

USING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE TO DESIGN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS' ACTIVE LEARNING

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Abstract. *English for Academic Purposes is one of the most important areas of the structured foundation programs offered in Oman's institutions of tertiary education with the aim to assist students in their adjustment to the university life and to help them develop language skills and knowledge that are required for degree study. Much effort is involved in designing and running the English language foundation program courses; however, the problem of the students' underachievement is still one of the concerns. This study addresses the need for providing more support for the foundation program students' adjustment and adaptation to the academic life built on their active learning, interaction, and collaboration in extra-curricular activities. By focusing on the linguistic landscape of the academic spaces as a resource for designing engaging extra-curricular activities that promote active learning, this study attempts to encourage the linguistic landscape exploration practice through various academic enrichment programs which play a significant role in language learning curricula in the context of the foundation program offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University and beyond.*

Key words: *linguistic landscape, active learning, extra-curricular activities, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the start of their first semester at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman, many students are placed into intensive English, mathematics and information technology courses through the foundation program offered by the Center for Preparatory Studies (CPS). When adjusting to the system of higher education, foundation program students encounter many and various challenges. These challenges can affect their academic performance, assessment, attendance, social and emotional well-being, confidence and self-esteem. With a view to address many of these areas for students to progress properly, the CPS initiated the student support structure of Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) with an aim to support incoming students' adjustment, supplement their learning experiences,

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provide them with real-life social connections and a relaxed environment to enhance their knowledge and practice their language skills. As perceived by both teachers and students enrolled in the foundation program courses offered by the CPS, the main key areas related to ECA programs, including their benefits in terms of students' progress enhancement, accommodation of their interests and needs, provision of a safe language-learning environment and support of their transition into the higher education system, involve the development of their skills in English for Academic purposes and academic performance (Ginosyan, et al., 2019). The events and activities organized by ECA also give students opportunities to develop students' communicative competence while addressing their needs and interests. Additionally, by providing extracurricular activities within the framework of the university's foundation program curriculum, ECA helps students succeed by addressing such aspects, as students' self-esteem and self-confidence, their motivation and positive attitudes toward learning, cross-cultural experiences, and transitional challenges (Ginosyan, et al., 2019). Ginosyan, Tuzlukova and Hendrix (2019) assert that there is increased engagement in motivation, and in confidence in students who were more involved in ECA. They argue that students participating in ECA increase their competence in active learning by being exposed to various activities outside the classroom with English being a tool and not the goal. The authors also explain that many extracurricular activities function as an extension of learning outcomes of the foundation program being of practical value to the program by including skills' practice and functioning as an immensely valuable resource for the foundation program. However, as noted in the study by Ginosyan, Tuzlukova and Hendrix (2019), although much is done for making the extracurricular activities conform to foundation program curriculum guidelines and learning outcomes, more involvement between extracurricular activities and foundation program learning outcomes can be beneficial. Gorter (2018) argues that "the linguistic landscape can be used for language learning, but even more as a powerful pedagogical tool to answer questions about language awareness, multilingual literacy, multimodality, identities" (p.8). Therefore, the authors suggest considering linguistic landscape as a potential content for designing and developing extra-curricular activities that can enhance foundation program students' active learning and their language skills and abilities.

The linguistic landscape is a widely researched trend in language learning which refers to the study of language on public signs in a given territory (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The linguistic landscape is a combination of language and visuals, such as pictures or graphs, colors, and logos. It can exhibit itself in the form of road and traffic signs, billboards, shop windows, notice boards, posters, flags, banners, and other meaningful signs. The term 'linguistic landscape' was firstly coined by Landry & Bourhis (1997) in reference to the visibility and prominence of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. The term as explained by Gorter (2018) gained its popularity in the 21st century due to a great focus on multilingualism and globalization where the language becomes a part of the surroundings shaping the global environment. Shohamy and Gorter (2008) view the linguistic landscape as a provider of a scene where the public space is symbolically built, establishing connections between the uses, concepts, language varieties, and contestations of multiple forms of 'languages' as they are displayed in public spaces. Kasanga (2012) highlights one important function of the linguistic landscape which is to convey what languages are locally relevant, or substantiate what languages are becoming locally relevant in a given community. Additionally, the analysis of the area's linguistic landscape can provide insight into the language situation of a particular area to unveil

multilingualism, dominance of languages, or language policies. The analysis of the number and types of languages on signs in a specific public space reflects people's cultural identity (monolingual, bilingual, multilingual) and practices as well as the order of dominance of those languages in a given territory.

