Linguistic landscape research in the multilingual Philippines: A systematic review

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Abstract

Research endeavors on linguistic landscape (henceforth LL) have multiplied, and this growth can be seen in the increased number of LL studies presented and published as well as the special attention given to it in language journals. This expansion is observable in the Philippines, where various sites have been targeted for investigation. In order to follow this progress, this paper undertakes a systematic review of the 39 published studies on LL in the Philippines using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. It is revealed that LL research in the Philippines is growing, albeit unsteadily. Many of the studies examined LL in Luzon, especially in Metro Manila. The contexts of the LL studies are varied, but the schoolscape has received much attention. Most studies adhere to onsite collection of data through digital photography. The thematic trajectory of LL research in the Philippines highlights the limited display of multilingualism, reinforcing the prestige given to English regardless of the contexts where the signs are installed. This paper offers a substantive reference for the future directions the LL research in the Philippines can take and its potential for uncovering more issues embedded in the linguistic and semiotic markings of the signs.

1   Introduction

Studies on the use of language have expanded through the years because language is essentially present and constantly evolving in every aspect of life. One of the many uses of language that has caught the interest of language scholars is Linguistic Landscape, with linguistic and semiotic materials becoming ubiquitous in different social and cultural spaces. The scholarship of LL, which is referred to as the study of the language of public signs, dates back to the seminal work of Landry and Bourhis (1997), who studied the relationship

between linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality among Francophone Canadians. Although their groundbreaking work was not about the analysis of the actual language use but on people's attitudes (Shohamy, 2019), they are still greatly considered by LL scholars as trailblazers in this area of language use investigation.

As a methodological framework, LL has invited academic investigation among scholars across the globe, paving the way for its development and growth. Huebner (2016) presents in his article how linguistic landscape works have multiplied, from the publication of four articles in the *International Journal of Multilingualism* in 2006, to the holding of regional workshops on linguistic landscape in Europe and in the US. Presently, special attention has been given to LL in various language journals, with the publication of the specifically dedicated disciplinary journal *Linguistic Landscape: An International Journal* by John Benjamins which has been providing a venue for LL studies to be disseminated since 2015.

Works done on LL by international scholars show the flexibility and diversity of studying the language of public signs. There are ethnographic studies (Huebner, 2006; Kosatica, 2023; Migge, 2023; Pesch et al., 2021), encasing bodies into place (Peck & Stroud, 2015), and textual discourse analysis (Caldwell, 2017). Frequency patterns were also studied (Amer, 2024), as well as the use of digital geographical mapping like Google Maps was deemed helpful (Rosendal et al., 2022). In the Philippines, LL scholarship is seen as a flourishing sociolinguistic subdiscipline based on the studies conducted, presented, and published in the last decade (Manalastas, 2025).

The burgeoning field of LL in the Philippines merits a systematic literature review (henceforth SLR) in order to track its development over the years as well as identify gaps and potential areas for exploration, given the interdisciplinary nature of LL. Hu (2022) carried out a review of existing LL literature globally but focused only on the perspectives, while Xin and Yuwei (2024) reviewed LL studies but concentrated on domestic studies in China. In the Philippines, Manalastas (2025) gathered and examined local LL studies but utilized a thematic approach. The current SLR builds on these conducted reviews by focusing on the local LL studies in the Philippines, using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement as a guideline. Specifically, this review addresses the following questions:

(1)   How has the LL research expanded in the Philippines through the years?

(2)   What contexts has LL research in the Philippines covered so far?

(3)   What is the methodological trajectory of LL research in the Philippines?

(4)   What is the thematic trajectory of LL research in the Philippines?

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2   Methods

This research utilizes the PRISMA 2020 framework, a structured technique that involves planning, documenting, and reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). The same framework is used in other systematic reviews because it is a transparent process (Song et al., 2024), improves completeness of reporting (Domingo & Lintao, 2024), and is a recognized approach (Peixoto et al., 2021). By establishing the search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and data gathering procedure, it sets a strong methodology in conducting an SLR.

