When Signs Speak: A Linguistic Landscape of Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Shah Alam

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.924ILEIID0026

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 29 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linguistic landscape (LL) of Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, focusing on how language use and text composition reflect institutional priorities and inclusivity. APB is a key faculty offering courses in Bahasa Melayu (BM) or Malay language, English, Arabic, and other languages, yet questions remain on whether its signage embodies the faculty's nature. Using a mixed-methods design, the study documented 174 signs in APB. Semi-structured interviews conducted with students provided insights into readers' perceptions of the faculty's LL. Findings revealed that APB's LL is dominated by monolingual signs with 68%. Among bilingual and multilingual signs text composition, partial translation, with BM and English, was the most prevalent. Other languages taught and offered by the faculty were almost entirely absent, despite their curricular significance. The students, during the interview, agreed that the signs do not really reflect the focus of the faculty and they believed that the language courses offered should be reflected in the faculty's LL. From the findings it could also be concluded that LL of the faculty does not promote other languages besides BM and English. This could be due to the fact that more than 95% of the students in the faculty comprise of local students whose native language is BM and are able to understand English. However, given the fact that the faculty focuses on language courses, it should realise the potential of promoting the use of the languages it offers in its linguistic landscape.

Keywords: educational space, linguistic landscape, multilingualism, text composition

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic landscape (LL) research has become an increasingly influential strand within sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and language policy studies. Since Landry and Bourhis (1997) first conceptualised LL as the "… visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region," the concept has been applied in diverse contexts to explore the interplay between written language, identity, and power. Over the past three decades, research has moved from describing language presence in city streets to more nuanced analyses that consider LL as a symbolic, ideological, and pedagogical phenomenon (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009; Blommaert, 2013). This includes the educational space, such as in schools and also higher education institutions like universities.

In higher education, LL provides a valuable lens for analysing the extent to which universities embody their stated commitments to multilingualism and internationalisation. Signage functions both as a practical tool for navigation and as a symbolic representation of institutional identity. The language choices, text compositions, and design strategies employed in signage communicate messages about inclusion, accessibility, and prestige (Brown, 2012; Motschenbacher, 2023). Malaysia offers a particularly rich site for LL research. The nation is constitutionally anchored in Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) as the national language, yet English holds

strong functional value in education, commerce, law, and international communication. At the same time, Malaysia is home to a diverse array of linguistic communities, including Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien), Tamil and other Indian languages, indigenous languages of Sabah and Sarawak, and foreign languages associated with Malaysia's role in the global economy. In multilingual societies, such as Malaysia, LL is especially revealing of the tensions between national identity, global positioning, and linguistic diversity.

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) occupies a unique position in this linguistic ecology. As Malaysia's largest public university system, UiTM has a dual mission: to empower the Bumiputera community and to assert itself as an internationally recognised institution of higher learning. Within UiTM, the Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB) serves as the hub for language education, offering programs and courses not only Bahasa Melayu (BM) and English but also in Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, and European languages. It could be said that APB therefore symbolises UiTM's aspiration to balance national identity with global integration. Yet, questions remain as to whether this multilingual curriculum is reflected in APB's linguistic landscape. Hence, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

What types of signs are found in APB's LL?

How are languages composed within bilingual and multilingual signs?

What is the readers' perception of the signs in the linguistic landscape of the faculty?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of linguistic landscapes originated in urban contexts, where researchers documented the distribution of languages on shop signs, billboards, and public notices. Backhaus's (2007) landmark study in Tokyo revealed how Japanese, English, and minority languages coexisted in complex hierarchies, with English often deployed for symbolic prestige rather than communicative function. Shohamy and Gorter (2009) expanded the theoretical scope by positioning linguistic landscape (LL) as a space where explicit and implicit language policies intersect. From this perspective, signage is not simply decorative but constitutes a form of de facto language policy. In recent years interest towards investigating linguistic landscape in educational spaces has emerged such as multilingualism in the LL of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand (Siricharoen, 2016), linguistic signage in the LL of Western Mindanao State University (Clorion et al.,2024), LL of International University Campus, Russia (Pavalko, et al., 2023), LL in Henan Institute of Technology, China (Wang, 2023) and a study conducted by Motschenbacher (2023) in Western Norway University of Applied Science looked into the relationship between the university's language policy and the actual display of signs in its LL.