The linguistic landscape is important in the context of language education for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is accessible to everyone as it is available in various forms: road signs, billboards, posters, banners, etc. Secondly, it influences the daily experiences of individuals and shapes how people interact as a society. In other words, it uncovers the identity of the individuals that make up the community, what languages they speak and/or prioritize. Lastly, the linguistic landscape can be an invaluable resource for language learning both inside and outside the classroom (Shohamy & Gorter, 2008; Gorter, 2018). Various activities and mini projects can be crafted for classroom practice to reinforce specific language skills. However, the benefits of engaging students in linguistic landscape exploration may outweigh those that come from the in-class practice as learning outside the classroom is mostly authentic and assessment-free. By focusing on the linguistic landscape as a resource for designing engaging extra-curricular activities that promote active learning, this study attempts to encourage the linguistic landscape exploration practice through various academic enrichment programs which play a significant role in language learning curricula.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Extra-curricular activities

Research indicates that student involvement in the extra-curricular activities produces its effect on their academic performance (Daniyal et al., 2012) while indicating that extra-curricular activities have become an important component of students' academic life. Consequently, many institutions of higher education worldwide keep investing significant resources on extracurricular activities (Seow & Pan, 2014). In addition to affecting academic progress of the students, participation in extracurricular activities has an impact students' adjustment to the context of tertiary education and their academic performance, which is associated with an improved grade point average, higher educational aspirations, increased college attendance, and reduced absenteeism (Broh, 2002, para. 8).

Many extracurricular activities have proven to be beneficial in building and strengthening academic achievement, even if the activities are not obviously related to academic subjects (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002, para. 9). To quote Marsh and Kleitman (2002), "a number of studies revealed that students participating in extracurricular activities did better academically than students who did not participate" (para. 7). The longitudinal study by Darling, Caldwell and Smith (2005), which particularly examined the relationship between extracurricular activities and academic performance in adolescents, found that "adolescents who participated in extracurricular activities reported higher grades, more positive attitudes toward school, and higher academic aspirations" (para. 1). The results of the study by Darling, Caldwell & Smith (2005) also revealed that students who participated in school-based extracurricular activities had higher grades. According to the researchers, they also had higher academic aspirations, and better academic attitudes than those who were not involved in extracurricular activities at all (para. 23-35).

Indeed, a substantial body of research demonstrates that extracurricular activities mitigate students' adjustment to academic life and promote academic performance in

students. However, the research also indicates that the impact of the extra-curricular activities on academic performance is inseparable from inside (institution-based, academic) and outside (social) influences. For example, in view of Quest and Schneider (2003), who believe that every school and community assign certain values to the various activities, putting more importance on some over others, the “value that is placed on each activity affects the relationship between that specific activity and academic performance (para. 4). Additionally, although numerous studies have found positive associations between extracurricular participation and academic achievement (Guest & Schneider, 2003), the specific effect that various activities produce is debated. For example, according to Broh (2002), “participation in some activities improves achievement, while participation in others diminishes achievement” (para. 1).

According to Guest and Schneider (2003), three factors influence this relationship. These factors are the “what,” the “where,” and the “when” (para. 7). The “what” suggests that “the type of participation or activity undertaken influences developmental outcomes” (Guest & Schneider, 2003, para. 8). The “where” suggests “that the school and community context in which extracurricular activity takes place matters” (Guest & Schneider, 2003, para. 9). Finally, the “when” suggests “that the developmental and historical context in which extracurricular participation takes place influences both how it is valued and its effects on subsequent development” (Guest & Schneider, 2003, para. 10). All three of these factors work together to influence the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and academic performance, because each one places a different value both on activities and academics.

2.2. Active learning

Active learning as defined by Bonwell and Eison (1991) refers to “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (p. iii). Active learning involves interaction and collaboration among students (Thomas, 2009; Saunders, 2020), peer feedback (Chen & Lou, 2004), and an active learning experience environment (Montgomery, 2008) as well as hands-on participation, short writing assignments, and peer teaching, in order to encourage students and boost their motivation (Bernstein, 2018).

Active learning enables students to think critically and to engage, rather than simply to listen to a lecture (Rotzien, 2005). It is as much a part of the process as it is about the end project which enables students to help each other, see things from another’s point of view and solve their learning problems jointly with a certain level of team skills.

