

Language Policy Adherence and the Linguistic Landscape of Tourist Spaces in Perak, Malaysia: Introduction for a Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the linguistic landscape (LL) of tourist sites, focusing on the consistency between the stipulated language policy and actual practice in the selected survey sites. As outlined in the national language policy, BM is advocated as the national language and must be featured prominently in all public outdoor signage. However, the actual practices in Malaysian tourist spaces reveal varied levels of adherence. The study investigates the extent to which actual signage practices align with stipulated language policies in three prominent tourist sites in Perak Malaysia- Pulau Pangkor, Lost World of Tambun, and Teluk Batik through the triangulation of policy document analysis, visual analysis of 1,039 signs, and semi-structured interviews with thirteen sign creators and three local authority enforcement officers. Findings reveal that the usage of BM was implemented in most government signs; however, it was largely disregarded in private signs, especially in the Lost World of Tambun. This implies that the stipulated language policy is not consistently adhered to by the private sectors, mostly due to commercial priorities, international tourism branding, and practicality concerns. Based on the empirical findings, this study introduces the Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG) to bridge the gap between policy adherence and actual practices. The TSMG represents the first evidence-based, context-specific multilingual signage guideline derived from empirical Malaysian tourism LL data and constitutes a practical instrument for policy makers, local councils, and sign creators seeking to align signage practice with stipulated language policy while serving the communicative needs of diverse visitors.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Language Policy, Tourist Space, Multilingual Signs, Policy-Practice Gap, Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG)

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's linguistic landscape, often abbreviated as LL, is a reflection of the multi-ethnic composition of the country, which has been influenced by the British colonialism and immigration of Chinese and Indians (Albury, 2021). The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025) records the nation's demographic that consists of a Malay majority (58.2%), followed by Chinese (22.2%), other Bumiputera groups (12.3%), Indian (6.5%), as well as other various smaller minority groups. In this multilingual setting, the national and official language of Malaysia is Bahasa Melayu (BM) as laid down in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution. It is the language used in public and private institutions such as administration, education and business (Manan et al., 2015). English, which is brought by the British colonialism, still exists as a second language in Malaysia and is still used widely in business, education and global communication (Ain Nadzimah & Chan, 2003; Coluzzi, 2017).

This multi-lingual context has led Malaysia being one of the famous tourist destinations and tourism has remained one of the most significant economic sectors in Malaysia. Heller et al. (2014) pointed out that tourism generates a space where language is used as both a symbol of authenticity and as an item that generates economic revenue. English is significantly used as a medium of communication in the Malaysian tourism industry, where it helps to connect between local service providers and foreign visitors. In Malaysia, however, signage is still under the regulations of the national policy. The National Language Act (Akta Bahasa Kebangsaan) stipulates that BM should be used on all public and private signs. When BM is used alongside other languages, it must be given priority and visual salience regardless of any conditions. The prominence of certain language(s) on public display is also determined by other factors that shaped the construction of LL, such as identity, local demography, political ideology and commercial concerns (Blackwood, 2010; Gorter, 2006; Shohamy, 2015), which are also expected to create a tension between policy and actual practice.

Despite the growing body of linguistic landscape (LL) research globally, research examining the intersection of LL, language policy, and tourism in Malaysia remains relatively limited. Earlier Malaysian LL studies focused largely on urban and commercial settings (Anuarudin, 2017; Beh, 2017), while more recent studies have expanded the field to examine language choice, multilingualism, policy, and language visibility in different public spaces. For example, Woo and Riget (2022) examined multilingual signage at Kuala Lumpur International Airport and found that Malay occupied the dominant position on multilingual signs, followed by English as an important language of international communication. Similarly, Mansoor et al. (2023) discovered extensive use of multilingualism in commercial signage in Semenyih and identified differences between local signage regulations and actual practices made by business owners. More recently, research in George Town, Penang has demonstrated how language visibility is shaped by interaction of local identity, globalisation, and international tourism (Jiao, 2024). These studies demonstrate that Malaysian LLs are shaped not only by formal language requirements but also by communicative, social, economic, and contextual considerations.

Research specifically addressing LL in tourist spaces has also begun to develop. A review by Hasni et al. (2022) identified multilingualism, language policy, linguistic diversity, and multimodality as recurring themes and highlighted the need for further investigation within specific local contexts. In Perak, Hasni et al. (2024) examined the language choice and preference in the LL of Teluk Batik and found variation in the public display within the survey areas. Based on that corpus, Hasni and Anuarudin (2025) widened the lens to several of Perak's most prominent tourist destinations, focusing on how sign authorship relates to compliance with national language policy. Their findings showed a clear difference where government signs generally adhered and displayed greater prominence to Bahasa Melayu (BM), while private signs displayed greater diversity and stronger use of English. The researchers relate these differences to intended audiences and commercial purposes of the signs. Based on this context of research, it highlights how language policy interacts with sign authorship, multilingual practices, and the specific demands of tourism spaces in Perak.

