Beliefs of EFL Learners towards Pedagogical Values of Linguistic Landscape in China: A Case Study Carried Out in Three Schools

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Numerous research in linguistic landscape (LL) have shown that the languages exhibited on signage in city space can offer an abundant resource enabling language learning in "real-life" situations. However, there are rare studies investigate the pedagogical value from the perspective of the learners. Taking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in China as research subjects, a qualitative and quantitative combined method was adopted in this study to survey three groups of students' beliefs about the pedagogical value of LL (classified as senior high school students, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students). The findings show that almost students hold a positive attitude toward English in LL, but with the different knowledge base, learning methods and ideology of "standard" English usage, the learners show different perceptions towards the specific issues on to what extent the English in LL can help them to learn English.

Keywords: EFL learners; linguistic landscape; pedagogical value; learners' perception; learners' attitude.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Linguistic Landscape (LL) emerged as a dynamic and active field of research. Conferences on diverse themes of LL are held annually in various places in the world; edited collections reporting new research are being published; symposia on LL at major sociolinguistics and applied linguistics conferences are presented regularly and courses on LL are now being offered in a growing number of higher education institutions. As a burgeoning field in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, LL research is concerned with the language displayed on "public roads, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" [1]. Landry and Bourhis [1] also discuss the functions of the linguistic landscape, holding that linguistic landscape has two major roles to play. One is the informational function, and the other is the symbolic function. They noted the information function as "the linguistic landscape serves to inform in-group and out-group members of the linguistic characteristics, territorial limits, and language boundaries of the region they have entered" [1]. Beyond the informational function, the symbolic function is also of paramount importance. It is true that the absence or presence of certain languages on public signs has an effect on how people in a community feel about the languages. "Having one's own language enshrined on most private and government signs should contribute to the feeling that the in-group language has value and status relative to other languages within the sociolinguistic setting" [1]. According to Gorter [2] and Shohamy and Gorter [3], the early LL studies endeavored mostly about the publications by Landry and Bourhis [1] anchored in social psychology and serving as the fundamental definition of the field. And then many developments have been taking place which at the same time yield some new findings. All these research studies made a sound and solid foundation for LL field as a discipline in its own right. Over the years it has reached different domains in research areas, the topics and themes widely included multilingualism and translingual mixing, language policy, language attitude and language ideology, minority languages and identity construction and scaled mobility [4,5].

The representative researcher who treated LL research from the perspective of multilingualism is Gorter [6]. He also uses the alternative concept of what he calls multilingual cityscape, which is reflective of the interest of most researchers in more than one language displayed in public signs in urban areas. Cenoz and Gorter [7] investigate the linguistic landscape of two streets in two multilingual cities in Friesland (Netherlands) and the Basque Country (Spain), examining the use of minority languages (Basque and Frisian), the state languages (Spanish and Dutch) and English as an international language on signs. The research results show that compared with other languages the majority language of Dutch and Spanish respectively in the two streets is more prominently found in the multilingual signs. For the different emphasis and effort towards language policy put in the two cities, the use of minority languages in the signs is different from each other. In addition, the choice of English usage in the signs has both the informational and symbolic functions. Backhaus, another very influential author, conducted empirical research on the multilingual signs in the streets of Tokyo. In his research, special attention is given to the distinction between official (top-down) and nonofficial (bottom-up) multilingual signs. Besides the perspective which dealt with LL research from multilingual dimension, scholars also carried out their studies from the sociolinguistic view as mentioned above. For example, Huebner [8] examined the linguistic landscape within the SPEAKING model proposed by Hymes who is famous in the interactional sociolinguistic field. The mnemonic SPEAKING (S = setting or scene; P = participants; E =ends or goals; A = act sequences; K = key; I = instrumentalities; N = norms; G = genre) represents a sociolinguistic theory for interaction between language and social life. Huebner believes there is an inextricable relationship between the language means and social meaning just as he mentioned that there is "a barometer of the relationship between language and society" [7]. In his case study of LL change in Bloemfontein, South Africa, Plessis [9] proposes that "A change in regime can bring about a change in the linguistic landscape". The LL then becomes one of the most vocal and concrete indicators of consequential language regime change. Shang and Zhao [10] provide a comprehensive overview of the background, methodology, theoretical approaches, prospects and challenges in linguistic landscape studies, which is a holistic picture of the area of linguistic inquiries. In 2015, Shang and Zhao [11] continued the linguistic landscape study and examined the analytical dimensions and theoretical construction.

