

Teaching English with Linguistic Landscapes to Saudi Students Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT

Aims: Since many Saudi ESL students studying abroad have limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge and poor reading comprehension skills, this article proposes the integration of linguistic landscapes (LLs) in teaching English to Saudi students studying abroad to supplement the English language courses and textbooks they study.

Definition of LLs: LLs refer to the use of language in the environment, i.e., the words and images displayed in public spaces such as streets, airports, schools, government buildings, shopping centers, tourist attractions, and others. They contain announcements, directions, warnings, services, and commercial ads. They are characterized by brevity, use of authentic language, and specific structures such as commands and ellipted phrases.

Materials, Tasks and Teaching Strategy: Since LLs differ in length and difficulty level, the English LLs selected for instruction should match the students' proficiency level. Instruction with LLs begins with selecting a Facebook page for posting LLs and discussions about them. The instructor introduces the LLs, gives pre-questions, and sets goals for working on them. The students practice LL text analysis. They predict the topic, pay attention to specific vocabulary and grammatical structures, and use contextual clues and their background knowledge to infer the overall meaning of an LL and the meanings of difficult words. At an advanced stage, students may identify the pragmatic, stylistic and sociocultural features of LLs. The students discuss their answers with the instructor, summarize, retell, or paraphrase an LL, discuss difficulties in vocabulary and grammatical

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structures. They can identify the number of directions given in a single sign, infer the intention and purpose of the sign, give the pragmatic reasons for the way the sign is worded and connect them with its design, pictures, colors and fonts used.

Reflections and Recommendation: LL pedagogy was beneficial and fun. Use of a Facebook LL repository with explanations is recommended.

Keywords: Linguistic landscapes; street signs; advertisements; linguistic features; pragmatic function; cultural features; language pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

A linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the use of language in the environment, i.e., the words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces. [1] added that linguistic landscapes (LLs) are the language of public road signs, place names, street names, commercial shop signs, advertising billboards, and public signs on government buildings. They also cover directions, warnings, announcements, services provided, and tourist attractions. LLs are characterized by brevity and conciseness, use of authentic language, passive voice, imperatives, negative structures, abbreviations, symbols and pictures, specific design and layout, including graphics, different font types, color, and sizes. The same LL may occur frequently in the environment. Students see the same linguistic landscape or different LLs giving the same instructions very often as in the “*priority seating*” sign which they may see on all busses, at airports, train stations and others. They see them everywhere and read them over and over again. They learn about regional variations in the language of the LL. They learn names of places, current events, and information about historical places and characters.

The author conducted an extensive literature review and found that most studies on LLs are socio-economic in nature, i.e., they seek to find relationships between the use of certain languages (such as English) in parts of a city and compare them to the general standard of living in those areas (Ila Coimbra). Some other studies focused on the linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural features of LLs in some countries or parts of a country as in [2-14,1] and others.

On the other hand, fewer studies in the literature focused on the use of LLs as a pedagogical resource in L2 learning by students of different age groups and academic levels. In this respect, [15] indicated that LLs provide linguistic and cultural exponents of different foreign languages

in authentic contexts. Using LLs as a learning space may facilitate language learning by college students. [16] added that LLs provide opportunities for students to engage in contextualized authentic language discussions. Students become critical thinkers about language use throughout their community.

Other studies showed that LL play a significant role in second language acquisition. [17] found that LLs have symbolic and informative functions, and they are multimodal, because they combine visual and printed texts, as a source of input in second language learning, in the acquisition of pragmatic competence, multimodal literacy skills and multicompetence. LLs provide a learning context and can be used for raising awareness in second language learning. [18] added that LLs are an innovative way of developing students’ intercultural competence and engaging them in activities that develop their critical intercultural awareness and prepare them for communication in superdiverse contexts.

Furthermore, numerous studies examined the effects of some activities and projects that involve LLs on students’ linguistic and intercultural awareness. In Germany, [19] explored how elementary school learners of English engage with some English LLs that they located in their local environment. The students completed a standardized worksheet in German that asked them to write brief comments on the LLs location, why they had selected the images and why they thought that English had been used. The students’ written comments showed that they were remarkably sophisticated in their analyses of linguistic, social, and cultural aspects of the LLs they found. The researcher concluded that elementary school students can benefit greatly from finding language examples in the environment outside the classroom.