Within this multilingual context, Malaysia has established regulatory mechanisms for outdoor advertising and public signage display, which include Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka's (DBP) Language Verification Procedures and local authority advertisement by-laws. These regulations stipulate that BM should be appropriately represented and given prominence in public signs. Nevertheless, the policy-practice gap remains an important issue in the Malaysian LL. Previous studies have shown that language regulations are not always consistently reflected in actual signage practice (Anuarudin, 2017; Ariffin et al., 2018). For example, Beh's (2017) investigation of official language practice in George Town, Penang, identified discrepancies between stipulated policy and actual language use, particularly among bottom-up or private-authored signs. More recent Malaysian LL studies similarly demonstrate the same underlying pattern which actual signage practices are shaped not only by language policy but also by language choice, multilingualism, sign authorship, target audience, and market demand (Hasni & Anuarudin, 2025; Hasni et al., 2024; Mansoor et al., 2023).

Although these studies have provided understanding of language choice, multilingualism, sign authorship, and policy compliance, a practical and policy-oriented gap remains. Existing regulations establish requirements concerning the use and prominence of BM but offer limited guidance on how these requirements should be applied alongside the communicative needs of domestic and international visitors, especially in tourist spaces. There is a need for a more systematic approach that can draw on existing research and policy requirements to

guide the development and management of multilingual signs. Such approach would be relevant to local councils, tourism stakeholders, and sign creators who are responsible for producing signage that accommodates diverse visitors while ensuring adherence to stipulated language policies.

Therefore, the current study examines the extent to which actual signage practices at selected tourist sites in Perak align with stipulated language policy requirements and investigates the factors that may account for any divergence. By integrating stipulated language requirements, actual signage practices, and stakeholder perspectives, the study provides empirical evidence of the relationship between policy and actual practice. The findings are also used to develop a practical guideline for multilingual tourist signage. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the stipulated language policy requirements governing outdoor signage in Malaysian tourist spaces?

RQ2: To what extent to actual signage practices at the selected tourist sites align with these stipulated requirements and what factors account for any divergence?

Based on the findings of these research questions, the study is expected to provide an evidence-based reference for local councils, tourism stakeholders, and sign creators in addressing the policy-practice gap in Perak's tourist spaces. More importantly, the present study further introduces the development of a Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG) that translates existing language-policy requirements and empirical evidence from tourist linguistic landscapes into practical guidance for future signage practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic Landscape and Tourism

The study of the Linguistic Landscape (LL), initially introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997), refers to the visibility and salience of written languages on public and commercial signs in a given region. LL serves both informational and symbolic functions that allow visitors to navigate while reflecting the sociolinguistic dynamics and cultural identity of a particular site (Kallen, 2009). Over the past few decades, the concept of LL has evolved and gained popularity across various domains. Within the tourism context, LL not only reflects the practical communicative functional sign but also embody broader socio-cultural meanings, including the representation of identity, the commodification of languages, and the negotiation of power between global and local languages. As highlighted by Bruyel-Olmedo and Juan-Garau (2009), LL in tourist spaces reflects more than linguistic realities whereby it captures the relationships and tensions between the languages on display. Since tourism is described as one of the greatest population movements of all time and among the world's biggest global trades, language has become an integral part of the 'movement' alongside people who travel (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011). In this sense, LL functions as a key symbolic resource of tourists' visual consumption of a particular destination and is regarded as one of the most influential aspects that influence tourists' overall experience (Lu et al., 2020). Therefore, tourism and LL are intrinsically interrelated and plays an indispensable role, especially in tourism development (Shang, 2018).

Within the broader literature on LL and tourism, three recurring themes emerge as particularly relevant to this study. First, LL in tourist spaces serves as a communicative infrastructure that provides directional and informational resources for visitors to navigate and understand unfamiliar surroundings (Kallen, 2009; Ruzaitė, 2017). Second, language display in tourist signs is used as a branding tool for constructing and promoting self-images and appealing to targeted segments of visitors through deliberate language choice (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011). A third issue concerns the unresolved tension between authenticity and accessibility. The use of local languages or culturally specific expression can strengthen the representation of a site, but it may also make a sign less accessible to visitors who do not understand those language choices. Similar concerns have been discussed in multilingual tourism context, where language choice can involve a trade-off between cultural representation and visitor comprehension (Beh, 2017; Moriarty, 2014). This instance underlines the need for a

structured, evidence-based guideline to assist creators or tourism stakeholders fulfils both policy requirements and communicative needs of visitors.

Linguistic Landscape and Language Policy

LL and policy are closely intertwined areas, with official policy serving as a prescribed guideline for language display in public space. According to Shohamy (2006), LL functions as a primary mechanism through which hidden and tacit language policy is exposed and enacted. Previous studies demonstrate that despite existing policies governing sign display, inconsistency and actual practice remain evident (Du, Plessis, 2012). Several factors appear to contribute towards this disparity including governance structures, commercial imperatives, ethnic identity, and the enforcement capacity of relevant authorities. Tourist spaces are commercialised environments subject to both regulatory requirements and market demands, making it a context in where language policy is constantly translated, negotiated or contested.

