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RESEARCH ARTICLE

English and Vietnamese in the Linguistic Landscape: Globalization and Language Policy in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT – This research is set out to explore language practice on commercial signs in Ho Chi Minh City with two-fold aim to examine the dynamics between "top-down" Language Policies and "bottom-up" language practice in Linguistic Landscape and to determine the extent of English language presence and its functions in such dynamics. The research studied 1286 privately owned signs across four neighbourhoods, through quantitative coding and interpretive sign reading methods. It was found that although national Language Policy is set in place to ensure the vitality of Vietnamese language, actual language practice on commercial signs shows some levels of discrepancy. The quantitative data shows that 62.2 percent of signs comply with regulations in Language Policy, but 37.8 percent of signs do not. The defiance exits in forms of using only English, leaving out Vietnamese translation, or making foreign language phrases more visible. The analysis also shows that commercial signs in tourism, banking and beauty businesses has the high percentage of English use. Interpretive analysis shows that English is used not only just to inform customers about shop business, but also to signify modernity, professionalism, luxury and global youth culture. The findings indicate that local businesses may sidestep national Language Policy by leaning in English's power to blend language use with economic benefits and status cues. The study highlights that English is gaining ground in Vietnam, and that its presence in Linguistic Landscape of the major economic hub of the country reflects the complex interplay of Language Policy and economic pragmatism and globalization.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, under the governance of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the confluence of multiple language policies and the ongoing discourse surrounding the national language persistently reinforces the significance of Vietnamese. Additionally, these policies strongly advocate for the preservation of Vietnamese language purity, systematically affirming its status as the sole national language (L. H. Phan et al., 2024). As Vietnam navigates economic integration and globalization, a key question arises: Are the strategies and efforts implemented by the Vietnamese government sufficient to maintain the supremacy of Vietnamese language in the country?

One possible way to have an answer to such a question is the study of Linguistic Landscape (LL). Language display in public spaces is not purely informative as the way languages are used or not used in public, and how they are presented, directly and indirectly shows which languages are considered important and which are less so in a society (Shohamy & Or, 2025), and thus the practice of language use on public signs can provide direct feedback to the language policy (LP) (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023) or expose tensions "between "top-down" language ideology (language patterns on government-regulated signs) and "bottom-up" language choice and preferences (language patterns on private-made signs)" (Yao et al., 2024, p. 1). From there, it can be deduced that the use of language in public spaces serves as an important medium for analyzing stakeholders' perspectives on the de facto language, as well as the language policies and planning strategies of a given country or region (Saad, 2023).

A noticeable line of research has been carried out in urban communities to discern how "top-down" language policies are translated into the actual practices of LL. The findings of this line of studies highlight a salient pattern of multilingualism phenomenon in LL (Blackwood et al., 2024). This phenomenon reflects the diversity of languages used in different contexts. This phenomenon is not only influenced by language policy, but is also morphed by different determining factors, be it ideological contestation (Maseko & Siziba, 2024), economic advantage (Karpava, 2024), or globalization (Santos Rovira, 2025). Apart from that, one significant finding corroborated by different studies indicates global presence of English in countries beyond the traditional inner-circle English-speaking countries, highlighting the domination of English challenging the assumption of linguistic homogeneity in various domains in the global arena (Coluzzi, 2020; Hasanova, 2022; Purnamasari et al., 2024).

In Vietnam, an emerging body of research in linguistic landscape has been documented. Phan (2020), by establishing time as a central construct for weaving semiotic resources together through human meaning-making, analyzed how semiotic resources interact, forming aggregates in Hanoi's Old Quarter to illuminate space-based and place-based meaning-making. Phan and Starks (2020) explored the LL of Hanoi and reported that although Vietnam officially mandates the visual prominence of Vietnamese on signage, the substantial presence of monolingual English signs in Hanoi contradicts these specific regulations while paradoxically aligning with

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broader state educational and political discourses promoting internationalization. Following that, Tran (2022) revealed that the misalignment between “top-down” and “bottom-up” language ideologies is played out in linguistic choices in public signs in Hanoi (the capital city of Vietnam with its 1000 years of history) with English coexisting with Vietnamese for the reconciliation of modernization and national identity. Pham (2025) expanded LL study in Vietnam through the lens of contrastive linguistics with her research analyzing government signs, street signs and commercial signs to compare and contrast the cultural conceptualization in Vietnamese and English used in LL in two major cities in Vietnam. Although the LL research in Vietnam has been sketched out, there are still some oversights that have not been fully addressed. Firstly, while most of the studies have provided valuable insights into the misalignment of language ideologies through the dynamics of LP and LL of Hanoi, their findings reflect the capital city's unique position as the political and cultural heart of Vietnam, where adherence to national identity is strictly monitored. The problem is that these findings may not apply to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the country's economic powerhouse. Secondly, research data has been collected solely from tourist areas or cultural-historical landmarks, providing a limited perspective. Thirdly, most of the data was collected before the Covid-19 pandemic, a period that significantly redefined the public sphere through changing people's behaviors (Jiang et al., 2024); relying on such data may overlook the fact that "most signs change over time and, in some cases, from one day to the next ... or from one second to the next" (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, p. 116).