Figure 1
The PRISMA Flow Diagram
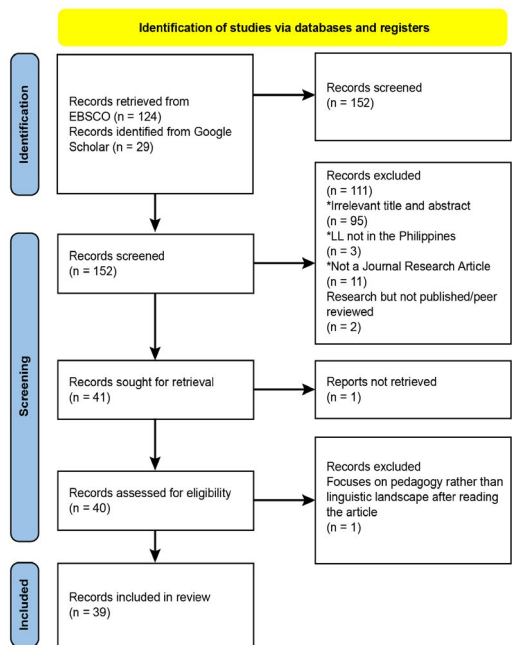
Note. The template for this flow diagram is for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only. Adapted from "ThePRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews," by Page et al., 2021, *BMJ, 372,* p. 5.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram that shows the step-by-step process of selecting the studies subjected to review. A thorough literature search was carried out using various key terms presented in Table 1. Records were retrieved from EBSCO, a platform that allows access to multiple research databases, which yielded 124 studies. Moreover, Google

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Scholar was used to handsearch results which might not have been found in EBSCO and to search the studies that were cited in the previously retrieved research works, securing a total of 29 studies, with one removed due to duplication. These 152 studies were screened against the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: for inclusion, studies should be published peer-reviewed research articles or research-based chapters in an edited book, the Philippines should be the research locale, and language used should be English or Filipino; for exclusion, studies should not be theoretical papers, meta-analyses, book reviews, unpublished theses or dissertations, and research conference presentations. A total of 111 studies were excluded, many of these have irrelevant titles and abstracts (n=95), while others are not journal research articles (n=11), not in the Philippines (n=3), and not published and peer-reviewed (n=2). Only one of the remaining 41 studies could not be retrieved. Final assessment for eligibility was done which excluded one study because its content centered on pedagogy rather than linguistic landscape. The final count was reduced to 39.

Table 1
Searching Strategy

Search Tool	Key terms
EBSCO	Linguistic Landscape in the Philippines
Refined by	Linguistic Landscape in the Philippines OR Philippine Linguistic Landscape OR Language of Signs in the Philippines OR Place Semiotics in the Philippines
Google Scholar	Linguistic Landscape in the Philippines (up to 100 results)
	Philippine Linguistic Landscape (up to 100 results)
	Language of Signs in the Philippines (up to 100 results)
	Place Semiotics in the Philippines (up to 100 results)
Handsearching	Studies cited by the identified LL studies in EBSCO and Google Scholar

3 Results and Discussion

The findings show how the LL scholarship in the Philippines has expanded over the years, accounting for where and when the LL studies were conducted and published, as well as the patterns in the contexts, methods, and results of these studies.

3.1 Development of LL Research in the Philippines

3.1.1 Temporal Distribution

Using the publication years, Figure 2 shows the spread of the published LL studies in the Philippines through the years.

As shown in Figure 2, the LL scholarship in the Philippines is a year and a decade old. It dates back to the study of De Los Reyes in 2014 on the LL of two major train stations in the Philippines, published by the *Asian Journal of English Language Studies* (AJELS). After a two -year pause, LL studies increased to six, albeit with an unsteady increase the years after 2017. It was in 2024 that the greatest number of LL studies in the Philippines was published. The year 2025 may still be considered incomplete because this review covers only its first half. By the numbers, it can be said that there is a growing interest in LL among language scholars in the Philippines.