In Malaysia, the use of language on public signs is regulated under the National Language Policy, which requires Bahasa Melayu (BM) to be given prominence on all forms of public displays, including in terms of its size, font, and colour. The implementation of this requirement is enforced through the relevant authorities and municipal councils to uphold the status of BM as the national and official language. Despite these clear legal requirements, previous studies have shown that the use of BM on public signs does not always correspond with the stipulated policies, particularly in tourist and commercial areas, where private actors may give greater emphasis to English due to its association with global language, international visitors, commercial purposes, and branding (Anuarudin, 2017; Beh, 2017; Gu & Coluzzi, 2024). This pattern is confirmed by the authors' own previous LL analysis of the similar selected tourist sites in Perak (Hasni & Anuarudin, 2025), which found that private signs at Lost World of Tambun mostly deviated from the stipulated policy. The present study extends that earlier work by incorporating policy document analysis and interviews with enforcement officers and sign creators, providing a complete interpretation of the non-adherence and how it could be addressed.

Despite this growing instance on the deviation of policy, none of the existing studies, including Malaysia or elsewhere has produced a practical guideline that policy makers or sign creators can adopt to manage the tension between policy compliance and actual practice in tourist spaces. Most studies revealed that BM compliance is often overlooked on Malaysian public display, particularly by the private sectors (Mansoor et al., 2023; Wang & xu, 2018), yet no studies has proposed an evidence-based multilingual signage guideline designed specifically for Malaysian tourist spaces. Malaysia can be used as a good example of a country that can develop such a guideline as it has government -run, municipal and privately managed sites operating under the same national policy. This enables a straightforward comparison of the compliance between various actors and management. This study aims to fill this gap, which is done through the introduction of Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study builds on the authors' earlier visual analysis of language use and code preference across three selected tourist sites in Perak (Hasni & Anuarudin, 2025), extending that dataset through the addition of policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews with enforcement officers and sign creators. This study employs a mixed method approach, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, both of which were collected concurrently and independently, and later merged and triangulated during the interpretation of the data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was chosen because the research questions can be answered as a complement: The quantitative research question of sign distributions is complemented by the qualitative research question of the interpretation of policy documents and sign creators' motivations. Triangulation of three types of data sources, namely policy documents, visual data and semi-structured interviews with enforcement officials and sign creators, was applied to answer the research questions specifically.

Research Sites

The three most popular tourist attractions in Perak, Malaysia, namely Pulau Pangkor, Lost World of Tambun and Teluk Batik, were chosen for this study based on the findings from the Department of Statistics Malaysia's 2019 Domestic Tourism Survey which indicates that these locations have high domestic and international tourist numbers. The sites have different kinds of tourist attractions and when taken together, they provide a varied LL for analysis. Pulau Pangkor is a popular island holiday destination which incorporates beach, cultural and local trading. Lost World of Tambun, on the other hand, is a privately owned theme park and hot spring resort which attracts both local and international visitors. The other coastal recreational area is Teluk Batik, which is visited mostly by domestic tourists, and the government's efforts in tourism promotion in the area can be clearly seen in the site's LL. Tourist presence at all three sites has decreased significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, but in recent years, the gradual reopening of the Malaysian borders has brought back the tourist presence in these sites and further confirmed their relevance as case studies for the analysis of LL in the Malaysian tourist spaces today.

Visual Data Collection

Data were collected at the three selected tourist sites through systematic photographic documentation of outdoor signage, which included road signs, place names, commercial shop signs, advertisements, and regulatory signs. Adapting from Backhaus (2007), the linguistic landscape (LL) in this study is defined as "... any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame" (p. 66). Thus, only written outdoor signs were included in the analysis, while non-linguistic semiotic elements such as symbols, logos, icons, and indexes were excluded to ensure clarity and consistency in the coding process. To avoid duplication, identical or repeated signs were counted only once. Of the 1,093 signs documented across the three study sites, 1,039 met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. The distribution of the signage data is consistent with that reported in the authors' previous study (Hasni & Anuarudin, 2025). The present study extends the earlier analysis by triangulating the signage data with evidence obtained from relevant policy documents and stakeholder interviews, as further explained in the findings section.

The collected data were then categorised and analysed using a coding framework adapted from established LL studies by Ben-Rafael et al., (2006), Cenoz & Gorter (2009), Edelman (2010), Huebner (2009), Scollon & Scollon (2003) and Spolsky & Cooper (1991). The framework comprised four main analytical categories: (1) number of languages displayed (monolingual and multilingual signs); (2) authorship (government and private signs); (3) code preference, examining language prominence in terms of size, position, and visibility; and (4) text composition, observing translation and the relationship between languages displayed on multilingual signs. While the baseline corpus (n=1,039) draws on the survey data set established by Hasni and Anuarudin (2025), the current study extends the dataset by adding sign type element as part of the LL analysis and integrate it with other qualitative data. Analysing the types and features of LL was based on code preference system, taking into account the core characteristics and language hierarchy derived from the National Language Act and local council by-laws (MBI/MPM):

1. Order of placement: when a sign contains two or more languages, the language appearing at the top, on the left, or in the centre of a sign is regarded as the preferred code. This assesses whether Bahasa Melayu (BM) maintains the spatial precedence required by local policy over secondary languages.
2. Font Size: Larger font sizes indicate greater importance and visibility, showing the prevalence and preference of some languages over others on multilingual signs. This criterion mirrors the regulations stipulating that BM text size must be more prominent than any other displayed languages.
3. Visibility: Coding preference was noted if a text uses bold lettering, distinct styling, or strong colour contrast. This captures compliance with display regulations mandating clear visual salience and legibility for BM.