Building on these discussions, this study was conducted with the hope that it may contribute to LL research by expanding existing knowledge, addressing the lack of studies on Ho Chi Minh City post-pandemic period from the lens of language policy and inadequate research regarding the functions of English language use in LL in respective location in Vietnam. To that end, this study is set out to examine Ho Chi Minh City's linguistic landscape with the aims to (1) explore how language policies shape "bottom-up" linguistic practices, and (2) assess the presence and role of English. Focusing on privately owned signage in four Ho Chi Minh City’s districts, data were collected via smartphone photography, quantitatively coded and analyzed using qualitative semiotic approach.

Specifically, the study was set to answer the two main research questions:

1. How does language policy influence language practices in the linguistic landscape of Ho Chi Minh City?
2. What is the presence and function of English in linguistic landscape of Ho Chi Minh City?

1.1 Linguistic Landscape

Linguistic Landscape (LL) has become a constantly evolving discipline which attracts immense interest from scholars in the domains of Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Economics and Education. Since its inception, Linguistic Landscape has been positioned as a novel empirical lens to explore the social practice of multilingualism (Gorter, 2006). In early stages of its development as a field of linguistic research, LL was conceptualized by Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23) as languages appearing on public commercial signs displayed in specific geographic areas. To elaborate on the concept, they further added that LL of a specific region is the collective presence of language on "public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25).

Based on this foundation, different scholars have proposed different definitions to describe LL. While Shohamy (2006) refers to it as language display in public spaces, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2014) define LL as the representation of language practices in open public spaces, encompassing everything from commercial signage to public art. Following this, the definition of LL is further expanded to include all semiotic resources as written text, images, sounds (Reershemius, 2020), or even smells, odors and other semiotic items (Pennycook, 2024). Collectively, these perspectives suggest that “the boundaries of linguistic landscape research continue to be debated” (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, p. 7).

So, to avoid espousing the notion that “everything could be a linguistic landscape” (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, p. 7), this study adopts a more bounded definition. Here, LL is understood as the visual representation of language on public and commercial signs that serves as a site of negotiation between de jure language policies and de facto language practices to ensure its explanatory power. Informed by this conception, the study focuses on written language with its positionings and cultural imagery on signage in public spaces to uncover how language use represents ideological tensions, social negotiations, and symbolic meaning.

1.2 Language Policy and Linguistic Landscape

Language policy (LP), according to Spolsky (2004), is defined as the set of rules which governing authorities create to manage language usage. Spolsky (2004) further extends this definition by identifying three fundamental elements of LP. They are social perception of language value, state language planning, and actual community language practice patterns. Considering the complex interplay of the three elements, especially the gap between the official planning and actual language practices, it is important to come up with an approach that can provide empirical insights, and there comes linguistic landscape as a viable framework for this purpose. The linguistic landscape (LL) functions as a visual display which shows how power systems operate through their effects on domination and marginalization and contestation and negotiation (Shohamy, 2015, p. 168). Language users, within the LL framework, employ LL as a platform to either support, challenge, or negotiate with the implementation of official policies (Han & Wu, 2020). In this sense, the LL acts as “arenas of contestations or sites of dissent or struggle between social groups, often based on clashes of identity and contrasting language ideologies.” (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, p. 227). Consequently, research studies have studied LP and LL to understand how public policies affect language visibility and vitality in public spheres (Rafael et al., 2024).

Research findings from different studies show that LL mirrors official LP content but also reveals the concealed tensions between them. Cenoz and Gorter (2006), analyzing minority language status through their research on Frisian and Basque languages, showed that LPs are put in place to protect their vitality but these languages stay hidden from public view by official language dominance. Likewise, Baranova (2024) agrees that LL functions as an ideological arena where opposing beliefs fight for dominance. In her

investigation of language practices in LL in Russia during the Russia-Ukraine War, she observed that while the use of minority languages mirrors policies supporting their public vitality, it also reveals a deeper ideological struggle. The increased presence of minority languages in Russia's LL indicates a dialogic opposition between anti-war and pro-war ideologies conveyed in the respective use of minority languages and Russian-the dominant language.