In Malaysia, linguistic landscape studies have explored areas such as language policy (Manan & David, 2016; Wang & Xu, 2018), multilingual billboards (Aini, Heng, & Abdullah, 2013), policy and practice perceptions (Aini, 2017), signage in places of worship (Colluzi & Kitade, 2015), the linguistic environment of Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Wai & Riget, 2022), commercial shop signs (Misyana, Kamisah, Mello, Nur, & Aini, 2019) and the visibility of language in George Town, Malaysia (Jiao & Singh, 2024). However, studies that observe the educational space in Malaysia's higher education institutions are still scarce. One study found was by Zhang (2024) who looked into the language ideology and phenomenon of multilingualism in the LL of University of Malaya (UM). Therefore, to add more to the literature, this study aims to observe the LL on campus of a university in Malaysia, specifically in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam. This faculty is chosen as the research site since the faculty is the centre of language studies at the university that offers language courses and programs. Thus, it would be interesting to see how the languages are being used on its signage. Based on the definition of LL by Ben-Rafael et al., (2006), this study examined the signs inside and outside of the faculty's LL by looking from two different perspectives: the types of LL (for e.g. official and non-official signs, monolingual and multilingual signs, text composition), and readers' perceptions towards the LL in the faculty.

METHODOLOGY

Adapting Aini's (2017) methodological approach, this study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive account of APB's linguistic landscape. A mixed approach was considered appropriate because signage constitutes both a physical artefact that can be systematically counted and coded, and a symbolic resource that is subject to diverse interpretations by its audiences. By documenting the distribution and composition of signs while also investigating students' perceptions, the study was able to triangulate between structure and experience.

Data Collection and Data analysis

Data collection was conducted during the academic semester to ensure coverage of both permanent and temporary signage, as well as to get respondents for the semi-structured interview. In addressing the first and second research questions (RQs), every sign within Akademi Pengajian Bahasa's (APB) physical boundaries were photographed and analysed quantitatively using frequency count and also qualitatively via content analysis to look at the aspects and context of the language(s) displayed on the signs. A total of 174 signs were documented, covering administrative offices, classrooms, noticeboards, corridors, lobbies, and open spaces in the faculty. The data was then categorised in accordance to type of signs such as official and non-official signs, monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signs. To attend to the second RQ, the bilingual and multilingual signs were distinguished to observe the text composition of the signs using Aini's (2017) Text Composition framework.

In distinguishing between 'official' and 'non-official' signs, several scholars have used different terms in discussing this variable. Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2004) study utilised the terms 'top-down' to signify signs by government agencies, and 'bottom-up' to refer to private signs. Other scholars have also made their own distinctions to signify these two signs' types, such as Scollon and Scollon (2003) who distinguished government and private signs by referring to the discourses as 'municipal' and 'commercial'. Backhaus (2005) has also used the expressions interchangeably with 'official' and 'non-official' signs when discussing this variable in his study of signs in Tokyo's public space. This study adopted Backhaus (2005) terminology where 'official' signs refer to signs that have gotten the approval from the relevant authority such as the faculty and also display UiTM's logo or the faculty's stamp of approval. 'Non-official' signs, on the other hand, are signs that are put up without UiTM's logo or the faculty's stamp of approval.