To confirm the validity of the categorisation process, the classification framework and a sample of the coded sign were reviewed by two researchers with expertise in linguistic landscape studies. The review focused on the clarity of the category definitions, the application of the categories to selected images, and the resulting

frequency counts. Issues identified during the review were considered in the subsequent checking of the coding. This process provided an additional check on the appropriateness and clarity of the categorisation framework and was informed by the peer-review approach discussed by Nowell et al. (2017). Following established Linguistic Landscape methodologies (Backhaus, 2007; Bruyel-Olmedo & Juan-Garau, 2009; Edelman, 2010), descriptive statistics were chosen over inferential testing. The visual analysis aims to systematically map and compare language distribution patterns across the selected survey sites rather than seeking to test causal relationships or draw inferences beyond the documented corpus.

Policy Document Analysis

In analysing the consistencies between stipulated language policy on actual practice, policy and documents pertaining to language policy and advertisement laws such as the Federal Constitution 1982, The National Language Policy, and also The Advertisement by-law of Municipal Council of Perak (2000) were retrieved from two different sources which are websites as well as interview sessions with enforcement officers from the relevant institutional bodies using an audio recorder. These documents were triangulated with the visual data and interview data to provide a complete interpretation of the LL practices.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three relevant enforcement officers (EO1 and EO2 from MBI; EO3 from MPM) from the two selected local councils (MBI and MPM) to gain information on the regulations of the policies in the selected survey sites. The interview sessions, which consisted of open-ended questions adapted from Anuarudin (2017) were conducted in BM as it is the official language to be used when dealing with government officials. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with thirteen sign creators from the survey sites to gain in-depth information pertaining to the creation of signage, especially on the reasons of creation as well as their awareness of the stipulated policy documents. The questions were adapted from Ryan (2011). Interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis and lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. Research ethics such as the respondents' consent to be interviewed, and issues of sensitivity, confidentiality and identity were strictly observed throughout.

Qualitative interview data were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework, allowing themes to emerge organically from participant responses (Charmaz, 2014). The first step involved data familiarisation, where all meanings and patterns across excerpts were analysed and identified. Printed transcripts were subjected to line-by-line analysis and annotated with margin notes during initial coding. Preliminary codes capturing salient ideas and patterns, such as 'BM positioning requirements', 'practical English usage', 'policy awareness', and 'flexible language choice' were systematically compiled into Microsoft Excel alongside corresponding codes to facilitate clustering, refinement, and thematic development. To minimise the risk of interpretive bias and ensure analytical consistency in manual coding, several measures were adopted throughout the analysis process. First, an initial coding framework was developed from the first four transcripts and refined before being systematically applied to the remaining dataset. Second, constant comparison technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was employed by re-examining earlier coded transcripts, preventing code drift and maintain consistency across the dataset. Third, qualitative trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017) was established by having two qualitative experts evaluated a 30% of the transcripts (n=5). This cross-check verified that code definitions were applied consistently and confirmed that emergent themes accurately reflected participant perspectives. Initial codes were clustered into broader themes through inductive thematic analysis. This is to ensure that the voices of participants were authentically represented and the core issues such as policy awareness, sign creator's motivation, and language preferences were directly grounded in the participants' responses. Once the themes were finalised, the interview findings were compared with the visual data and relevant policy documents to address the research questions. The triangulation serves not only to explore the discourse within the interview but also provide further context for interpreting issues discussed in the findings. The identified themes were then examined in relation to the visual and documentary data. This allows the interview findings to be considered alongside the patterns observed in the signage and the relevant policy documents. A similar combination of thematic and multimodal analysis was employed by Lu et al. (2020) in examining LL data. By comparing the different sources, the study was able to examine language

practices from several perspectives, particularly in relation to policy adherence and the views of the actors involved at the selected sites.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Stipulated Language Policy Requirements Governing Outdoor Signage

Analysis of the DBP Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertisements and the advertisement by-laws of MBI and MPM revealed a consistent set of requirements governing language use on outdoor signs. First, BM must be used on advertisements and public signage, either independently or alongside other languages. Whenever more than one language is displayed, BM must be given visual prominence over the other language(s), particularly in terms of placement, colour, and size. The wording(s) in other language(s) must not be displayed more prominently or in a larger size than BM. An exception is provided for registered names of firms, companies, societies, or organisations that contain words in languages other than BM, for which translation into BM is not necessarily required. The local-authority regulations further stipulate that advertisements that fail to comply with these language requirements may not be displayed, and that incorrect use of BM may result in the advertiser being instructed to alter or remove the sign. Failure to comply with these requirements may constitute an offence. The regulations therefore address more than the inclusion of BM on outdoor signs. They also concern the accuracy of the language used and the prominence given to BM in relation to other languages.