In the UAE, [20] analyzed the LL in 8 culturally responsive, bilingual picture storybooks written

by Arabic-English bilingual teacher candidates for emergent bilingual children. They also examined what the storybooks explicitly or implicitly convey about language and culture in the UAE. Results indicated that directionality, linguistic balance, page layout, name selections, environmental print and cultural content are influenced by this process of meshing English and Arabic.

In Australia, undergraduate linguistics students conducted an LL project to explore linguistic diversity in a Sydney suburb of their choice and they were required to reflect on their own intercultural learning experience [17]. The project had a strong impact on the students' perceptions of diversity and on their attitudes towards other languages and cultures. There was an increase in students' critical awareness of how identity, ideology and attitudes influence language choices and intercultural interactions. The project made them reflect on their own identity as intercultural citizens. The project was also useful in developing intercultural competence.

In Spain, [15] used LLs on mobile devices and social media as a learning space to facilitate contextual informal foreign language learning (Spanish) by college students. The findings suggested that use of LLs on mobile devices and social media increased students' awareness of language learning opportunities. This activity supplemented formal learning in the classroom and encouraged continuous learning in the students.

Another study by [21] analyzed three Korean undergraduate students' experiences conducting an LL research project in which they studied publicly displayed languages in billboards and other signs. Participation in this project resulted in a greater awareness of the complex and contradictory relationships between languages and aided their development as language learners. In addition, having different perspectives shaped the students' views of these multilingual signs, creating both tension and opportunities for learning.

In Canada, [21] used LLs as a pedagogical resource for teaching and learning about multilingualism in a graduate course on ethnographic research methods. The students carried out an LL project to document, analyze, and engage with multilingualism in Vancouver's Chinatown. The findings suggested that using the LLs as a pedagogical tool allowed for a multimodal/sensory learning experience and text-

to-world connections to be made, enabling greater awareness and creative analysis around social language use.

It is clear that prior studies have not investigated the use of LLs as a supplement to formal in-class instruction to enhance college students' learning of English by training them to conduct a linguistic, stylistic and pragmatic analysis of the LL text to understand the overall topic of an LL, the purpose of the LL, and the meaning of difficult vocabulary and grammatical structures.

1.1. Need for Study

Many Saudi students are studying abroad, especially in English-speaking countries such as the USA, UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Before they start their B.A., M.A., or Ph.D. courses in their major area of study, they have to take an intensive English course at a language institute where they study 20 hours per week. Interviews with a sample of Saudi students studying in the UK showed that the English language courses that the students take mainly focus on grammar and written exercises. Traditional methods that depend on the textbook only are used by the instructors. Even after three months of studying at the language institute, many students' English remains poor: They have limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge and poor reading comprehension skills. Although the students are living in an English-speaking society, they hang out with each other and/or with other Arab students where they converse and communicate in Arabic [22]. The students do not seem to make use of or benefit from the English LLs that they see everywhere, and they exert little effort to learn English from LLs outside the classroom. The author noticed that while students are on the bus or walking in the streets, they rarely look at the street signs, read them or jot down new words that they see on signs. They rarely ask about the meanings of LLs.

Learning English in class from a textbook is not enough to develop students' proficiency level. It has to be supplemented by extension activities and has to be practised outside the classroom, where students can learn real-life English in authentic contexts, rather than simplified and limited book English. LLs provide a good opportunity for students to learn authentic English and develop their reading skills, vocabulary, grammatical structures, inferencing skills and increase their intercultural awareness informally.

In addition, prior studies, described in the previous section, show that use of LLs as a pedagogical resource in language learning is a relatively new area of scholarly interest, in addition to lack of studies that train students to conduct a linguistic, stylistic, pragmatic analysis of LLs.

1.2 Aims of Study

To fill in the gap in LL research that focuses on using LL as a pedagogical resource, the current study proposes a model for integrating LLs in the teaching of English to Saudi graduate and undergraduate students studying abroad in English-speaking countries as an extension activity. The pedagogical model aims to show the following: (i) where LLs can be collected and criteria for selecting LLs for pedagogical purposes; (ii) reading, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatic, stylistic and intercultural skills that can be practised with LLs; and (iv) strategies for teaching LLs inside and outside the classroom.