To gain a better insight of what is composed on bilingual and multilingual signs, as stated earlier, Text Composition framework by Aini (2017), which is a combination of Reh (2004) typology of multilingual text composition and Backhaus's (2005) framework, was employed. This was to classify the signs that displayed:

mutual translation - consist of two or more languages with complete translations of each other;

partial translation - provide only some words or some parts of the text being translated to another language(s); and

harmonised composition - does not consist of any form of translation, the phrasing in the text is complementing one another

In answering the third RQ, semi-structured interviews with four (4) APB students were conducted. The semi-structured interview involved three local undergraduate students and one international student. The interview items contained five (5) main open-ended questions, and two (2) follow-up questions for each main question, exploring perceptions of inclusivity, accessibility, and symbolic representation. Interviews were conducted in English, lasting between 20 to 30 minutes each. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised with pseudonyms as below:

LS 1: local student 1

LS 2: local student 2

LS 3: local student 3

IS: international student

The data was then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis - familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing up.

Ethics

This study is part of a bigger study that looked into the LL of UiTM Shah Alam and UiTM Selangor and ethical approval was obtained from UiTM Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to data collection.

Limitations of Study

This study only provided comprehensive coverage of APB's physical signage; hence, findings of the study cannot be generalised to the LL of other faculties and the university as a whole. Limitations also include the small sample of student interviews. This also limits generalisability, though the qualitative data provide valuable insights into lived experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in relation to the study's research questions to better visualise the actual practice of Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Shah Alam's linguistic landscape.

RQ1: Types of signs found in APB's linguistic landscape

The first research question (RQ1) identified the types of signs that could be found in linguistic landscape of Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB) UiTM Shah Alam. This includes categorising the signs into official and non-official as well as identifying the monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signs in the LL. Of the 174 signs documented, 129 (74.1%) were official signs, and 45 (25.9%) were non-official signs. Hence, it could be said that APB's linguistic landscape, during the course of the study, was dominated by official signs. This situation is also similar to a study by Zhang (2024) in University Malaya where it was found that 93% of the signs in the LL of the university were top-down or official signs.

Table 1 Distribution of monolingual (mono), bilingual and multilingual (multi) signs (n=174)

Sign	Official	%	Non-official	%	Total
Mono (BM only)	67	51.9	23	51.1	90
Mono (Eng only)	18	13.9	6	13.3	24
Mono (Others)	0	0	4	9	4
Bilingual (BM & Eng)	36	27.9	11	24.4	47
Bilingual (BM & others)	6	4.7	0	0	6
Bilingual (Eng & others)	0	0	1	2.2	1
Multi	2	1.6	0	0	2
Total	129	100	45	100	174

The second categorization that was observed in this study is the type(s) of language(s) displayed in the LL of the faculty. As can be seen in Table 1, 118/174 (68%) signs were monolingual, 54 (31%) were bilingual, and only 2 (1%) were multilingual. Monolingual signs were almost exclusively in Bahasa Melayu (BM), while majority of the bilingual signs displayed BM and English with 47 out of 54 signs. The two multilingual signs were student-generated posters (non-official signs), though these were decorative rather than functional. Figures 1, 2 and 3 are examples of the different types of signs found in APB.

Figure 1 Example of a monolingual official sign

Figure 2 Example of a bilingual official sign

Figure 3 Example of a multilingual non-official sign

It is also essential to note that there were 4 non-official monolingual signs which were not in either BM or English. The signs were in Japanese (as in Figure 4), Mandarin, Korean and French.

Figure 4 Example of monolingual sign (non-official) in Japanese language

These languages are part of the language courses offered to students as their third language course. Although there are other language courses offered by APB other than BM and English, the visibility of these languages in the faculty's LL such as on posters, notices and announcements were very limited.

RQ2: Text composition of bilingual and multilingual signs

In addressing the second research questions, the signs were categorised based on Aini's (2017) text composition which was adapted from Backhaus (2005) & Reh (2004) frameworks. Aini (2017" text composition lists three (3) types of text composition for bilingual and multilingual signs, which are mutual translation, partial translation, and harmonised composition.