Additionally, research shows that LL operates independently from LP because language practices in LL are driven by economic logic of businesses, cultural elements and symbolic meanings instead of official rules. Torkington (2009) studied signage in Algarve, Portugal, to demonstrate how English dominates the region because of its economic significance in tourism even though this violates official language regulations. Lamarre (2014) analyzed Quebec's LL system to show that public area language restrictions have led to the development of new multilingual communication systems which the researcher terms "linguistic playground." The phenomenon has received documentation in Western nations as well as throughout Asian nations. Tang (2020) discovered that English dominates the LL in Singapore even though the government supports multilingualism, and that this is indicative of a discrepancy between official language policies and real-world language usage. In China, the Chinese government's regulations in LPs face opposition from local communities because they resist the state-imposed monolingual system which supports Putonghua (Han & Wu, 2020). Meanwhile, in Malaysia (Mansoor et al., 2023), and in Indonesia (Sakhiyya & Martin-Anatias, 2023), private enterprises frequently adopt English for modernity and prestige even though this practice is at odd with national language policies which demand national language implementation. Saveski (2021) also found a similar pattern in which language practices in LL sidesteps "Thaification" (Savski, 2021, p. 18). Similarly, the tourism-based economies of Cambodia (Lin, 2024) and Laos (Wang & Gao, 2025), have also witnessed the use English and Chinese as their main private signage languages to attract foreign visitors, challenging the status of official languages.

Within the context of Vietnam, Phan and Starks (2020) set the first milestone in LL research through the lens of LP. Their study investigated the LL of Hanoi to discern how LP is interpreted in language practices in LL. The research found that advertising laws support monolingualism but the widespread use of English-only signs in public spaces shows contradiction. Tran's research on LL of Old Quarter area in Hanoi confirmed a similar pattern. The study, without construing such a language practice as "circumvention or resistance to rigid language policies" (Tran, p. 10), posited that "the language use on signage in public spaces and the daily practice of the people indicate an effort to reinforce national and municipal authenticities and (re)negotiate modern Vietnamese identity" (Tran, 2022, p. 25). Those research studies offer valuable insights into LP-LL relationship in Vietnam, but they are geographically limited to Hanoi, leaving the Linguistic Landscape of Ho Chi Minh City seemingly unexplored under such a framework. This gap is significant given the city's status as Vietnam's economic hub, characterized by unique historical and cultural features (Gibert-Flutre & Musil, 2020), fast-paced urban development (Downes et al., 2024), an expanding middle class population (T. T. T. Nguyen, 2024), and better English proficiency among the youth (Vietnam Manpower Supply, 2025).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a theoretical framework drawing from language policy (LP), ethnolinguistic vitality and semiotics. Firstly, the current study approaches LL from the perspective of Language Policy Theory. As the theory views LL as spaces where "top-down" policies meet "bottom-up" practices (Shohamy, 2006), it enables the analysis of compliance, negotiation, or resistance of language practices in LL in Ho Chi Minh City. Complementing this, the synergy of Visibility and Salience Model (Landry & Bourhi, 1997) and Multilingual Inequality Model (Gorter & Cenoz, 2020) acts as the analytical frame of this study. Because the two models are both structured on the position that discrepances between LPs and language practices in LL stem from socio-economic factors which influence language policy implementation (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023), the synergy of them can highlight how signage reflects the sociopolitical status of Vietnamese language and other languages. Additionally, the indexicality principle of Geosemiotic approach (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) is also adopted for interpreting symbolic meanings of language usage on commercial signage. Since the principle considers signs as texts encoding cultural and ideological meanings (Pütz & Mundt, 2019), it is deemed as useful for examining the symbolic roles of English, such as its association with globalization, modernity, and professionalism. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework that enables the study to explore the LL of Ho Chi Minh City.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design and Study Areas

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate the LL of Ho Chi Minh City, exploring the interplay between LP and language practices in LL. To ensure a representative cross-section of the city's linguistic ecology, four districts were selected using purposive sampling. As noted by Gorter and Cenoz (2023), the neighborhood is often the most appropriate level of analysis because the configuration of signs within a specific area provides a distinct identity and reflects local demographic and social realities.

Therefore, the following districts were chosen to reflect the city's socioeconomic and demographic stratification. District One was chosen as the central business and tourist hub, representing high interaction with globalization and international visitors. District Seven was selected for its large expatriate community (specifically Korean and Western residents), representing a high-prestige, affluent residential area. District Ten was included to represent a densely populated, traditional commercial area dominated by local businesses. And last, Binh Chanh District was selected to represent a peri-urban area undergoing urbanization, to offer a contrast to the central districts.