2.3. Linguistic landscape as an educational resource

One of the most recent trends in teaching of English to the speakers of other languages involves the expansion of its framework to embrace, for example, maturing competent language use (Sun, 2014). It also integrates such aspects, as specificity, taking prominence of the needs of the language learners and responding to their “immediate professional or academic demands” (Laborda & Litzler, 2015, p. 40). In addition, a few studies have specifically looked at the importance of learning a language and using it for ‘meaningful’ purposes (Krashen, 1981). So far, the evidence suggests that the most effective way is learning a language skill and using it in authentic situations (Savas, 2009; Krashen, 1981) while utilizing a variety of resources (Gorter et al., 2021). The concept of the linguistic landscape introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997) to describe the language of signs is one of these (Shohamy, & Gorter, 2009). To illustrate, in general, the linguistic landscape of

Oman features diversity that embraces the multicultural and multilingual character of the community. Here, to quote Halliday (1978), “language actively symbolizes the social system, representing metaphorically in its patterns of variation the variation that characterizes human cultures” (p.3). Arabic as an official language enjoys a status that is not equaled by other languages represented in written and oral communication in the country. It is predominant in the “linguistic landscape” (Bourhis & Landry, 1997, p.25) of the country’s big and small cities and villages, and is displayed on governmental buildings, shop windows, commercial signs, posters, billboards, advertising, official notices, traffic signs, and, therefore, is omnipresent in the country in its “textual form” (Gorter, 2006, p.1) in various instances of written communication. However, more multilingualism with English as the second most used language in the country’s developing national economy and tourism industry, is evident, and Oman’s academia is not an exception. Nevertheless, there have been no studies yet on how both Arabic and English are distributed and reflected in the linguistic landscape of Oman’s academia, as well as about the possible role that the textual signs as examples of authentic input (Gorter et al., 2021) could have as a pedagogical tool and resource for language learners. In Gorter’s view (2006), language signs can be taken as “literal panorama” (p.82). They also have a profound potential for language learning. To quote Gorter et al. (2021), “the linguistic landscape offers a chance to link the classroom with real language use in society. What is learned inside the classroom can be reinforced in the context of natural language use. At the same time the linguistic landscape provides numerous opportunities for language acquisition and learning about languages that can be taken into the classroom” (n.p.).

To exemplify, a study conducted by Tociamaza-Hatch (2016) involved having students translate signs at a zoo. Researchers tested them on 50 target vocabulary words without having shared the word list with the students. The results showed that most of them picked up the words through the project itself. Another way of engaging students in the linguistic landscape exploration is through linguistic treasure hunts, interactive games where participants follow a series of clues to compete for a prize (Heinisch, 2019). The method of the linguistic treasure hunt aims at collecting and analyzing language variations in written form in a public space. A group of people follows a series of clues through a public space with an additional task to take, upload and tag pictures of signs and lettering in a public area. The group who solves the puzzles, uploads the highest number of pictures and tags them according to certain criteria wins a prize. As explained by Heinisch (2019), linguistic treasure hunts can be set up in diverse ways depending on the expected outcome which could range from the ability to navigate through a public space to understanding the relative status of linguistic communities. As for the advantages of this method, they involve gathering large amounts of data in a short period of time; providing the participants with the opportunities to “make an initial analysis of the data they have gathered during the linguistic treasure hunts in the form of annotations with a tagging system”, and enriching the data base for linguistic landscape research with the “vast collection of pictures from written signs in the public sphere” (Heinisch, p.3).

3. STUDY

The linguistic treasure hunt discussed in this paper was labeled “The CPS Linguistic Landscape Scavenger Hunt”. This activity was implemented within a section of an exit-level foundation program course students during Fall semester in 2023. The linguistic

treasure hunt primarily aimed at inspiring students' exploration and interpretation of signs in public spaces, offering students a context for active English language learning outside the classroom, stimulating English language learning in naturally occurring context of Oman's academia and developing observational and analytical skills by identifying and categorizing signs in the linguistic landscape.