Table 2 Distribution of mutual, partial and harmonised text composition on signs (n=56)

Text comp /Signs	**Mutual**		**Partial**		**Harmonised**	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Official	11	64.7	20	80	9	64.3
Non-official	6	35.3	5	20	5	35.7
Total	17	100	25	100	14	100

As could be seen in Table 2, in terms of text composition, partial translation was the most common strategy, accounting for 68% of bilingual signs. For example, notices on one of the faculty's doors (see Figure 5) displayed an instruction in BM, 'SILA TUTUP PINTU', which means 'please shut the door' as can be seen translated on the notice. However, for the English text, further explanation was provided with no translation in BM. Mutual translation (21%), appeared mostly in official signs, such as in Figure 4. Harmonised compositions (11%) as in Figure 6 were rare, often appearing in posters where BM and English text were visually integrated. These findings could be seen to reflect limited efforts towards comprehensive multilingual accessibility.

Figure 4 Example of a mutual translation sign

Figure 5 Example of a partial translation sign

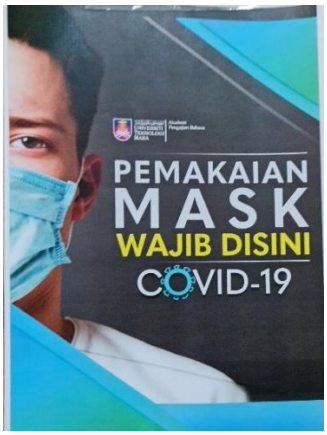

Figure 6 Example of a harmonised sign

RQ3: Readers' perception of the signs in the faculty's linguistic landscape

To answer the third RQ, interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Initial coding was followed by the identification of themes that reflected students' perceptions of APB's LL. Qualitative interviews revealed three major themes. First, students observed a mismatch between APB's multilingual curriculum and its signage. LS 1 noted: 'the faculty offers many languages, but the signs show only Malay and English. It feels like the other languages don't count.' Second, accessibility for international students was hindered by partial translation. IS (international student) explained: 'The heading is in English, but the details are in Malay. I often ask others to explain. It makes me feel like I don't fully belong.' Third, the absence of other languages seen as symbolic erasure by the respondents. LS 2 & 3 stated: 'For example, APB offers a Bachelor Degree in Arabic, but here, you don't see it on signs. It feels like it is not valued.' These findings align with previous studies conducted by Zhang (2024) at UM, which reported similar BM-English dominance with little representation of other taught languages. The findings also resonate with Wang (2023) in China and Mashiyi & Mkhize (2022) in South Africa, where minority languages are sidelined in favour of national and global prestige languages.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the extent to which APB's linguistic landscape (LL) reflects institutional identity, reinforces linguistic hierarchies, and negotiates tensions between nationalism and globalisation. Based on the findings, the discussion is organised around five key themes: LL as implicit policy, symbolic erasure, text composition and accessibility, nationalism versus globalisation, and global parallels.

First, LL could function as implicit language policy. While UiTM does not explicitly dictate signage practices in policy documents, the overwhelming dominance of BM-English signage in the faculty implicitly communicates institutional values. Bahasa Melayu or Malay language functions as the national anchor as it is the country's national and official language, reinforcing UiTM's Bumiputera mission, while English symbolises international competitiveness. This echoes Shohamy's (2006) argument that LL serves as a covert policy instrument, shaping linguistic hierarchies without explicit regulation.

Second, the absence of other languages taught and offered by APB in the faculty's linguistic landscape could be seen as representing symbolic erasure. One example is Arabic language, one of the languages offered in the degree program as well as one of the third languages course offered, is absent from APB signage despite being a core subject. Similarly, other third languages offered such as Italian and Japanese were also 'invisible' in the faculty's LL. This situation could undermine APB's identity as a language hub and suggests that certain languages, despite curricular presence, are considered peripheral in institutional representation.

The findings were also parallel with other studies conducted in higher education institutions. For instance, in China, Wang (2023) found minority languages were excluded in the LL in favour of English and Mandarin in higher education institutions. In South Africa, Mashiyi and Mkhize (2022) reported marginalisation of

indigenous languages and in the Gulf, Al Zidjaly (2019) noted Arabic overshadowed by English in higher education signage. These parallels reveal structural dynamics where national and global prestige languages dominate, while minority or curricular languages are symbolically erased.