Figure 2
Temporal Distribution of LL Studies in the Philippines
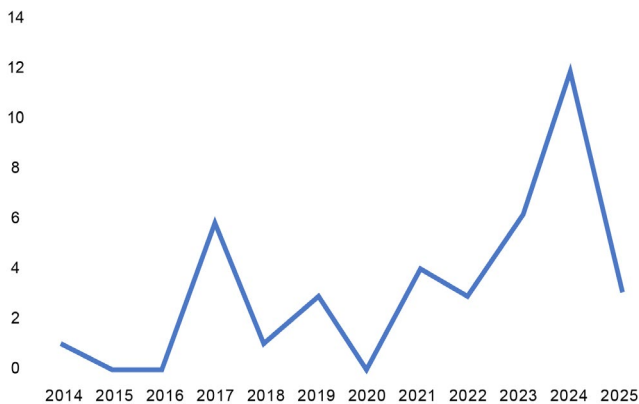

3.1.2   Spatial Distribution

An illustration is provided to map the published LL studies in the Philippines based on the research locales.

Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of LL studies in the Philippines using the Philippine map. Many of these studies are in Luzon, with a total of 25 studies. Majority of this is in Metro Manila (n=13), while the rest are in the towns and cities in the provinces. Mindanao has a record of seven studies, while Visayas has four studies.

Meanwhile, there are three studies that covered multiple locations. The study of Villareal et al. (2021) analyzed the LL of the three major cities in the Philippines, namely City of Manila, Cebu City, and Davao City, located in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, respectively. The work of Manalastas and Auxtero (2024) had a more comprehensive coverage, focusing on the regional centers Calamba City (Calabarzon), City of Manila (NCR), San Fernando City (Central Luzon), Calapan City (Mimaropa), Butuan City (Caraga), and Baguio City (Cordillera Administrative Region), specifically the main roadways of these cities. Lastly, the

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study of Go (2024) was unique because the gathered data were from social media during the 2022 presidential electoral campaign. Although two other studies (Manalastas, 2024a; Monje, 2017) also gathered data from the Internet, their LL sites were still specifically identified.

Figure 3
Spatial Distribution of LL Studies in the Philippines
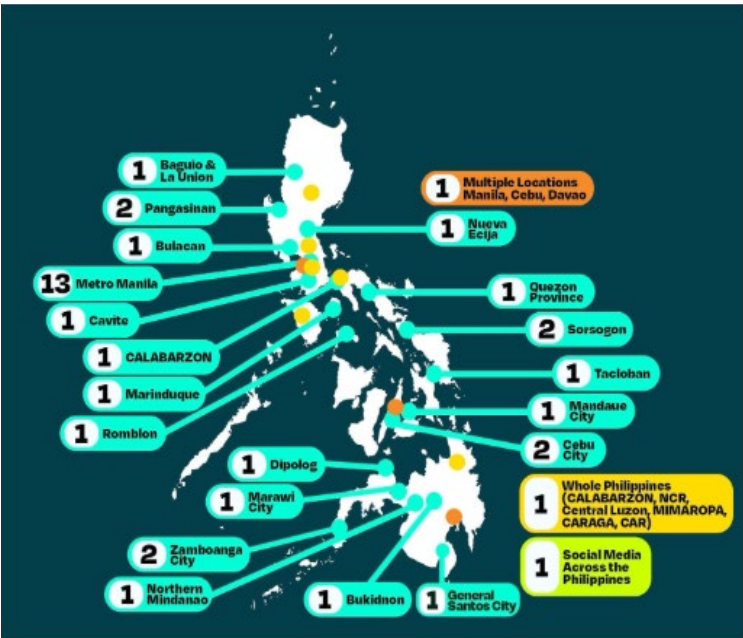
3.2   Linguistic Landscape Contexts