2.2 Research Context: Language Policy in Vietnam

As Vietnam has not enacted specific laws outlining the principles governing the use of the national language and other languages, this study examines the intersection of legal documents concerning language use in the country to tease out the relevant language policy

governing language use in the LL in Vietnam. The focus is placed on legal provisions that address language use. That is this study focuses on the Vietnamese Constitution, legislation on language use in legal documents, advertising laws, national education policies, foreign language education policies, and regulations concerning Vietnamese expatriates.

Vietnam's Constitution, first promulgated in 1946, has undergone revisions in 1959, 1980, 1992, and 2013. The original version established the foundational status of Vietnamese as the national language, with Articles 15 and 18 emphasizing that while ethnic minority students could receive education in their native languages, individuals seeking national election candidacy must demonstrate proficiency in reading and writing Vietnamese (Vietnam National Assembly, 1996). Subsequent constitutional revisions omitted specific references to the Vietnamese language until the 2013 version, where Article 5 explicitly reaffirmed Vietnamese as the national language while recognizing the rights of ethnic minorities to preserve their languages (Vietnam National Assembly, 2014). Further reinforcing this status, the 2015's law on language use in legislative documents mandates that Vietnamese be the primary language for legal texts, with translations into other languages permitted only as supplementary references under government directives (Vietnam National Assembly, 2015).

To understand how language functions in society, it is essential to examine policies related to national education and governmental decisions on foreign language instruction. The 2005 National Education Law declared Vietnamese as the official teaching language for all educational institutions throughout Vietnam (Vietnam National Assembly, 2005). The revision of the law in 2019 has accentuated Vietnamese as the official language while adding two essential elements which included minority language education for ethnic majority areas and foreign language integration into national curriculum (Vietnam National Assembly, 2019). Apart from this, the Vietnamese government created its first official policy regarding foreign language education through Decision Number 1040/2008 which established the national project "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages 2008–2020" (Vietnam Government, 2008). The project received its first revision in 2017 when the Vietnam Government issued new guidelines for the implementation of the project in Decision Number 2080 (Vietnam Government, 2017). The modified version of the project reinforces the discourse of foreign languages for economic development. It has been set to achieve three essential goals, which include making foreign language skills a national priority, (2) benchmarking English and other widely spoken foreign languages against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and (3) providing every Vietnamese student with appropriate instruction of foreign languages by 2025 (Vietnam Government, 2008).

Another relevant policy area concerns the Vietnamese diaspora. The Resolution on Vietnamese Expatriates (Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee, 2004), and the subsequent Directive (Central Executive Committee, 2015) establish overseas Vietnamese communities as strategic for national economic development and defense of national sovereignty. Initially, the 2004 Resolution positions Vietnamese language as critical in enabling Vietnamese expatriates to maintain their cultural ties with the motherland. Following this, the 2015 Directive creates government-supported initiatives which use media platforms together with global education centers to provide Vietnamese language education for Vietnamese descendants residing overseas.

Regarding language use in public spaces, the Law on Advertising (Vietnam National Assembly, 2012, 2025) serves as the primary legislation which controls language usage in public areas. Specifically, Articles 8.3 and 8.9 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2012, 2025) require that language use in advertisements must not mislead or convey messages that contradict cultural norms and moral values. Article 18.1 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2012, 2025) requires all product information to be presented in Vietnamese language except for two specific cases: (1) foreign languages can be used for trademarks and labels and slogans and internationally recognized terms which do not have Vietnamese translations and (2) foreign languages need official approval to appear in published materials or broadcast media. Additionally, Article 18.2 specifies that in multilingual advertisements, Vietnamese must be given priority in terms of font size, style, and order of appearance. Consequently, Decree 38/2021 (Vietnam Government, 2021) was introduced and is still currently enforced, to operate as an active enforcement tool for penalizing non-compliance. Particularly, in Article 35.1 and Article 48.1 (Vietnam Government, 2021), a fine of 5–15 million VND is imposed on (1) commercial signs using only foreign languages without Vietnamese translations, (2) cases where foreign languages are placed above Vietnamese, and (3) instances where the size of foreign text exceeds 75% of the Vietnamese equivalent.

In brief, Vietnam's "top-down" language policies are designed to maintain the dominance of Vietnamese across all domains, including its presence in public spaces and the LL. The legal framework operates through a complementary system, which, at one end, prioritizes defending vitality of Vietnamese language and minority languages of ethnic groups, and at the other end, limits foreign language usage to its functions in economic growth, and international integration.