Analyzing the studies conducted by foreign scholars, Shang and Zhao conclude that there are at least 5 analytical dimensions: linguistic landscape and language power, linguistic landscape and the implementation of language policy, features of language on public signs, the international spread of English and the historical dimension of linguistic landscape study.

Apart from the social and ethnolinguistic inquiries, there are also academic endeavors towards the investigation of the influences of LL on second/foreign language learning. The pedagogical perspective of LL studies is the very outcome of this endeavor. Cenoz and Gorter [12], for instance, focused on the relation between linguistic landscape and second language acquisition (SLA) and the role of LL in second language acquisition. They argued that the texts on signage, as an additional source of input for SLA, are always authentic and contextualized, thus can be utilized to enhance learners' pragmatic competence, develop literacy skills as well as raise their language awareness. As Cenoz and Gorter have noted, "linguistic landscape provides an additional opportunity to experience non-linear multimodal texts in the public space" [12]. Moreover, for Cenoz and Gorter, the linguistic landscape also playing an important role in affecting the language learning attitudes and hence conducive to the SLA process. Therefore, it can be concluded that the second/foreign language learning should consider the symbolic and affective factors of the linguistic landscape. Rowland [13] has reviewed six generalized pedagogical thoughts of LL which include developing students' critical literacy skills, improving students' pragmatic competence, increasing the possibility of incidental language learning, facilitating the acquisition of multimodal literacy skills, stimulating students' multicompetence, and enhancing students' sensitivity to the connotational aspects of language. Shohamy and Waksman [14] also touched upon the pedagogical perspective of linguistic landscape studies in their paper Linguistic Landscape as an Ecological Arena. They insist on the point of view that LL can be used as a meaningful and powerful tool for language learning and developing language awareness. When mentioned to raise language awareness, it comes to the pedagogical application of language signs through LL projects. Inspired by the educational potentials of LL, numerous student-led projects have been implemented in order to enhance learners' language awareness and foster language skills

and competencies, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts [15],[16]. For example, in Sayer's [17] Mexico LL project, his EFL students were acted as investigators and he intended to explore the social meanings of English on signs. The final conclusion shows that the project can enable the learners to think creatively and critically about language issues, which shows the advantages of LL in learning foreign language as well as fostering their literacy skills. The similar research made by Rowland in 2013 also revealed that the language practice to explore the LL turned out to be helpful for them to comprehend the social orders underlying language choice and develop symbolic competence and literacy skills.

When the research focuses on the functions of LL in specific domains, like in educational settings. The schoolscape comes into the view. Firstly, certain studies focus on either demonstrating the educational function of LL in language acquisition [18], [13] or examining the utility of LL in promoting awareness and teaching cultural and linguistic diversity [19], [17]. Secondly, Brown [20], [21] approaches schoolscapes from an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, combining interviews and observation. Thirdly, Dressler [22], Hanauer [23], Laihonen and Tódor [24], Linkola [25] and Szabó [26] combine digital photography, field notes, interviews, questionnaires and group discussions. Fourthly, only Garvin and Eisenhower [27] and Gorter and Cenoz [28] represent the fairly established approach utilizing photography.

Although ample studies have proved that there is some relationship between LL and foreign language learning as well as the benefits language teaching can gain from the schoolscape, rare research has talked about the perceptions and thoughts of the foreign language learners. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a study to investigate how foreign language learners perceive the LL, and whether they are willing to actively get involved in such immersing learning materials. The inquiry of the students' belief towards LL can help us to Figure out the pedagogical function of LL more clearly, and offer some insights into the formation of language education policy.

2. THE STUDY

In mainland China (or the People's Republic of China, henceforth China), the institutionalized

language is Putonghua or Standard Mandarin, which has long been the predominant language variety in the society. Most LL signs in China's city space are Chinese, sometimes along with minority languages. English, as the most important foreign language in China, is also widely used in some private and official signs in cities due to its symbolic marking of cosmopolitanism, high technology, modernity, fashion, internationalism, and sophistication [29]. In some economically developed areas in China, English is quite prevalent. According to Zhao's [30] study, the foreign language usages in the central districts of Shanghai, nearly 70% of the public and commercial signs include English which has proved that English has become a pervasive trend in the city space. Zhang and Lv [31] also referred to that with the rapid development of the urbanization process in China, English has become easier to be seen even in medium and small-sized towns. The percentage of English is much more than that of minority languages in scenic spots in ethnic minority areas, which on the other hand reveals the fact that the Chinese national features are less underscored in reality.

