of a questionnaire and a guided task were used.

- The students completed a questionnaire to identify their level of awareness of LL (see appendix 1).
- The students were asked to take pictures of the English language around campus including signs, posters, advertisements, billboards, etc.
- The students discussed the pictures they took in groups through a guided task to identify new vocabulary, grammatical structures and spelling (see appendix 2).
- The purpose of the task was to draw the students' attention to the benefits of the LL.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Frequency of reading signs

Most participants indicated that they read signs frequently. The results show that 47% of the participants *always* read signs when they are looking for a place on campus and 31% responded that they *often* do so. This forms a total of 78% of all participants. On the other hand, the frequency of asking somebody for directions is still high with 25% and 37% responses falling under *always* and *often*, respectively (See Figure 1).

These results do not match our expectations as we notice that students ask a lot even if all the signs are available. The discrepancy between the high frequency of sign reading and the still substantial reliance on asking for directions suggests a complex connection between signage and how students navigate their surroundings. Further investigation into the decisionmaking process behind whether to rely on signs or verbally ask for directions could provide valuable insights into user behavior.
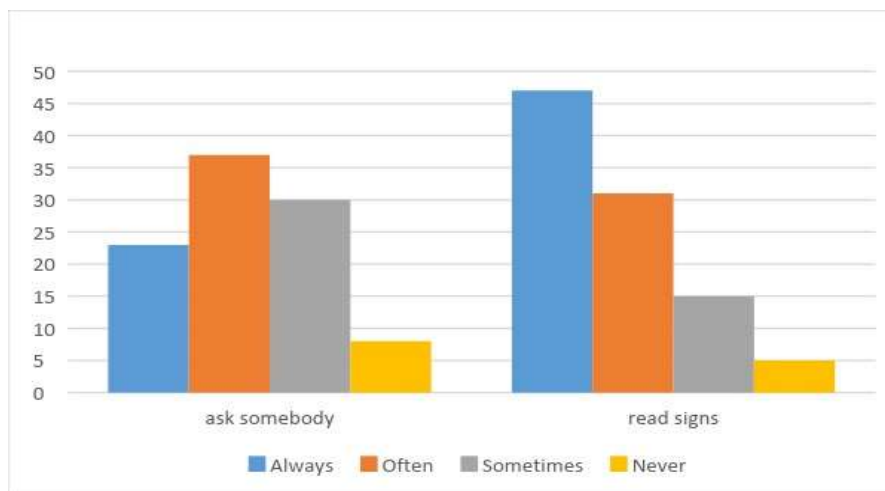

Figure 1: Frequency of reading signs

English vs. Arabic

The results indicate that students read in Arabic more than in English which is expected for this context. About 60% of participants *always* read Arabic and 32% *often* do so. While only

11% *always* read in English, 32% answered *often*. It is interesting to note that 45% of the participants sometimes read English. This shows that about 88% of the participants used to notice and read the English translation compared to 10% who indicated that they never read English (See Figure 2). The high engagement with Arabic signs, given the local context, where Arabic is the dominant language, aligns with the researchers' expectations. However, the number of participants who engage with English signage is worthy of attention as it indicates a positive attitude towards bilingualism in the landscape and suggests a degree of English proficiency among the participants. This finding highlights the importance of multilingual signage in accommodating diverse linguistic preferences and facilitating inclusive communication.
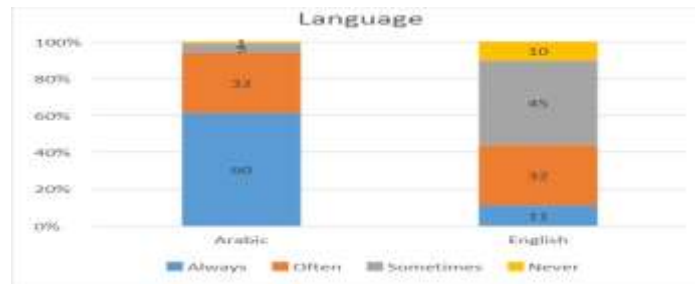
Figure 2: English vs. Arabic