There are quite a number of landscape contexts explored by the scholarly works on LL in the Philippines. As Table 2 shows, topping the list is the school landscape (n=9), which has been termed *schoolscape*. Most of these are the LL of higher education institutions (Abbas et al., 2022; Bernardo, 2024a; Clorion et al., 2024; Magno, 2017; Marcelo, 2024; Panuelos, 2023; Reintegrado-Celino & Bernardo, 2023), while there is only one on secondary school (Astillero, 2017) and one on elementary school (Monroid et al., 2025). A higher interest is also shown towards rural landscape, or the LL of rural places, which are all municipalities in Luzon (Balog & Gonzales, 2021; Fabregas, 2025; Floralde & Valdez, 2017; Luna, 2023). Although many of the LLs are in the cities, there are three studies that embarked on a more comprehensive study of the LL of the cities termed *cityscape* (Clorion et al., 2024; Nibalvos, 2017; Villareal et al., 2021).

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Table 2

Landscape Contexts of the LL Studies in the Philippines

Landscape Context	No. of Studies
School Landscape	9
Rural Landscape	4
City Landscape	3
Commercial Landscape	3
Cultural Heritage Site Landscape	3
Extreme Landscape	3
Government Landscape	2
Tourism Landscape	2
Transit Facility Landscape	2
Cemetery Landscape	2
Chinatown Landscape	1
Church Landscape	1
Shopping District Landscape	1
Trial Court Landscape	1
Political Campaign Landscape	1
Laws governing signs	1
Total	**39**

The field of advertising is highly characterized by LL; hence, it is not surprising that it was the subject of the three studies. The LLs of these studies were on coffee products (Ambion, 2023), billboard ads (Perez et al., 2019), and shop signs along a famous boulevard (Cantina, 2021). The LL research on cultural heritage site covered museums (Manalastas 2023; Manalastas, 2024c) and a historical site (Manalastas, 2024a). For some studies, a higher risk was involved because of the challenging conditions presented by the LL spaces, which Mc Laughlin and Ouaras (2024) call *extreme landscape*, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Alburo, 2022), a protest (Monje, 2017), and the aftermath of a disaster (Doroja-Cadiente & Valdez, 2019). The government landscape pertains to the LL of a post office (Eclipse & Tenedero, 2018) and LL in the government agencies of a city (Coronel, 2019), while the tourism landscape concerns the LL of tourist destinations (Mendoza & Bernardo, 2024; Sieras, 2024). The studies on the transit facility landscape analyzed the LL of train stations (De Los Reyes, 2014) and urban skywalks (Aharul, 2022). Two studies focused on the LL of cemeteries (De Leon & De Roxas, 2025; Manalastas, 2024b), both highlighting the communicative and symbolic functions of epitaphs. The rest of the studies occurred only once, namely the LL of a famous Chinatown in the Philippines (Jazul & Bernardo, 2017), a Catholic church for church landscape or *churchscape* (Esteron, 2021), regional trial courts

(Esteron et al., 2023), a political campaign during the 2022 presidential elections (Go, 2024), and LL vis-à-vis the laws governing the signs (Manalastas & Auxtero, 2024). Although commercial in nature, one study (Tupas, 2024) focused on the LL of a place in Metro Manila known as a shopping district; hence, it is separated from the commercial landscape because it underscored the nature of the place as the context of the signs.

The contexts of the signs in the LL research in the Philippines share the same patterns in China (see Xin & Yuwei, 2024). Both have studies on urban and rural linguistic landscapes as well as tourist sites. While other international studies are rather broad, such as covering the whole city (Maseko & Siziba, 2024) and town (Migge, 2023) and multiple neighborhoods (Huebner, 2006; Rosendal et al., 2022), the majority of local LL research in the Philippines is specific to identified sites such as a church, a museum, or a school. The local literature in the Philippines expands the global patterns, covering more distinct contexts.

3.3   Methodological Trajectory of LL Research in the Philippines

Table 3 shows the data on the methodological patterns of LL research in the Philippines, especially in data gathering.