Third, the text composition of the bilingual and multilingual signs displayed selective accessibility. While English headings provide some recognition of international audiences, the failure to translate details, as in partial translation text composition, leaves international students marginalised. This hierarchy of information reflects what Piller (2016) describes as 'linguistic gatekeeping,' where access to certain knowledge depends on the mastery of dominant languages. The fourth aspect that could be seen is APB's LL embodies UiTM's broader tension between nationalism and globalisation. Malay language dominance underscores national identity, while English signals global engagement. Yet the absence of other languages does bring an effect to both inclusivity and internationalisation. Phillipson (2010) posited that this condition reflects the dual pressures faced in postcolonial contexts, which is to safeguard national identity while striving for global recognition. Taken together, these themes underscore the role of LL in constructing institutional identity, shaping student experiences, and projecting values to external audiences.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study have significant implications for policy, pedagogy, and practice at UiTM and other higher education institutions. First, from a policy perspective, APB should establish clear guidelines requiring multilingual representation in signage. This could involve systematic inclusion of other languages alongside BM and English, reflecting both curricular scope and student diversity. This issue was also highlighted by the interview respondents where they were of the opinion that APB should look into what is displayed on the notice boards and around the faculty in terms of the language choice and use. Hence, it is pertinent for the faculty to also have a balance of the languages displayed in their LL to show inclusivity as well as to uphold the faculty's core 'business', i.e. language courses. Translation practices should also be visible and encouraged as it could support local and international stake holders, ensuring equitable access to information, and also to realise the university's aspiration as an institution which is 'globally renowned, locally rooted'. Institutional identity would also bring benefits when LL visibly embodies multilingualism. The absence of other languages undermines APB's position as a centre of language studies as greater visibility would strengthen APB's image locally and internationally.

Second, pedagogical implications suggest that signage reform can be integrated into coursework. Language students could participate in designing and producing multilingual signage as part of applied learning projects. This would not only enrich the LL but also reinforce learning outcomes and foster student ownership of the linguistic environment (Schvarcz & Warren, 2025). In relation to this, it is recommended for future research to compare the faculty with other faculties in the university. This could provide a more in-depth insight of what is being practiced throughout the university in terms of language(s) displayed in educational space. Another recommendation that could be incorporated in future research is to adopt a multimodal approach to incorporate semiotic elements such as symbols and logos as this study only focused on written language. Including the semiotic features could expand the comprehension of signs in the educational space in terms of the meaning behind the semiotic elements displayed. Finally, participatory governance is recommended. Students, faculty, and administrators should collaborate on signage policy and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the linguistic landscape of APB, UiTM Shah Alam, through documentation of 174 signs and student interviews. Despite APB's curricular emphasis on multiple languages, findings suggest that its signage is largely limited to BM and English. This presents a striking mismatch between curricular diversity and symbolic representation, warranting better language presentation in the faculty's LL. Findings also revealed on the dominance of BM-English bilingualism, the prevalence of partial translation, and the absence of other taught languages. These patterns reflect institutional priorities that privilege Malay and English, while symbolically erasing languages that are central to APB's curricular. The discussion situates these findings within global LL scholarship, highlighting common patterns of exclusion in higher education signage. At the same time, it underscores the role of LL as de facto policy, shaping institutional identity and inclusivity. The

implications for policy and pedagogy are clear: UiTM should expand visible multilingualism, standardise translation practices, and involve students in signage reform. Such measures would align APB's linguistic and enhance accessibility for diverse students. Ultimately, the LL is more than a collection of signs. It is a symbolic stage where competing values of nationalism, globalisation, and multilingual inclusivity are negotiated. Reforming APB's LL would embody its role as a centre of language studies as well as promoting d cultural diversity within in the university.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is a part of a larger study titled "Reconnoitering linguistic landscape on campus: A case study of UiTM Selangor", and funded by Geran Inisiatif Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (GIA)

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