2.3 Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

The researcher carried out the fieldwork for the study during the first quarter of the year 2025. Following the "main street" approach common in LL studies (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023), the researcher used systematic sampling to achieve representation in the study. Accordingly, three major high-traffic commercial streets per district were selected, and on each street every fifth shopfront was photographed. The researcher then analyzed "the larger whole of the establishment" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006, p. 71) as the analysis unit which combined all visible texts from each storefront into one aggregate unit to avoid skewing data manipulation through multiple observations. A total of 1,286 static signs were photographed. To make sure the sample was representative of grassroots language practices, the researcher focused solely on privately-owned commercial signage ("bottom-up" signs), while keeping official government signs out of the analysis.

2.4 Data Coding

Following data collection, the photographs were coded based on best practices in LL research (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023). This process was conducted with a coding scheme which is summarized as in Table 1. Accordingly, signs were categorized into monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual groups based on the named languages present. To evaluate compliance with LP in Vietnam, prioritizing Vietnam's Advertisement Law (2012, 2025), signs were further analyzed for font size, positioning, and the prominence of Vietnamese relative to other languages (e.g., English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean).

Table 1

Summary of coding scheme

Criteria	Code	Description	Rule
Presence/Absence of Vietnamese	L1 Present	Vietnamese is visible on the sign.	Any recognizable Vietnamese text is present.
	L1 Absent	Vietnamese is completely missing.	The sign contains only foreign languages (e.g., purely English or Chinese).
Font Dominance (Size and Hierarchy)	L1 Dominant	Vietnamese is clearly the most visually prominent language.	The Vietnamese text is at least 200% the height of the foreign language text.
	L1 Prominent	Vietnamese is larger than the foreign language but not overwhelmingly so.	The Vietnamese text is larger than or equal to the size of the foreign language text, but less than 200% the height.
	Equal Size	The foreign language and Vietnamese are the same size.	The height (or character area) of the L1 and L2 text is visually indistinguishable or the same.
	L2 Dominant	The foreign language is clearly the most visually prominent language.	The foreign language text is larger than the Vietnamese text.
	L1 Only	The sign is monolingual Vietnamese.	N/A (Only L1 present).
Positioning and Placement	L1 Above L2	Vietnamese text is placed vertically higher than the foreign language text.	The top edge of the Vietnamese characters is clearly above the top edge of the foreign characters.
	L1 Before L2	Vietnamese text is placed horizontally before the foreign language text.	For left-to-right reading (common in Vietnam), the Vietnamese text starts to the left of the foreign language text.
	L1 Integrated	The languages are interwoven, often line-by-line or word-by-word.	Languages appear on the same line or are part of the same phrase (e.g., in complex code-switching).
	L2 Above/Before	The foreign language text is positioned above or before the Vietnamese text.	The top edge/starting position of the L2 text is clearly superior to the L1 text.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the coding process, a concern highlighted by Gorter (2019) regarding methodological rigor, an inter-rater reliability check was conducted. The second rater selected for this process was an official from Advertisement Appraisal Council in Ho Chi Minh City that is specializing in the regulation of commercial signage content and physical characteristics. The official performs his official duties by inspecting signs, issuing permits, and enforcing citations for violations of local aesthetic and traffic safety ordinances, so his involvement is essential for achieving high external validity regarding regulatory compliance. Additionally, the rater is currently pursuing a second BA's degree in English linguistics at the university of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. He also possesses strong competence in the languages observed in the study with level of proficiency being at B2 CEFR in English, Chinese, and Japanese.

The reliability procedure required the rater to evaluate a 10% data sample which included 130 signs from the entire dataset. The initial inter-rater agreement measurement showed 95% accuracy; thus, it proved that the designed codebook was both clear and reliable. After that, the researcher together with the rater established the final validated coding scheme by discussing and reaching agreement about all remaining differences which included both specific language identification details and the visual dominance of fonts.

2.5 Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out in two stages. First, a quantitative analysis informed by Nikolaou (2017) was conducted to determine how languages are distributed across different business types. Subsequently, an interpretive qualitative analysis was performed to understand the symbolic functions of English and other foreign languages. Drawing on the framework of proposed by Scollon & Scollon

(2003) and later elaborated by Pütz and Mundt (2019), this phase examined semiotic markers focusing on fonts, sizes, layout and cultural imagery to understand how language hierarchies are visually constructed in the Ho Chi Minh City landscape.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the photography of commercial signage in public spaces, no personal identifying information (such as faces of pedestrians or private home interiors) was collected. The unit of analysis was the "establishment" and its public-facing text. Consequently, informed consent from shop owners was not required, aligning with standard ethical guidelines for Linguistic Landscape research where data is drawn from the public domain (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023).