Learning English in different contexts

The findings show that the place with the highest frequency of learning English from signage is around

SQU. More than 80% of the participants indicated that they either *always* or *often* learn English around the university. This is expected since the participants are FPEL students and the surrounding environment (e.g. classrooms, the colleges and support centers) encourages, if not forces them, to read in English. For example, all event posters and notes on teachers' offices are in English only. In the other three contexts (while shopping, on the street, at a restaurant), the most dominant response for reading English signs is *sometimes*, 60%, 56% and 40% respectively. However, there are some students who responded *never* in each context. The highest is at restaurants with 15% and the lowest is around SQU with 3% of respondents (See Figure 3). These findings reveal that English signs play a major role in students' exposure to the L2, which consequently suggests incidental language learning as students do read them and take advantage of them when they are encouraged or forced. The prominence of English signage in educational settings like SQU highlights the major role of the context in language acquisition. The varying levels of exposure to English in different contexts suggests taking the linguistic surrounding into account when designing a language learning environment. Further, the presence of English-only materials in educational settings could undoubtedly reinforce second language acquisition.
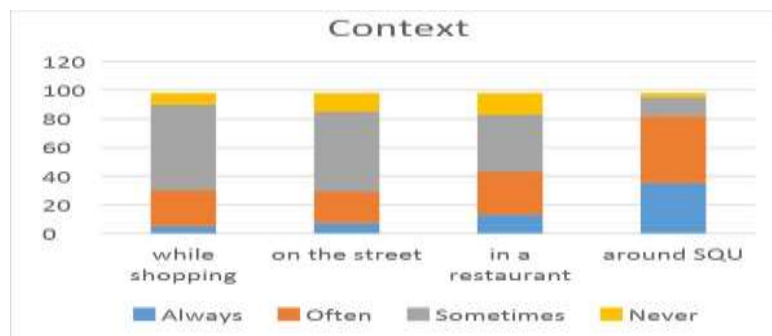

Figure 3: Context

Context vs. translation

With regards to language development, Figure 4 points out that participants realize that LL assists them understand the English language through the context that the words appear in and/or through translation. Therefore, the LL provides a rich learning environment where learners can use different learning strategies.

The recognition of both contextual clues and translations as helpful in language learning implies diversity in learning styles, which demonstrates learners' adaptability and in navigating language barriers. This suggests the value of incorporating various learning approaches in second language instruction to accommodate individual preferences and maximize learning outcomes.

Figure 4: Context vs. translation

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Language skills

It is worth noting that the LL doesn't only provide an opportunity for vocabulary learning, but also grammar and spelling. The participants were asked about these three language skills which can be learned through the LL. Figure 5 shows that they agree that the linguistic landscape helps them learn new English vocabulary, spelling and grammar. More than 90% of students are aware that the LL helps them learn new words and spelling. In addition, 63% of them agree that it can help them learn grammar. This shows that the landscape is rich with language that promotes autonomous learning to some extent. It also suggests a multifunctional role of the linguistic landscape in supporting language development.
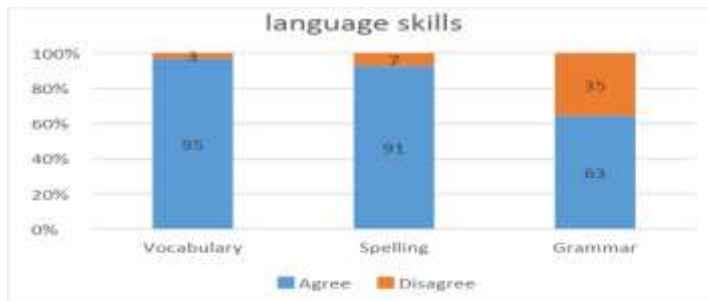

Figure 5: Language skills

Errors in the LL

Figure 6 indicates that 70% of students believe that the language available in the LL is error free. This perception of error-free signage highlights that it's important to build critical language awareness. Drawing the attention to errors encourages active engagement with the linguistic landscape.