The integration of LLs in English instruction will provide Saudi students studying abroad with additional opportunities for practicing and improving their English. They contribute to their English language acquisition and intercultural competence. Helping Saudi students studying abroad develop their reading, vocabulary and grammar skills is important for their success in the English language courses that they take at the language institutes and in the subsequent specialized content courses that they will take in their area of specialization. LLs are also important for comprehending written texts in the environment they live in, getting informed of the cultural events that are taking place in their community and points of interest around them.

2. MATERIALS, TASKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

2.1 Locating and Selecting LLs

A corpus of English (monolingual) LLs can be collected from street signs, gardens, airports, schools and universities, government building, hospitals, shops shopping centers, worshipping places, tourist attractions and others. The students can take pictures of monolingual English LLs of interest to them from their environment.

In selecting LL's for English language instruction to college students, the instructor should take

into consideration the following criteria: LL length, difficulty level, grammatical structures used (commands, ellipsis, emphatic structures, polite requests, statements etc.), style, purpose of the LLs. LLs selected should match the students' proficiency level. Beginners may use short, easy, familiar LLs, whereas advanced students may use longer, more difficult, and less familiar LLs.

2.2 Skills Practised with LL's

- 1) Vocabulary skills such as pronunciation of unfamiliar words and names of streets, towns, shops (Whight, Interborough, Donegal), part of speech, homonyms, homophones, homographs (park), place, company, store, and brand names (WhightLink, Waterstone, Recresco), abbreviations and acronyms (CO, PK), and British and American varieties of English.
- 2) Grammatical structures such as negative structures, commands (imperative), present tense, passive, ellipsis (deleted verb to be, articles, pronouns, reduced clauses, etc), and emphatic structures.
- 3) Reading skills that can be practised: following directions; inferring meaning of difficult words from context and associated photos; inferring the purpose of the sign; understanding abbreviations; paying attention to differences in font type and size in the sign; speed reading from a bus or car; using background knowledge (knowledge of the world) or familiarity with the facts, information, and ideas contained in an LL; making inferences; and resolving anaphora, i.e., recognizing words and phrases that refer back to other words and phrases. The students practice using contextual clues such as:
 - phonic clues to determine the pronunciation of unknown words by identifying silent and double letters, hidden sounds, and making spelling-pronunciations associations.
 - word structure clues to determine the pronunciation and meaning of unknown words by breaking them into their component part (prefix, root, suffix, inflectional endings); recognizing derivatives; identifying compounds, contractions, and possessives.
 - syntactic clues such as identifying the part of speech, number and voice of verbs; the position of a word in a


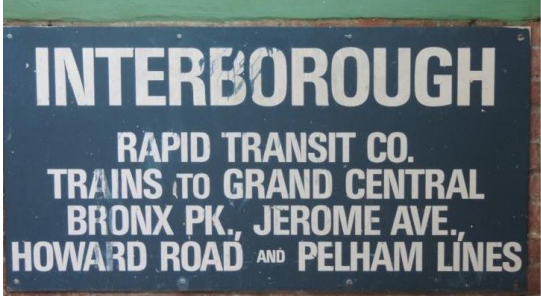

- sentence; function of punctuation and typographic devices such as capitalization, italicization and bold face; and identifying and understanding emphatic structure and deleted words.
- o semantic clues to infer the meaning of unknown words from context.
- 4) Identification of pragmatic purposes: informing, demanding, requesting, giving background information, giving directions and instructions, making an announcement, using verbal and nonverbal signals, warning, drawing attention to something, relating information, guiding and directing, stating rules, labelling objects, people, places, shops, stating a problem and others.
 - 5) Stylistic analysis such as using a command or imperative mode, use of statements that lack a subject and a verb, use of unpunctuated statements, capitalizing all words in LL for emphasis,

using simple vocabulary to suit the public, extreme compression for rapid comprehension, using a form that is entirely suitable for the public and the function of the LL.