The document analysis shows that DBP and local authorities have different but related roles in regulating outdoor signage. DBP is involved in checking the appropriate use and prominence of BM, while local councils implement these requirements through their advertisement by-laws and licensing procedures. Language verification by DBP is also required during the sign licensing process. Where signs do not meet the requirement, the documents show that compliance involves several aspects, including the presence of BM, accuracy of language use, its visual prominence, the display of other languages, and compliance with local licensing requirements.

Interviews with enforcement officers from MBI and MPM confirmed that the authorities focus heavily on preserving the symbolic status of the national language. During the interview sessions, all representatives from the selected local councils constantly emphasised the importance of conforming to the national language policies. They explained that BM should always be prioritised in whatever conditions and should not be overshadowed by other languages regardless of font, size, and colour, as required in the National Language Act 1963/67. BM's visibility in public display is central to reinforcing both the language's official status and Malaysia's broader national identity. The same reactions were found in both EO1 and EO3, suggesting that the signs reinforce BM's status as an official language and it is a crucial tool in reinforcing national identity and the preservation of cultural heritage. Several sign creators in the survey areas during the interview also agreed with the notion that the use of BM symbolizes Malaysian identity and its culture. As EO2 from MBI mentioned, "prioritising BM on signs provides clear message about its significance and its role in uniting Malaysians". This perspective aligns with previous LL studies in Malaysia which also highlight BM's role as both symbol of unity and index of local identity (Anuarudin, 2017; Beh, 2017; Coluzzi, 2017; Manan et al., 2015).

All enforcement officers also agreed on the positive impact of giving prominence to BM, which they believed could promote and elevate its usage and serve as an effective way to uphold the status of BM. The visibility of BM on public signs should therefore be practised by all parties, as prioritising the language on signs could encourage its wider use and set the norm for others to follow. This is said to be a crucial step because increased visibility may enhance exposure to BM and encourage voluntary compliance among sign creators who are aware of the stipulated policies. Even with explicit policies in place, enforcement officers acknowledged the challenges faced in ensuring compliance, especially in commercial and touristic areas. The pointed out that widespread English signage often complicates effort to promote BM, as English is often associated with modernity, economic opportunity, and global identity (Fauzia et al., 2024; Jiao & Singh, 2024). Consequently, these economic and cultural perceptions may potentially diminish the importance of BM in public displays.

Nevertheless, the enforcement officers also pointed out that most sign creators are aware of the relevant policies, however compliance may involve negotiation and contextual considerations. The interviews responses are in line with Anuarudin's (2017) finding that copywriters were aware of the relevant language policies. They also support Zimny's (2017) observation that sign creators may negotiate language requirements according to the context rather than simply ignore them. In the present study, awareness of the regulations did not necessarily result in uniform language practices. Sign creators appeared to balance the requirements with the linguistic and commercial needs of their particular settings. This provides an important context for interpreting the policy adherence observed at the selected tourist sites.

RQ2: Policy Adherence and Divergence Across Selected Survey Sites.

Table 1 indicates the distribution of sign type across the survey sites. Commercial signs accounted for the largest number of the signs observed at the three survey sites (n=298). Informational and identification signs each accounted for 218 signs, followed by regulatory signs (n=181), and directional signs (n=124). Differences in policy adherence were also observed between the sign categories. BM was more visually prominent on regulatory and directional signs, many of which were produced by government authorities. Commercial and identification signs, however, revealed more instances of non-adherence. This was noticeable at Lost World of Tambun, where private entities appeared to place more emphasis on brand visibility, market appeal, communication and international visitors. The findings therefore suggest that sign type is related to how language policy is practised in tourist spaces, with government and private signs showing different patterns and priorities in their language choices.

Table 1: Distribution of sign type across survey sites (n= 1,039)

Sign Type	Functional Description / Purpose	Pulau Pangkor	Lost World of Tambun	Teluk Batik	Total
Commercial	Shop signs, business displays, promotional banners	220	62	16	298
Regulatory	Prohibitions, safety/warning notices	91	59	31	181
Informational	Maps, site descriptions, cultural/historical briefs	76	118	24	218
Directional	Wayfinding, street signs, traffic navigation guides	96	24	4	124
Identification	Signage naming a site, building names	133	63	22	218
Total		616	326	97	1,039

The analysis of policy adherence shows how language policies are implemented within the selected survey areas. While the national language policy mandates that BM must take precedence on all types of signs, it remains unknown whether this is consistently being practiced in public spaces, particularly in touristic areas. Based on the analysis of the LL across the survey sites, only Pulau Pangkor and Teluk Batik generally adhered to the stipulated policy, with most monolingual and multilingual signs issued by both government and private sectors gave prominence to BM. In Pulau Pangkor, multilingual signs exhibited high degree of compliance with the stipulated policies as BM appeared as the prominent language (positioned at the top or left and font size) in 91% of government signs and 71% in private signs. Meanwhile in Teluk Batik, 100% of government signs and 71% of private signs also prioritised BM, which signify compliance (refer to Table 2). Figures 1 and 2 below display samples of signs for main language in terms of code preference.