3.1. Participants

Twenty-six foundation program students participated in this case study. The participants of this study, like other Omani university students, were high school graduates who started their university studies by taking a mandatory foundation program course before proceeding to their respective University colleges. The foundation program that they joined aims at maximizing the potential of young Omanis and enabling them to fully benefit from higher education (Oman Academic Standards, 2010) to better apply them in the future. The foundation program is administered through the CPS which offers students the English language, mathematics, information technology, and general study skills courses. Foundation program students tend to experience multiple challenges adjusting to the higher education system that can affect their progress in English medium academic environment, social and emotional well-being, confidence, and self-esteem (Ginosyan & Tuzlukova, 2016). Wangery & Mutweli (2012) claim that depending on their home environment and setting, some students find the physical and social settings of the university new, overwhelming and intimidating. The challenges most students face range from adjusting to the new sociocultural and physical environment of learning, such as the change to coeducation and the need to develop and apply a range of skills to deal with their studies. In order to mitigate students' academic transfer and improve their English proficiency, it is crucial to consider the potential of a variety of approaches that support students and make their language development more meaningful. The approach suggested to the study participants involved exploration of the linguistic landscape of the CPS premises.

3.2. Procedures

This case study focused on the linguistic landscape within and around the CPS building, specifically examining the signs in public spaces where the offices of the English teaching staff are located. The primary aim was to inspire students to explore and interpret these signs, providing insights into how language is used and displayed in this academic environment.

The participants were actively engaged in exploring the linguistic landscape of the CPS building through the CPS Linguistic Landscape Scavenger Hunt which consisted of three stages. In small groups of 3-4 students each, students walked around the CPS building surrounding area, the ground floor and the first floor and take photos of signs, advertisements, and other forms of written or printed communication they saw. After 30 minutes, students returned to the Conference room where the activity was administered. The groups arranged the signs into the following categories: informational, directional, promotional, and decorative. The next step was to further identify the signs as monolingual vs. multilingual signs. After the categorization of the signs, the students presented their findings to class by supporting their findings with relevant photos. The activity was concluded by a class discussion on different categories and types of signs found by the groups. The

participants identified commonalities and differences in their findings across various groups by addressing the following questions:

- How do the findings of each group compare, and what commonalities or differences can be identified among them?
- Do students typically pay attention to the signage around them when they are in a public place?
- Are students open to changing their attitude about paying attention to signage in public places?
- Which signs would they follow to find their teacher's office?
- Which types of signs typically catch their attention when they look around?
- Can they improve their English by exploring the signage around them?

4. DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to inspire students' exploration and interpretation of signs in public spaces, specifically the linguistic landscape of the CPS building. Additionally, this paper suggested considering linguistic landscape as a potential content for designing and developing extra-curricular activities that can enhance foundation program students' active learning and their language skills and abilities. The analysis of the different categories and types of signs identified by the participants, along with some shared similarities and differences, yielded the following observations:

Language Usage: All groups observed that most of the signs were predominantly in English, which is expected in an English teaching environment. In other words, the signs reflected the academic and professional environment of the CPS. In addition, some groups noted the presence of bilingual signs, incorporating Arabic to accommodate non-English speaking staff, students, or visitors (see illustration 1).



Illustration 1 Linguistic landscape of outdoor academic spaces

This finding is in line with Shohamy & Gorter's (2008) claim that the linguistic landscape provides a scene where the public space is symbolically built, establishing connections between the uses, concepts, language varieties, and contestations of multiple forms of 'languages' as they are shown in public spaces.

Types of Signs: A significant number of signs were informational and directional, providing directions, office names, schedules, and other essential information for navigating the building. For example, in order to locate their teacher's office, students could follow directional signs, office directories, or nameplates on office doors, which typically include the teacher's name and office number. This finding agrees with Wangery & Mutwelli (2012) who assert that some new students find the physical and social settings of the university new, overwhelming, and intimidating, so they need different channels of support that range from physical environment to academic achievement. By exploring the linguistic landscape of the premises of the Centre for Preparatory Studies, students will be able to adjust to the new physical environment of learning and seek support from their teachers.

Official Tone: Most of the signs had a formal tone, suitable for an educational institution, and were designed to convey clear and concise information. This finding goes back to Shohamy & Gorter (2008) who claim that the linguistic landscape offers a scene where the public space is symbolically built, establishing connections between the uses and concepts.

Design and Visual Elements: There was a noticeable consistency in the design of the signs, including fonts, colors, and symbols, which helped maintain a uniform look throughout the building. This reflected a standardized approach. However, the use of visual elements such as icons, logos, and images varied significantly, with some groups reporting more visually rich signs than others. Some of the signs were identified as purely textual, while others included visual aids to enhance understanding. It was generally noted that bold, colorful, or visually striking signs were the ones that caught attention. Additionally, signs at eye level or with clear and large text are also more likely to be noticed. This finding reasserts Shohamy & Gorter's (2008) claim that the linguistic landscape describes a scene where the public space is symbolically built, establishing connections between the uses and concepts. The CPS offers students a wide range of opportunities to engage in language learning outside the classroom by participating in extracurricular activities which normally take place in the rooms located on the ground floor (see illustration 2).