2.3 Strategy for Teaching LLs

The instructor can use a Facebook page for posting pictures of LLs, tasks to be performed, students' responses to the tasks and teacher's feedback. Live discussions can be held via the Facebook Watch Party or the Live tool. The Zoom platform can be also used for discussions. For illustration, examples of LLs collected by the author from the UK with reading, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatic and stylistic tasks that require the students to analyze the LL texts are shown in Table 1 above. Additional LLs collected from the UK are presented in the Appendix.

Table 1. Examples of linguistic landscapes, skills and tasks

| | |
|---|---|
|  <p>PRIORITY SEATING Passengers must give up these seats to guests using wheelchairs / scooters</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idioms: give up • What does the / mean? • Parts of speech: Priority, seating. • Words with a silent letter: guests. |
|  <p>INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT CO. TRAINS TO GRAND CENTRAL BRONX PK., JEROME AVE., HOWARD ROAD AND PELHAM LINES</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pronunciation: Borough, Pelham. • Abbreviations: CO., PK, AVE. • How many bus lines are there? • How many Borough are mentioned in the sign? • What is a transit CO and what does it run? • What it Grand Central? • Why are all the words capitalized? • What does the sign announce? |
|  <p>WIGHTLINK Customer Cycle Park Bicycles parked at owners' risk. Wightlink accept no responsibility for any loss or damage.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homophones: Wight / white • Pronunciation: Whight • Cycle, Park • Parked at own risk • Whight Link accept NOT accepts • For any loss or damage (of what) • What can/cannot customers do? • What pictures mean. • Whight & white. |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is targeted by the sign? • What does the sign tell people? • Meaning of idioms/phrasal verbs: turn off, nod off? • What do the sheep symbolize? • What is the purpose of the sign? • What are the stylistic features of the sign? |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of the sign? • What is Waterstone? • Why is the 's' used? • What do 'these' and 'here' refer to? • What is this LL advertising? • What do these words refer to: these, favourites, here, every word? • What is the purpose of the pictures used? • What are the stylistic features of the sign? |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of sign • What is the topic of the sign? • Where do you see such a sign? • What is the purpose of the sign? • Damage or loss of what? • Management of what? • That does 'so' refer to? • What does 'at their own risk' mean? Which word in sign has the same meaning? |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning of Millennium Walk Way. • Meaning of: Keep dogs on a lead? • Do you know an equivalent American idiom with the same meaning? • Who is targeted by the sign? • What are the residents allowed/not allowed to do? • What are members of the public allowed/not allowed to do? • What is the purpose of the sign? |



- Purpose of the sign.
- Who died, why, where, how, how many?
- Meaning of: S.S. Arandora Star; Donegal; Torpedo; Non-combatants.
- What is '2 July 2008'?
- Place names: Liverpool, Donegal.



- Break 'partnership' into its component parts.
- Give examples of anti-social behavior.
- Give examples of the agencies mentioned in the sign.
- Meaning of: 'Tackle crime'
- What are West Midlands?
- How is the sign organized?
- Which are the 8 largest cities?
- Partnership among who?
- What is the purpose of this partnership?
- What is anti-social behavior? Give examples.
- Which ideas are emphasized and how?
- What is the purpose of the words in blue?
- Who posted the sign?



- Purpose of the sign.
- What is the topic of the sign?
- Who is targeted by the sign?
- What does 'bank' refer to in the sign?
- What kind of bottles are mentioned in the sign?
- What is Recresco?
- Reference: 'This service is provided by': which service, who provides it?
- How is the picture of the vehicle related to the topic of the of the sign?



- What is the purpose of the sign?
- Who is targeted by the sign?
- Who posted the sign?
- Idiom: make the switch; take you T.V. off standby
- Infer the topic from the picture.
- How does the picture relate to the content?
- What directions are given to save energy?

Before reading an LL, the instructor introduced the LLs under study, sets goals for reading the LLs, gives pre-questions that require the students to give the meaning of difficult words, pay attention to the grammatical structures used, purpose of the LL, pragmatic use, stylistic features, and cultural point.