In the guided task given to the participants (see appendix 2), the students were able to get up to 12 new words out of an average of 15 pictures they took. They were also able to identify the strategy they used to understand these new words. Reading the translation was the most used strategy which implies the importance of bilingual support in facilitating comprehension. However, there were several words which were understood only through context such as, *push*, *exit*, *chess club*, *fire hose reel*, *reserved* and *liquids*. Regarding grammar, the students were able to identify some common grammatical aspects out of the list provided in the task. These include *parts of speech*, *word order* and *singular/plural nouns*. This indicates that students are aware, to a great extent, of the benefits of the LL, but do not fully take the advantage of English with the existence of Arabic. The participants' ability to identify new words and grammatical structures through signage shows the effectiveness of the linguistic landscape as a learning resource.

When asked about mistakes in translation, the students' comments demonstrate that they were attending to the linguistic properties of the language used on these signs. The recognition of mistakes suggests that the students were involved in learning experiences through comparing their own linguistic knowledge base with the English on the signs, and consequently being aware of discrepancies. Generally, whether measurable incidental learning of the target language took place or not, we can say that the current project might have served to reinforce the existing L2 knowledge of the students.

Figure 6: Errors in the LL Guided task

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level of student's awareness of the linguistic landscape around them. It is intended as an eye opening for the endless possibilities of language learning outside the classroom. Despite the limited scope of this research, some pedagogical implications and recommendations could be traced. The research has proven that foundation students at SQU have a positive attitude towards the English language available in the LL. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers utilize this rich environment of L2 and encourage students to make full use of it as learners can use different learning strategies. However, it is

also important that teachers draw students' attention to the fact that the LL is not error free and that they need to use their own discretion and make judgments on the language they are exposed to outside the classroom. Although incidental and autonomous language learning are not measurable largely in the current study, they are still two possible benefits of the LL. Furthermore, raising awareness of the linguistic diversity within the LL could enhance students' sensitivity to the language variation in their surroundings. In addition, incorporating LL exploration activities into the curriculum can promote active learning because of the engagement with language beyond the traditional classroom setting. Moreover, encouraging students to document and reflect on the LL around them can deepen their understanding of language in authentic contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Participant information:

This study seeks to investigate FPEL students' awareness of the learning opportunities that the Linguistic Landscape can offer. All data collected for this study will be confidential and anonymous. Your marks will not be affected in any way. Kindly answer the following questions.

1. When I look at a sign, I read the _____ language.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
a. Arabic				
b. English				

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2. Indicate how frequent you learn English in the following situations:

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
a. In the supermarket.				
b. On the street.				
c. At a restaurant.				
d. While walking around SQU.				

3. How do you act when you look for a place at SQU?

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
a. ask somebody				
b. read the signs				
c. use a map				

4. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a. The context helps me understand the signs written in English only.				
I notice the amount of English language I am exposed to outside the classroom.				
Reading the Arabic signs with English translation can help me learn English				
Reading the English words on signs can help me learn new vocabulary				
e. Reading the English words on signs can help me improve my spelling				
Reading the English words on signs can help me improve my grammar				
g. I trust the language I read on signs to be error free.				
The language available in LL is more authentic than textbooks in terms of context.				

Answer the following questions:

5. To what extent do you believe LL can help you develop your English language? How can you best take advantage of LL around you?

6. Have you ever learned English from the Linguistic Landscape incidentally? Provide an example.

Appendix 2: Guided task

Work in **groups**. Show your pictures to your group members and discuss the following:
1. The total number of pictures is _____
2. The number of duplicate pictures is _____
3. List the **new** words you learned from these pictures. What helped you understand the meaning of these words?

Word	Context	translation	Word	Context	translation
1.			7.		
2.			8.		
3.			9.		
4.			10.		
5.			11.		
6.			12.		

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4.   Do you notice any common grammatical points in the pictures? Give examples.

parts of speech	
singular/plural	
verb tense	
word order	
prepositions	
others	

5.   Do you notice any mistakes in translation?