Since English is that highly sought-after in China's city space, and there has been inadequate empirical research regarding the EFL learners' perceptions towards the English in LL and how they use such sources. These issues will be the focus of our study.

2.1 Research Questions

In order to carry out a comprehensive study to explore the EFL learners' perception and practice towards English in LL. The following related questions will be addressed in the current study.

  1). How do the EFL learners perceive English in LL?
  2). What are the learners' attitudes towards the pedagogical values of English in LL?
  3). What are the learners' attitudes towards schoolscape construction?

2.2 Research Participants

The participants surveyed in this study are students in three different schools in downtown Beijing with the characteristics of international and metropolitan, and the students in this region are easy to get access to English in the city space. The total number of the participants is 205 including three groups with 100 senior high

school students, 63 undergraduate students, and 42 postgraduate students. The detail information about the participants is listed in Table 1. It should be noted that the senior high school students have to take the University Entrance Exam in China which includes the subject of English. Therefore, senior high school students are also worthy of consideration.

Table 1. Basic information of the participants

	Male	Female	Total
Senior high school students	63	35	98
Undergraduate students	23	40	63
Postgraduate students	6	36	42
Total	92	111	203

2.3 Methods and Instruments

To address the research questions clearly, a combined research design with quantitative and qualitative methods was used in this study. Firstly, A five-point Likert scale questionnaire, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with assigning values from 1-5, was sent out in the classroom to elicit needed information. The questionnaire contains 2 parts, the first part gathered some basic personal details like gender, grade level, school, etc. The second part of the questionnaire composes 27 statements, which can be categorized into three basic themes: perceptions of English in LL in China's city context (Q1-Q10), attitudes towards pedagogical values of English in LL (Q11-Q20), attitudes towards the schoolscape construction (Q21-Q27). Secondly, a semi-structured interview was conducted among the students to investigate the reasons behind the choices of the questionnaire.

2.4 Data Collection

The questionnaire was disseminated with the aid of English teachers in the classroom. In this study, 205 questionnaires were distributed. Finally, 203 valid ones were collected. The profile of the participating EFL learners is shown in Table 1. After the questionnaires were gathered, the data were extracted for data analysis. And the interview was carried out via Wechat, an instant communication tool popular in China, and the voiced message was transcribed by the researcher.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Students' Perceptions of English in LL

To investigate the students' perceptions towards English on signage, ten questions were designed in order to know to what extent they take notice of English in LL (Q1: I often take notice of English on signs in city space); for what purpose (Q2-Q4: I take notice of the English on signage just for fun; I take notice of the English on signage for information purpose; I take notice of the English on signage for finding errors or inappropriateness), the symbolic function of English in LL (Q5-Q6: English on signs can signify the modernization and internalization of a city; the density of English signs can show the economic conditions of a city), their evaluations on status of English and Mandarin (Q7-Q9: The fact that English is a supplementary language on signs prove its low importance in Chinese people's life; English used on public can imply that it is an important English; Hnayu Pinyin rather than English should be used in signs), and to what degree they come across "errors" or "mistranslations" of English on signage (Q10: I have come across English errors or mistranslation). The specific data were listed in Table 2.

In Table 2. we can see that all the students are aware of the English in LL the mean values of the three groups are around 2, which claims that the students though in the different grade level of English, they hold a relatively high degree of noticing the English on signs. Moreover, the data of Q2 of the three groups also illustrate that they are not for the funny purpose to see the English

on signs (their mean values are all above 4.0). From the results of Q5 and Q6, it is known that all the students accept the symbolic function of English which stands for modern, international and wealthy of a city. For Q7, it is clear that most students are opposed to the statement that English is unimportant in people's social life. On the contrast, they agree that English is an important language (see the data of Q8).