In the task phase, the students read the sign out loud. They give the overall meaning. They infer the topic of the LL. They perform a text analysis of the assigned LLs, i.e., they analyze each LL in terms of the intention and purpose of the LL; number of directions given in a single LL; type of instructions or directions given; direct vs indirect language used; sentence structure used (commands, polite requests, statements, ellipsis, etc.); pragmatic reasons for the way the LL is worded; color-coding, illustrative pictures, font type and style, punctuation used in the LL, and LL size, height and/or location. They pay attention to ~~the~~ specific vocabulary and grammatical structures used. They use contextual clues and their background knowledge to infer the meaning of difficult words and meaning of the whole LL. At an advanced stage, they can identify the stylistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic features of English LL (See examples of LLs and tasks in Table 1).

After reading an LL, the students discuss their answers with each other and with their instructor. They summarize, retell, or paraphrase the LL under study orally, discuss difficulties in vocabulary, grammatical structures such as ellipsis. The instructor gives feedback. She assigns more LLs that provide practice with the aspects that are difficult for the students. She encourages the students to interact, engage in and have an active role in the discussion. The students comment on each other's performance. More LLs collected by the author during her visits

to the UK are shown in the Appendix which can be used for further practice with the students.

3. REFLECTIONS

The author tried out the instructional strategies outlined in this article with 6 EFL college students studying in the UK when she was visiting Coventry and Leamington in the UK for a month (before the pandemic). The students were 4 females and 2 males, aged 23-26, enrolled in an intensive English language course, before starting their M.A. While walking in the street or riding the bus with them, she would point to an LL, ask them individually to read it, and ask about the meaning of some vocabulary items, a grammatical structure, and the overall meaning of the LL. Every time they saw a sign they had read and analyzed before, she would quiz them to see if they still remember what they had learnt the day before. She would go over the sign, re-analyze and re-explain what they had forgotten. At the end of the month, the students were asked about the LL pedagogy, whether they found it useful in English language learning and what aspects of English language learning have improved as a result of it. Their responses showed positive attitudes towards practicing English with LLs. They found the LLs interesting, and they enjoyed analyzing them lexically, grammatically, and pragmatically. The students reported that analyzing the LLs that they frequently see in the English-speaking environment has several benefits: The LLs met students' needs and catered for the differences in English proficiency level among them, targeting their linguistic weaknesses such as inferring meanings of difficult words from context, understanding some grammatical structures (idioms, ellipted phrase, English language variety) and inferring the topic and purpose of an LL. Those who struggled with English vocabulary,

grammar and reading indicated that LLs provided them with additional opportunities for practicing vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic tasks that they could manage. They reported that reading practice with LLs helped them acquire cognitive and metacognitive language skills as the task depended on LL text analysis, making lots of inferences and learning about the different aspects of the English language. The students wrote:

Ahad: *Your questions about the details in the LLs I see in the environment were enriching. I never paid attention to ads and signs in the street and never imagined I would learn a lot of English from them. You gave me a chance to learn real-life English.*

Saad: *With signs, I had a chance to do extra practice that helped me overcome my difficulty in inferring meanings of difficult words from context and inferring the general topic of an LL. Before, I was apprehensive of even reading long signs whenever I saw them.*

Maha: *Reading signs in the street, shops and restaurants, helped me acquire a variety of words and grammatical structures that I was not learning in class and from the textbook. This is a new way of practicing English informally in the street which I find interesting and fun.*

Lana: *I acquired the ability to analyze the signs that I see very often around me. Seeing the same sign over and over again helped me remember the new words and grammatical structures in them.*

Naser: *Focusing on signs in the street helped me focus on specific aspects of the language because the signs are short and concise.*

Alaa: *I started to take pictures of signs I see with my mobile, read them and keep a note of the new words and structures I encounter in them in my notepad.*

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The current study proposed the integration of LL in teaching English to Saudi students studying in

English-speaking countries to develop their linguistic, pragmatic, stylistic and cultural knowledge. Use of prior knowledge and context plays a significant role in understanding the content of LLs. The students should read an LL in units. Since words have several meanings as in 'park', a meaning in a sign may not be the same as the one that the students know. The instructor can encourage the students to bring pictures of LLs in the environment around them. They can keep them in a portfolio or a folder on their mobile. A special Facebook page that would serve as an LL repository can be created by the students and supervised by the instructor, with comments on their lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and stylistic aspects added by the students. This Facebook LL repository would serve as a pedagogical resource for other students who wish to improve their English with authentic short texts as an in-class or out of class supplementary activity.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