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Distribution of Languages in the LL of Ho Chi Minh City

After categorizing the languages displayed on signs into distinct linguistic groups, the distribution of languages in Ho Chi Minh City's LL was documented in Table 2, and this can provide a preliminary answer to the first research question of the study concerning the how LP influences language practice in LL in Ho Chi Minh City. The findings showed that Vietnamese held a dominant position, occupying 533 (N=533) of the total signage. This shows the alignment with LP as Article 5 in Constitutional statutes (Vietnam National Assembly, 2014), and Article 18 in Advertising Law (Vietnam National Assembly, 2012, 2025) explicitly highlight the supreme position of Vietnamese in public language practice. Apart from this, English, notably, emerged as the most prevalent foreign language. The language appeared either in combination with Vietnamese (N=368) or as a stand-alone language (N=203). In addition to Vietnamese and English, other foreign languages such as Chinese (N=75), Korean (N=78), and Japanese (N=21) maintained a limited presence in the public space as in the combination with English or Vietnamese, occupying specific niches. In contrast, there was no evidence of indigenous languages being used in Ho Chi Minh City, and this is indicative that despite LP promoting indigenous language preservation, these languages are not used on signs, for they are not relevant to the local community. Based on the observed patterns, it can be argued that the language practice in LL, to some extent, deviated from regulations set out in the LP. This result is corroborated by findings of other studies in monolingual societies as in China (Han & Wu, 2020), Cambodia (Lin, 2024), and Laos (Wang & Gao, 2025). Therefore, it may be contended that LL in Ho Chi Minh City embraces multilingualism.

Table 2

Distribution of named languages in Ho Chi Minh City's LL

Category	Language	N
Monolingual	Vietnamese	533
	English	203
Bilingual	Vietnamese-English	368
	Vietnamese-Chinese	38
	Vietnamese-Korean	25
	English-Chinese	10
	English-French	8
	English-Japanese	21
	English-Korean	28
Trilingual	Vietnamese-English-Chinese	27
	Vietnamese-English-Korean	25
Total		1286

3.2 Navigating Language Policy in Linguistic Landscape: Conformity or Negotiation?

To answer the research question of how LP influences language practice in LL in Ho Chi Minh City. The signs were further examined in terms of language policy adherence. The result (see Table 3) showed that the majority of signs (N=800, or 62.2%) complied with regulations outlined in Article 18 of the Advertisement Law (2012, 2025), Article 35 and 48 of Decree 38/2021 (2021), and other relevant legal documents concerning language use. However, more than one-third of the signs (N=486) were found to be in discordance with regulations stipulated in LP. This discordance can be interpreted as that because language policies are often imposed "top-down" without adequate public input, LL can become a means of indirectly challenging them (Shohamy, 2015). Considering the context of Ho Chi Minh City, as a major social-political-economic center of Vietnam, this result further accentuates similar findings from other studies (Han & Wu, 2020; Mansoor et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2024) to set forth the conceptualization of the interplay of LP and LL as "a reciprocal relationship" in which "Language policy measures can regulate and obviously do influence the linguistic landscape, but usually such measures do not determine all of it fully because many other factors co-determine the outcome of the totality of signs" (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, p. 224).

Table 3

Categorization of signs in reference to LPs

Category of sign	Value	Percent
Complying	800	62.2
Defying	486	37.8
Total	1286	100

To be specific, a significant number of commercial signs adhered to LP by using only Vietnamese (see Figure 1 as an example). In other instances of bilingual signs, the foreign languages (e.g. English) were subordinate to Vietnamese, being smaller and placed below it (see Figure 2 as an example). The pattern was also observed in multilingual signs (see Figures 3-4 as examples). These examples strongly suggest that to some extent, the existing LP is moderately successful in maintaining the dominance of Vietnamese. This finding aligns with Rohmah and Widya Nur Wijayanti (2023)'s finding about Indonesian language in Mojosari 's linguistic landscape, Phan and Starks's (2020) and Tran's (2022) with Vietnamese in Hanoi's, Mansoor et al. (2023) with Malay in Kuala Lumpur's.

Figure 1

Sign of a food shop displaying only Vietnamese

Figure 2

Bilingual sign of a shop prioritizing Vietnamese

Figure 3

Trilingual sign of a restaurant prioritizing Vietnamese

Figure 4

Trilingual sign of a law firm prioritizing Vietnamese

While Vietnamese language policies mandates Vietnamese as the primary language on all signs (whether monolingual or multilingual), with limited exceptions for logos, trademarks, international terms, and foreign language content, stipulating that foreign language text in multilingual signs must be smaller (no more than three-quarters the size) and placed below the Vietnamese, the observed language practices in LL revealed deviations from these rules. Some signs (as represented by Figure 5) featured only foreign languages, omitting Vietnamese entirely. Others disregarded the prescribed hierarchy and size proportions, placing Vietnamese text below foreign language text and making it less prominent due to size (see Figure 6 as an example). Furthermore, some signs (represented by Figure 7) used foreign languages (e.g. French) for their trademarks and foreign language terms even when Vietnamese equivalents existed, e.g., "French Restaurant" instead of "Nhà hàng Pháp".