Table 2: Main language appeared in terms of code preference (n=314)

Languages	Pulau Pangkor				Lost World of Tambun				Teluk Batik			
	Gov		Private		Gov		Private		Gov		Private	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
BM	42	91%	114	71%			17	18%	6	100%	5	71%
English	3	7%	39	24%			72	76%			2	29%
Chinese	0		6	4%			6	6%				
Tamil	1	2%										
Other language			1	0.6%								
Total	46	100%	160	100%			95	100%	6	100%	7	100%



Figure 1 BM and Chinese



Figure 2 BM and English

For monolingual signs in Pulau Pangkor, government signs using only BM accounted for 62.2%, while private signs made up 21.4% (refer to Table 3). Similarly, Teluk Batik also indicated a preference for BM monolingual, with 42.9% government signs and 37% private signs. However, there were still noticeable instances of non-compliance reflected in monolingual signs. Although the number of these signs were not that significant, it still shows inconsistencies in the LL of the survey areas. The discrepancies are based on several conditions; some signs deviated in terms of placement, others give prominence to other languages, particularly English in terms of font size, and few signs were written completely in other languages without the presence of BM words. Figures 3, 4 and 5 below exemplify samples of monolingual signs.

Table 3: Distribution of types of monolingual signs (n=725)

Type of signs / tourist sites	Pulau Pangkor		Lost World		Teluk Batik	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
BM only (government)	255	62.2	0	0	36	42.9
BM only (private)	87	21.4	0	0	31	37
English only (government)	2	0.5	0	0	10	11.9
English only (private)	64	15.6	222	96.1	7	8.3
Chinese (private)	2	0.5	9	3.9	0	0
Total	410	100	231	100	84	100



Figure 3 Chinese-only sign



Figure 4 BM-only sign



Figure 5 English-only sign

As seen in Table 2 and Table 3, inconsistencies were clearly demonstrated in Lost World of Tambun, especially by the private sectors as neither monolingual nor multilingual signs fully complied with the required policy. In most instances, 76% of multilingual signs issued by the private sectors in the area prioritised English and 96.1% of the monolingual signs followed the same pattern. The strong preference for English clearly demonstrates non-adherence with the national language policies. The presence of BM in most of the multilingual signs available was relegated to secondary positioning below English or rendered in smaller font sizes which shows a direct violation by the management. This disparity highlights how governance structures dictate policy implementation. It is commonly known that government-regulated public spaces always ensure compliance. However, in most privately controlled commercial areas, profit motives and international branding supersede regulatory requirements - a trend that is also commonly observed in most LL tourism studies (Babayode, 2023; Beh, 2017; Djonda & Madrunio, 2023; Mubarok et al., 2024).

Interviews with local sign creators showed that the frequent use of English in private signs was mainly associated with commercial considerations, international branding, and practical navigation needs. Table 4 presents the themes emerged from the interview transcripts, involving three enforcement officers and 13 sign creators. The table also shows the frequency of each theme and includes selected quotations from the participants during the interview conducted.

Table 4: Emergent Themes from Qualitative Interview Data

Emergent Theme	Theme Description	Interviewees & Response Frequency	Representative Quotations
1. Symbolic purposes & National Identity	Priority given to Bahasa Melayu (BM) as a statutory requirement and national identity marker	Enforcement Officers (n=3/3, 100%); Sign Creators (8/13, 61.5%)	“Prioritising BM on signs provides clear message about its significance and its role in uniting Malaysians” (EO2, MBI) “BM is our national language, so it should naturally be featured to reflect our cultural identity” (PP2, Sign Creator)
2. Commercial Priorities & Global Branding	Relegation of BM in favour of English/Chinese to appeal to target tourist demographics and convey prestige.	Sign creators (n=11/13, 84.6%); Enforcement Officers (n=2/3, 66.7%)	“Prioritizing English has become standard practice for private sectors to enhance commercial appeal and accommodate international visitors” (LW1, Sign Creator)
3. Implementation & Guidance Gap	High awareness of BM requirements, but low technical clarity on multi-script design layouts.	Sign Creators (n=9/13, 69.2%); Enforcement Officers (n=3/3, 100%)	“We know BM is compulsory, but current rules only tell us what is forbidden. We lack practical guidelines on how to lay out three languages” (TB2, Sign Creator)
4. Selective Localized Enforcement	Enforcement focuses heavily on initial licensing rather than ongoing visual compliance in commercial zones.	Enforcement Officers (n=3/3, 100%); Sign Creators (n=7/13, 53.8%)	“Enforcement in private commercial areas involves negotiation and contextual considerations due to tourism economic demands” (EO1, MBI)

As one of the sign creators at Lost World of Tambun (LW1) explained, prioritizing English has become a standard practice for many private sectors to enhance their commercial appeal and accommodate the needs of international visitors who may not be familiar with BM. She also added that English is prescribed as a prestige language that made the site on par with other global destinations. The patterns identified in this study resonate with and extend findings from other multilingual tourism contexts across Southeast Asia. In Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, Djonda and Madrunio (2023) similarly found that privately authored tourism signage favoured English over the national language, driven by comparable commercial and accessibility considerations, while Mubarok et al. (2024) reported a parallel pattern of limited national-language adherence in Lembang, Bandung’s tourism-driven signage.