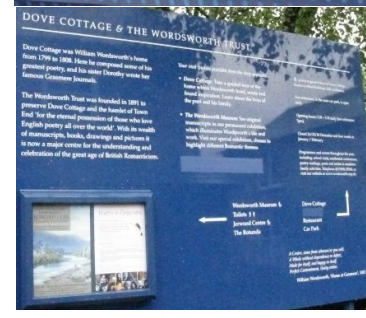
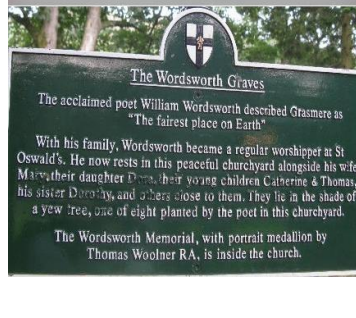
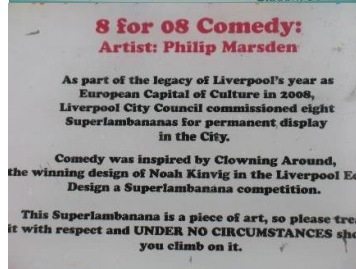
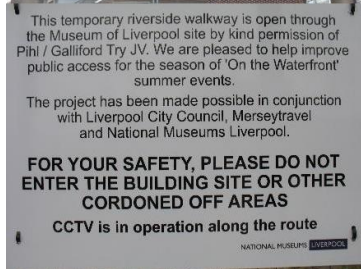
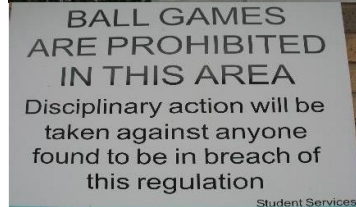
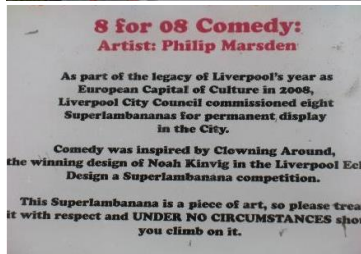
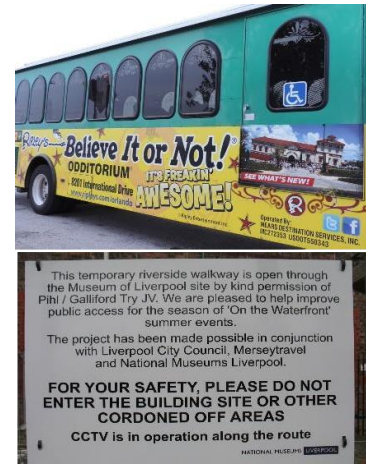
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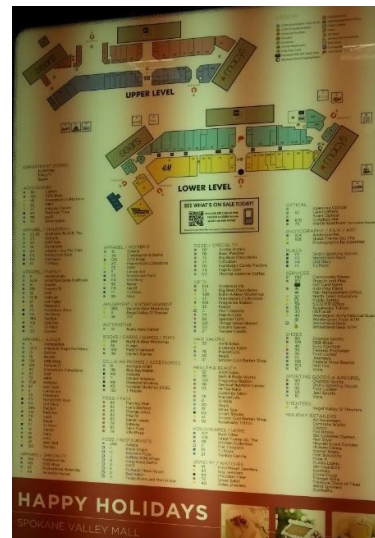
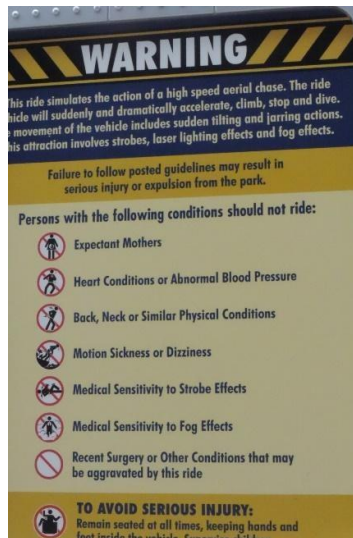
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APPENDIX

Examples of Linguistic Landscapes from the UK





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