Figure 5

Sign of groceries store featuring foreign language only

Figure 6

Sign of a Korean restaurant prioritizing Korean and English languages in terms of position

Figure 7

Sign of a restaurant using French and English instead of Vietnamese equivalent

While some signs seemed to break advertising language rules, they reflect the influence of policies concerning national education (2005, 2019), foreign language instruction (2008, 2017), and overseas Vietnamese communities (2004) as found by Phan and Starks (2020). Therefore, these apparent violations can be seen as businesses negotiating, rather than directly challenging, the language policies. These "bottom-up" actors interpret the rules to their advantage, competing for public visibility. From there, this finding highlights how practical considerations drive language choices in the marketplace (Lin, 2024; Savski, 2021). Based on such reasoning, the finding further supports Landry and Bourhi's (1997) and Gorter and Cenoz's (2020) premise that "official and non-official language policies cannot ensure equality of languages on signs, because such policies are constrained by wider social and economic contextual forces." (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, p. 82).

3.3 English Use in Ho Chi Minh City LL

To answer the second research question concerning the presence of English and its functions in the LL of Ho Chi Minh City, commercial storefronts analyzed by business typology (see Table 4). English was most prevalent in travel and tourism (43.8%), banking and finance service (42.3%), beauty services (41.8%), food and beverage (40.8%), and education services (40.1%). It also appeared frequently in fashion (36.8%), entertainment and recreation (35.2%), and healthcare (30.8%). This distribution pattern is quite similar to those in other contexts as observed in studies of Nikolaou (2017), and Al-Sofi (2024). The use of English as a common business language likely emerges from two factors which are national foreign language policies (Phan & Starks, 2020), and the cultural significance of English language (Alomoush, 2019).

Table 4

The distribution of named languages used on signs grouped into business types

Business Types	English	Vietnamese	Other languages	Total (%)
Fashion	36.8	55.8	7.4	100
Food and beverage	40.8	50.7	8.5	100
Entertainment and recreation	35.2	61.3	3.5	100
Healthcare	30.8	66.1	3.1	100
Banking and finance service	42.3	54.9	2.8	100
Travel and tourism	43.8	47.6	8.6	100
Education service	40.1	55.9	4.0	100
Beauty service	41.8	52.5	5.7	100
Others (including Jewelry shop, Technology & Photocopy shops and Automobile care)	6.8	92.2	1	100

The dominance of English in these sectors demands a critical interrogation of why this specific language can be argued to hold such profound symbolic power in the Vietnamese context. It is not merely a tool for communication with the passerby; rather, English has evolved into a marker of social stratification (Van Van, 2020). In the post-Doi Moi (Renovation) era, English has effectively replaced previous foreign languages as the gatekeeper to educational advancement and economic success (L. T. T. Nguyen & Chon, 2020). Consequently, the display of English on signage serves as a semiotic promise which indicates the presence of quality. That is, the use of English on signage is expected to index the shops as places where products on sale align with international standards of service, and luxury (Rojo López & Nowak, 2024). In this sense, English allows businesses to disassociate themselves from the "traditional" or "local" (which may be perceived as lower value) and align with the "modern" and "global." This suggests that in the consumer's mind, the Vietnamese language seems to be culturally cherished but commercially devalued, while English is apparently viewed as the language of the upwardly mobile middle class.

To have nuanced understanding of English's role in the LL, the language's functions on the signs were further examined within their geographical contexts. Signs in tourist areas of District One (see Figures 8-9 as examples) and District Seven, a popular residential area for foreign workers (see Figure 10), were exclusively in English. This suggests the language is used primarily to communicate with and attract foreign customers. Therefore, language choice on signage appears to be influenced by the desire to attract tourists (Lin, 2024), or expatriate clients residing or working in the areas (Sarot & Kraisame, 2025), reflecting a rational economic motivation on the part of those creating the signs (Wang & Gao, 2025).