In the Philippines, Mendoza and Bernardo (2025) documented how tourism landscapes similarly privilege English as a marker of accessibility and modernity, and Bonotan (2025) found comparable dynamics in Siargao Island’s rapidly growing tourism sector. The similar instances found in these studies is not considered unique as it also reflects a broader structural tension faced by certain countries, where national language frequently coexists with strong commercial incentives favouring English in tourism-driven context.

In addition to English, another language found in monolingual signs, specifically in two survey areas (Pulau Pangkor and Lost World of Tambun) was Chinese. Even though the distribution in both areas shows a small proportion – accounting for 0.5% of signs in Pulau Pangkor and 3.9% in Lost World of Tambun – their presence nonetheless underscores policy-practice discrepancies. These monolingual signs were constructed by the private sectors. This occurrence was raised during the interviews with sign creators in the selected survey sites which they were asked about the reasons behind this inclusion. Sign creators explained that the presence

of Chinese stems primarily from local Chinese businesses and established resident demographic in these survey sites. Even with these reasons given, Chinese monolingual signs remain far less prominent than BM or English, due to its non-official status and localised commercial role (Beh, 2017). The preference is also said to accommodate Chinese-speaking tourists and express cultural heritage and identity. Private sign creators also described commercial and market considerations as important factors in their choice of languages. This helps explain why some private signs did not closely follow the stipulated language requirements.

The findings from RQ1 and RQ2 point to a gap between what policy requires and how multilingual tourism signs are represented in practice. Although the existing regulations establish the use and prominence of BM, they provide limited guidance on how multilingual signs should be presented. In the absence of specific guideline, private operators have considerable discretion over which language to include and how they are displayed.

Visitor expectations, commercial considerations, and the perceived usefulness of particular languages may therefore influence these decisions. This divergence was particularly visible at Lost World of Tambun, where English monolingual signs were relatively common. A similar tension between language policy and actual practices of LL was also reported by Beh (2017) in Penang. Thus, it could be concluded that the overall implementation of LL in Malaysian tourist spaces have yet to achieve satisfactory level of adherence.

Schiffman's (1996) distinction between overt and covert language policy provides a useful perspective on this discrepancy. The overt policy framework reflected in the National Language Act and the requirements administered by DBP and local authorities gives BM an established position in outdoor signs. However, the extensive use of English at Lost World of Tambun reflect that formal policy does not fully determine language practices at the site.

The prevalence use of English among private sign creators may reflect commercial and institutional expectations that are not explicitly stated in the formal policy framework. From this perspective, language choices at the site appear to be shaped by considerations beyond regulatory requirements. The findings therefore illustrate the difference between the language practices prescribed through formal policy and those observed in an actual tourism setting.

The findings further demonstrate the importance of commercial interest in shaping the LL. Heller et al. (2014) describe language as having both cultural and economic value. Both functions can be seen in the present study, although their relative importance varies according to the type of sign and the organisation responsible for it. Government-authored signs generally place greater emphasis on regulatory requirements and the use of BM, whereas private signs more often reflect branding, visitor appeal, and communication with a wider market. For private operators, language choice may therefore serve commercial purposes together with its communicative function.

These findings can also be related to Spolsky's (2004, 2009) view of language policy as involving practices, beliefs, and management. The findings suggest that these three elements do not always operate in the same direction. At government-managed sites, the language appearing on signs generally corresponds more closely with the language requirements imposed through management and regulation. In contrast to touristic sites managed by private sectors, actual language practices are heavily influenced by the perceived needs of visitors and commercial objectives of the operators. The difference between these settings illustrates how language policy is negotiated in actual practice rather than being implemented uniformly.

Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG)

To address the gap between stipulated policy and actual practice, this study introduces the Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG). The practical guideline brings together regulatory requirements and the communicative needs of visitors across four dimensions: linguistic, visual, cultural and user experiential, and governance. An overview of the proposed framework is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Overview of the Tourist Signage Multilingual Guideline (TSMG)

Dimension	Focus Area
Linguistic	Language hierarchy and accuracy
Visual	Design clarity and legibility
Cultural and User Experiential	Representation and visitor engagement
Governance	Monitoring and accountability

The proposed guideline was developed from the findings of this study, particularly the differences observed between stipulated language policy and actual practices across the selected survey sites. The findings indicate that compliance alone does not address all the communicative needs of multilingual tourism spaces. Signage also needs to be clear, accessible, and appropriate to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of its users. The four dimensions in Table 5 therefore address different aspects of sign production, from language selection and visual presentation and mechanisms for monitoring compliance.