Illustration 2 Linguistic landscape of indoor academic spaces

This area is filled with bold, colorful, or visually striking signs to catch students' attention and get them involved in the extracurricular activities which can lead to increased engagement in motivation, and in confidence in students who were more involved in ECA (Ginosyan et al., 2019). Moreover, extracurricular activities organized by the CPS ECA give students opportunities to develop students' communicative competence while addressing their needs and interests (Ginosyan, et al., 2019).

Purpose and Function: The observed signs varied in purpose, ranging from directional signs to motivational posters, safety instructions, and administrative notices. This finding corroborates with Landry and Borhis (1997) who argue that languages on public signs serve different functions, including being a marker of the relative status of linguistic communities. This diversity highlighted the multifunctional role of signage within the building. On the one hand, all groups identified the primary purpose of signs as providing information and directions. On the other hand, differences were observed in secondary functions, like motivational and safety messages, which were more prevalent in some areas than others. A vivid example of this is the ground floor area discussed above where most extracurricular activities take place (see illustration 3).



Illustration 3 Linguistic landscape of the ground floor of the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University

The bold, colorful, or visually striking signs aim at catching students' attention to engage themselves in the extracurricular activities they prefer.

This reaffirms the assertion made by Ginosyan, Tuzlukova and Hendrix (2019) that there is increased engagement in motivation, and in confidence in students who were more involved in the extracurricular activities

Materials and Durability: Both temporary and permanent signs were noted by all groups. However, the balance between temporary and permanent signs varied, with some groups encountering more temporary notices, indicating dynamic information needs. Differences were also observed in the materials used for the signs, from temporary paper notices to permanent metal, indicating varying degrees of permanence and importance.

Paying Attention to Signage: The participants unanimously agreed that they generally notice signage when they need specific information or directions. However, they tend to overlook the signs around them if the environment is familiar or if they are not in need of guidance. This finding is in line with Wangery & Mutwelli (2012) who believe that familiarization with new physical learning environment can mitigate transitional challenges faced by many new students.

Openness to Change: It was observed that, there is openness to changing attitudes about paying attention to signage, especially when its relevance and benefits are emphasized. Paying more attention can enhance navigational efficiency and awareness of surroundings.

Improving English through Signage: It was generally reported that exploration of the linguistic landscape can offer students a context for active English language learning outside the classroom. There was a shared belief that exploring signage can improve English skills. Reading and interpreting various signs help with vocabulary, context understanding, and functional language usage. It also exposes learners to practical and everyday English in different contexts. By analyzing and engaging with the signs in their environment, students can improve their English as well as develop a sharp sense of how language functions in public spaces, enhancing both linguistic and cultural literacy. This finding agrees with Gorter et al. (2021) that the linguistic landscape offers an opportunity to link the classroom with real language use in society. In other words, what is learned inside the classroom can be reinforced in the context of natural language use. Thus, by actively engaging themselves in exploring the linguistic landscape of the CPS building through the CPS Linguistic Landscape Scavenger Hunt, students can develop a keen sense of how language functions in public spaces, enhancing both linguistic and cultural literacy.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings revealed that by analyzing the various signs, students can gain a better understanding of the cultural and linguistic dynamics at play within the CPS. This approach produces dual results; it promotes students' awareness of linguistic diversity and encourages critical thinking and interpretive skills as they engage with their immediate surroundings. By identifying the commonalities and differences in the CPS linguistic landscape, the participants gained a deeper understanding of how signs serve different functions and audiences within the building. This analysis helped them appreciate the complexity of the linguistic landscape as well as encouraged them to think critically about the role of signage in shaping their environment. Additionally, reading and interpreting various signs boosts their vocabulary and functional language usage. Thus, linguistic landscape can serve as a potential content for designing and developing extra-curricular activities that can enhance foundation program students' active learning and their language skills and abilities. In a nutshell, by analyzing and engaging with the signs in their environment, students improve their English skills and gain insights into language functions in public spaces which can be sustained through extra-curricular activities which supplement the English language courses of the foundation program.

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