Figure 8

Sign of a pub aimed at tourists

Figure 9

Sign of a travel agency aimed at tourists

Figure 10

Sign of a coffee shop located in a building that houses offices of international firms

The employment of English in commercial signs also aims to give businesses a competitive edge. English was used in place of Vietnamese equivalents to convey professionalism, as seen in examples like "VinBeauty Spa & Clinic" (see Figure 11). This example is interesting given this sign was placed in the residential area of Binh Chanh District, which is characterized as peri-urban area with most of the population being Vietnamese natives. Clearly, the owner of the business made use of English on the sign to convey professionalism, high-class service and even beauty, thereby helping clinic stand out from its rivals in the area. Furthermore, English was used to project an image of high quality and luxury, even for everyday products like coffee and sweets (see Figures 12-13). Based on the findings, the practice of English inclusion in the commercial signage in LL of Ho Chi Minh City is likely to target middle-class consumers who are willing to pay for experiences associated with prestige, luxury, modernity, and professionalism (Rohmah & Widya Nur Wijayanti, 2023; Rojo López & Nowak, 2024).

Figure 11

Sign with symbolic use of English to connote professionalism in the business of healthcare

Figure 12

Sign with symbolic use of English to connote high-quality in the business of food and beverage

Figure 13

Sign with symbolic use of English to connote luxury in the business of food and beverage

English is also used to project specific identities. A fashion shop in District Ten (see Figure 14) used English for its brand name with “ya” instead of you to address the receiving end of the message colloquially and with “You are My everything” for its slogan to appeal to urban English-speaking youngsters by positioning them as someone that holds the supreme importance to the shop owner. A coffee shop included "Board game" in its name, targeting those familiar with US culture (see Figure 15). An internet cafe prioritized English to resonate with young "digital natives" and online gamers (see Figure 16). Moreover, a sign advertising traditional dish served with sticky rice and chicken showed English took precedence over Vietnamese (see Figure 17). Specifically, while English phrases "TAKE AWAY" and "DELIVERY" subtly targets millennials and their consumer-driven lifestyles, the brand name “Chicken Xôi” is a typical example of lexical code-mixing – a phenomenon that is commonly observed among young Vietnamese people speaking English (Linh, 2025). Furthermore, in a different instance, English was likely employed to signify rebellious individuality, as seen in the fashion brand "Narcotics" (see Figure 18), a term banned in Vietnamese public displays due to its negative association with solicited substance. Overall, the use of English in the LL can be interpreted as a way for young people to express their identity as they navigate the complexities of globalization and national traditions (Tran, 2022; Zhang, 2024).

Figure 14

Sign of a fashion shop aimed at young people

Figure 15

Sign of a food and beverage shop aimed at young people

Figure 16

Sign of an Internet café aimed at young people who play online games

Figure 17

Sign of food shop aimed at young customers

Figure 18

Sign of a beauty shop aimed at young clients

4.0 CONCLUSION

The research investigated Ho Chi Minh City's language environment through an analysis of 1,286 privately operated signs which covered four different districts. The research data shows that official language policy (LP) maintains a complex relationship with how language is used in market settings. In Ho Chi Minh City's LL, Vietnamese language is the dominant language thanks to the successful implementation of "top-down" rules, but non-complying language practices of private businesses are meant to serve strategic purposes. Businesses frequently negotiate these regulations, utilizing English not just for translation but to signal modernity and compete in a globalized economy. This suggests that Ho Chi Minh City's LL is a dynamic space where LP's mandates interact with economic pragmatism.

In terms of theoretical contribution, the study has positioned Ho Chi Minh City's LL as a "Third Space" which serves as a site for negotiations with LPs. In contrast to political rigidity found in Hanoi's LL as in Tran (2022) and Phan and Starks (2020), Ho Chi Minh City's rapid economic development exhibits a different context which shifts the dynamic from a binary of "compliance vs. resistance" to a spectrum of "calculated risk." The study implies that in emerging economies, globalization does not replace the national language but forces a functional co-existence: Vietnamese serves administrative purposes, while English fulfills symbolic roles. This shows that signage serves as a tool which firms use to achieve their business goals in internationalized markets

Practically, the "defiance" observed in LL in Ho Chi Minh City indicates that strict protectionism clashes with socio-economic reality. The study recommends that policymakers adopt "balanced bilingualism or multilingualism", to pivot away from the discourse of English or other foreign languages as threats. A more effective approach would involve sector-specific guidelines, allowing leniency in tourism hubs while preserving cultural zones, and prioritizing education on modern Vietnamese branding over punitive fines. Finally, considering its scope, the current study shows its limits. While this study provides a generic visual mapping of language practices in LL, it is limited by its lack of direct stakeholders' input. Further research should capture the voices of stakeholders to move the discussion from semiotic interpretation to a grounded understanding of the motivations driving evolving linguistic landscape.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Duy Khiem Tran (The author was solely responsible for all aspects of the work and approved the final manuscript.)

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