At this stage, the TSMG should be regarded as a research-informed proposal rather than a validated policy instrument. The detailed criteria under each dimension, together with the procedures for implementation and assessment, are being developed in a separate guideline document. Stakeholder validation will also be required before the framework can be considered for wider adoption. As the full instrument is currently under development and copyright protection is being pursued, this article presents only the framework and its four main dimensions rather than complete operational criteria and validation tools. Further research can assess the applicability of the TSMG through pilot implementation at the selected tourism sites. Feedback from local authorities, tourism operators, sign creators, and visitors would be useful in refining the guideline and determining its practicality in different settings. Although the TSMG was developed in response to the Malaysian tourism context, its four dimensions may also provide a useful starting point for other multilingual tourism spaces where national language requirements intersect with commercial and visitors-oriented signage practices.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the consistencies between language policy for outdoor signs and actual practice in the LL of the selected tourist sites in Perak. Although official policies and regulations have made BM as the prominent language in linguistic practices particularly on signs, findings from this study revealed that these policies have not been fully implemented. BM remained prominent at Pulau Pangkor and Teluk Batik, particularly on government-authored signs, whereas a different pattern was observed at Lost World of Tambun. The use of English, the inclusion of other languages, and the absence of BM on some signs appear to reflect the different purposes served by signage in these locations. These differences also suggest that language choices in public spaces are influenced by the organisation responsible for the signs and the target audience.

For RQ1, the document analysis found that the relevant DBP procedures and local council by-laws contain specific requirements concerning the use and prominence of BM on outdoor signs. These requirements address aspects such as placement, font size, and visibility, including signs that contain BM together with other languages. The policy documents therefore provide a formal basis for regulating the language used on outdoor signs. The findings for RQ2, however, show that actual practices were not uniform across the three sites. At Pulau Pangkor and Teluk Batik, most government and private signs, including both monolingual and multilingual signs, generally followed the stipulated requirements. BM-only signs were also common and can be understood as serving both a regulatory function and a role in addressing the local Malaysian audience. At Lost World of Tambun, most of the language representation did not fully reflect the requirements in the stipulated policy. English was given greater prominence on a number of private signs, and there were also cases of signs appearing without BM. This instance indicates a weaker relation between what is required (policy) and what is being practice. Similar patterns have also been reported in other recent LL studies, where

commercial and symbolic considerations can influence language choice in tourism settings (Bonotan, 2025; Mendoza & Bernardo, 2025; Sha, 2025).

The prominence of English at Lost World of Tambun appears to be associated with the site's commercial orientation and its focus on a wider target audience. In the tourism context, English serves not only as a means of communication but also contributes to the branding and appeal of the attraction. The findings suggest that private sign creators may consider the perceived market value of a language and visitor expectations when constructing a sign, even when these choices do not fully correspond with the stipulated policy requirement. The difference between the requirements set out in language policy and the practices observed at the site points to the need for clearer guidance on the use and visual representation of multiple languages in Malaysian tourism signage.

Therefore, in coming up with a sign, target readers would have significant influence on the sign creators when constructing a sign. Signs are expected to comply with policy requirements, and at the same time reflect the authenticity and local heritage of the place it represents. Within the context of LL in tourism, a balanced approach to constructing a dynamic LL is recommended to enhance visibility as well as fulfil the communicative needs. Given that existing policy already permits the inclusion of additional languages, provided BM retains its visual prominence in placement, font size, and colour, adopting a more inclusive and dynamic approach to LL construction represents a practical step toward bridging the gap between policy and practice.

To improve the implementation of language policy in tourist signage, the TSMG offers Malaysian local councils, tourism stakeholders, and sign creators a practical, evidence-based instrument for narrowing the gap between policies and practice — one that authorities do not currently have available to them. Its four-dimensional structure represents this study's principal applied contribution, extending the research beyond documenting language practices and policy compliance toward a proposal for their improved management. Formal validation with relevant stakeholders, and eventual pilot testing at selected tourist sites remain necessary next steps before the guideline can be adopted in practice. The TSMG is intended to support a more systematic approach to multilingual tourist signage by balancing adherence to national-language requirements with the communicative needs of linguistically diverse visitors.

Despite the study's contribution, it also has several limitations. Its scope was confined to three tourist sites in Perak, selected on the basis of the 2019 Domestic Tourism Survey; the findings therefore cannot be generalised to other Malaysian tourist destinations, and cross-site comparative studies would help identify broader trends and variations in LL practices over time. Another limitation concerns jurisdiction which the selected sites fall under two different local councils, their policy documents were examined separately, and the findings should be read as reflecting these two jurisdictions specifically rather than Malaysia's outdoor signage policy as a whole. The interview data also carry additional limitations. As with any interview-based research involving officials and business operators discussing compliance with a national policy, responses may have been subject to social desirability bias, particularly among enforcement officers, who may have been inclined to present their councils' enforcement efforts favourably, and among sign creators, who may have downplayed the extent of deliberate non-compliance. While the consistency of enforcement officers' accounts with the independently collected visual data offers some reassurance against this concern, it should be considered when interpreting the interview findings. Similarly, sign creators were recruited through volunteer sampling, which may have introduced selection bias if those willing to participate held systematically different views from those who declined; and the perspectives of only three enforcement officers, across two local councils, limit the extent to which institutional accounts can be considered representative of enforcement practice more broadly. Addressing these limitations in future work would allow for a more comprehensive interpretation of the LL issues raised in Malaysian tourist spaces.

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