Table 3

Methods Employed in the LL Research in the Philippines

	Method employed	No. of Studies
Modality		
	Physical	34
	Virtual	5
Data collection		
	Digital Photography	38
	Interview / FGD	8
	Document	1
	Survey Questionnaire	3

Some patterns emerged shaping the methodological trajectory of the LL studies in the Philippines—in terms of modality, physical collection of data was more preferred compared to digital, and digital photography was always utilized except one, with interview or focus group discussion (FGD), document, and survey questionnaire as supplementary.

All but five studies conducted actual fieldwork on the LL sites. Onsite ethnography allows a deep immersion for the LL researcher in order to contextualize the analysis of signs, often regarded as being abstract but may yield more interesting insights with regard to regimes of power and knowledge (Blommaert, 2013 as cited in Shaikjee et al., 2024). On the other hand, the five exceptions used online platforms to gather data, namely through

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Google Maps (Manalastas, 2024a; Manalastas & Auxtero, 2024), social media (Go, 2024; Monje, 2017), and an online survey questionnaire (Sieras, 2024). The use of web services not only presents the opportunity of a cost-efficient LL study but can also be replicated and is diachronic (Manalastas, 2024a).

Digital photography was the primary means of gathering data, having been used in all studies except for one (Sieras, 2024). Photographing the signs is not only easy but also cost-efficient, making it one of the driving forces for language scholars to gain interest in LL research. For the studies that gathered data from online platforms, digital photos were retrieved and used.

Interviews were used as supplementary sources of data. Eight studies (Ambion, 2023; Astillero, 2017; Balog & Gonzalez, 2021; Doroja-Cadiente & Valdez, 2019; Eclipse & Tenedero, 2018; Marcelo, 2024; Mendoza & Bernardo, 2024; Reintegrado-Celino & Bernardo, 2023) explicitly mentioned that they conducted an interview to seek further insights about the signs. Questions about language policies were asked among sign makers and perceptions were sought among sign consumers. For the perceptions, two other studies, aside from the previously mentioned (Sieras, 2024), used survey questionnaires to assess the perceived effectiveness of billboards (Perez et al., 2019) and elicit perceptions from students about the bulletin board displays (Magno, 2017).

Despite the multifaceted nature of the methods employed in the studies, patterns show common adherence to onsite data collection and digital photography in materializing the LL studies in the Philippines. The same is true with international LL studies, where there is preference given to field-based ethnography and photographing the signs (Huebner, 2006; Migge et al., 2023; Pesch et al., 2021).

3.4   Thematic Trajectory of LL Research in the Philippines

Manalastas and Auxtero (2024) argue that LL studies in the Philippines seem to be preoccupied with the (lack of) display of multilingualism in the signs, having placed English in a privileged position despite the multilingual reality of the contexts where the signs are located. Thirty-two studies found that English was the preferred language in the signs. The preference was evidenced by the exclusive use of English (monolingual signs) (e.g. Magno, 2017) and its placement in the multilingual signs (e.g. Alburo, 2022). English enjoys prominence as it is the language of authority (Eclipse & Tenedero, 2018), academic thoughts (Bernardo, 2024a), government and stakeholders (Doroja-Cadiente & Valdez, 2019), and because it is concise (Marcelo, 2024; Sieras, 2024) and inclusive (Sieras, 2024). English was even more preferred despite the existing executive order on intensifying the use of Filipino in the official transactions and communication in government offices (Coronel, 2019). These findings prove that English occupies a hegemonic position in the Philippine LL.

Other studies whose results were not on language display focused on the communicative and symbolic functions of the epitaphs (De Leon & De Roxas, 2025; Manalastas, 2024b), the pedagogical potential of LL (Floralde & Valdez, 2017), translanguaging (Panuelos, 2023), semiotic markings that pertain to mental health awareness (Aharul, 2022), linguistic and

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pragmatic strategies (Cantina, 2021), and spatialization of gender and sexuality (Go, 2024). These are a welcome development in the local scholarship of LL, as international studies have also expanded the investigation to English vis-à-vis environmental preservation (Maseko & Siziba, 2024), diversity and belonging of transnational migrant students (Pesch et al., 2021), semiotic meaning-making in printed shirts (Caldwell, 2017), and even tattooed bodies as a site of spatialized identities and historical power structures (Peck & Stroud, 2015).

3.5   Recommendations for Future LL Research in the Philippines

Based on the findings, much can be done in order to advance the LL scholarship in the Philippines. While there is an apparent increase in the number of studies, this does not account for the unpublished works, which could reach a significant number. Hence, greater publication efforts are warranted to further enrich this subfield and to more comprehensively document patterns, trends, and even divergences. This also includes expanding the scope to other cities and municipalities and non-site-based signs (see Manalastas, 2025) to materialize a more comprehensive description and interrogation of Philippine linguistic landscape.

Next, since LL is truly diverse and complex in nature, future LL researchers in the Philippines may choose to investigate underexplored or unexplored landscape themes which draw special attention because of their crucial relevance to the social, cultural, and environmental landscapes of the Philippines, such as other extreme landscapes (e.g. environmentally risky areas, conflict zones, displaced communities, marginalized communities, prison, etc.), transnational spaces (e.g. airports and seaports, little Tokyo, little India, Korean districts, etc.), digital landscape (e.g. digital billboards, hypertextual signs, etc.), and political landscape (e.g. premature campaigns, territorial markers, protests, etc.) to uncover deeper interdisciplinary issues. Additionally, since schoolscape is found to be the most explored area, interested scholars may shift the focus to the effectivity of LL as a pedagogical resource, as unveiled in the study of Floralde and Valdez (2017). LL shows a promising capability in language teaching and learning, such as Philippine English (Bernardo, 2024b) and even the indigenous languages.

While descriptive frequency can yield interesting findings on the investigation of signs, a move beyond counting and photographing may deepen our understanding not only of what the signs mean but also how and why they are made. The analysis may be expanded to looking into the discursive process of sign making, which involves investigating signs vis-à-vis the national and/or local language policies of sign making, language ideologies of sign makers, and actual—not only perceived—responses of sign consumers to the displayed signs, such as those that are regulatory and instructive.

Lastly, more in-depth and nuanced investigation of signs can be pursued by developing local frameworks on LL or localizing existing frameworks. This is to reflect that Philippine multilingualism is not only about the (lack of) coexistence of English and Philippine languages in the signs but also about situating this (lack of) coexistence within sociohistorical and political frameworks to further understand what constitutes the Philippine linguistic landscape (Manalastas, 2025).

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4   Conclusion

In order to track the LL scholarship in the Philippines over the years as well as identify gaps and potential areas for exploration, this SLR utilized the PRISMA statement which helped provide a structured and transparent approach to locating and identifying LL studies in the Philippines, screening these studies with reduced bias, and making the process replicable. The review of 39 LL studies in the Philippines provides impetus for the direction(s) that this growing field may take as it continues to attract scholarly attention. Certainly, there is a growing interest in LL in the Philippines. The number of published LL studies, albeit not steady, has been increasing since its cornerstone publication in 2014. However, there is a need to expand the Philippine LL studies to other cities and provinces as well as other contexts or domains, as LL carries various potentials in uncovering social, cultural, and environmental issues embedded in linguistic and semiotic signs. To make a nuanced analysis, a more diverse and even localized framing of analyses can be done in future LL studies in the Philippines. Finally, situating LL in the multilingual nature of the Philippines means examining the signs vis-à-vis the broader sociohistorical and political frameworks.

Engaging with the existing LL literature in the Philippines has revealed the rich nature of the field as well as the opportunities for LL scholars. These potentials are worth pursuing to enrich and expand the current lines of inquiry. These may foster a deeper understanding of the (socio)linguistic issues and other pertinent issues that LL can capably generate insights about, especially in the context of a multilingual nation like the Philippines.

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