The results of the data analysis show that no matter which group they are in, most students acknowledge the importance of English. However, the postgraduate students support Hnayu Pinyin to replace English on signs in Q9, the mean value is 2.7 (SD=0.75), which is lower than senior high school students and undergraduate students with the mean value of 4.1 (SD=0.90) and 4.3 (SD=0.69) respectively. According to the interviews with different students in these groups, most senior high school students hold the opinion that English is a symbol of internationalization which indicates the well-development of China, so they agree to keep English rather Hanyu Pinyin on signs. Although some undergraduate students hold similar views with the senior high school students saying that China now has developed well at home and abroad, some other undergraduate students consider China's development, at present, is not in an all-rounded way and it's still leaving much room to improve from various aspects. They think English as a world language can attract and strengthen communication with foreigners, and affect the image construction of a city or a country in the world. It is interesting that many undergraduate students support to replace English on signs with Hanyu Pinyin. For them, they treat this issue from the perspective of

Table 2. Three groups' mean score from Q1 to Q10

Question number	Senior high school students		Undergraduate students		Postgraduate students	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	2.2	0.76	2.1	0.88	1.9	0.85
2	4.2	0.84	4.8	1.68	4.7	0.77
3	1.8	0.87	2.5	0.63	3.8	0.79
4	4.8	0.78	3.0	0.71	2.9	0.67
5	1.9	1.57	2.2	0.65	2.1	1.62
6	2.0	0.72	2.1	1.77	2.2	0.75
7	4.6	0.81	4.8	1.61	4.7	0.83
8	2.0	1.64	2.2	0.81	2.0	0.87
9	4.3	0.69	4.1	0.90	2.7	0.75
10	3.9	0.79	2.4	0.86	1.8	0.66

keeping and disseminating traditional Chinese culture. In their view, Hnayu Pinyin as an international standard is also an essential part of Chinese culture and Chinese characteristics, and to use Hanyu Pinyin in LL is conducive to building and showing the country's image in the world.

For the data of question Q4, the mean value of senior high school students (M=4.8, SD=0.78) is much higher than undergraduate students' (M=3.0, SD=0.71) and postgraduate students' (M=2.9, SD=0.67), which shows that senior high school students are rare to find errors of English on signs, while the undergraduate and postgraduate students are inclined to seek for faults of English in LL. For such condition, on one hand, it is the different English ability within the different groups that makes the students can/cannot find errors of English in LL. For example, senior high school students may in the stage of learning and accumulating English knowledge. While the undergraduate and postgraduate students learn English much longer and deeper than the senior high school students thus they hold abundant knowledge reserves of English which contribute to recognizing the impalpable incorrect usage of English in LL. The interview also reaffirms this because the undergraduate and postgraduate students both mentioned the misuse of the affective meaning of some English words in LL. On the other hand, it also proves the fact that the level of English development in China has been improved and promoted with the increase in frequent exchanges and trades between China and foreign countries. The data of Q10 shows similar findings with Q4, the senior high school students are the least ones who have experienced "errors" in English on signs, the postgraduate students are the most ones who frequently find "errors" in English in LL, and the undergraduate students stand in the middle of the other two groups.

Now it comes to the data of Q3, the mean value of the three groups are gradually increased, that is, the tendency that the students take notice of English on signs for information is decreased with the mean value of 1.8 (SD=0.87), 2.5 (SD=0.63), 3.8 (SD=0.79). Among them, the postgraduate students are less likely to look for information in English in LL. Combined the analysis of Q4, the postgraduate students might not trust or appreciate the English in LL for the errors that occurred. And the senior high school students are most likely to read English on signs for information purpose. The reason may be that they have faith in the correctness of English on

signage and make most of it with less fault-searching. The degree of finding information in English on signs, undergraduate students is between the other two.

3.2 The Students' Attitudes towards the Pedagogical Value of English in LL

In the second part of the questionnaire, Q11-Q20 are designed to gather the students' attitudes towards the pedagogical value of English in LL including their acceptance of English on signs as a learning source (Q11) and making authentic learning atmosphere (Q12), the effects of English on signs of helping students learn vocabulary, improving literacy skills, promoting critical thinking ability (Q13-Q15) and impact on raising the students' interests in English (Q16), experiences of reviewing English knowledge when come across English on signs (Q17) and experiences of using English on signs in English-learning process (Q18), supports for gathering materials of English on signs by themselves for learning purpose (Q19) and supports for gathering materials of English on signs by their English teachers for learning purpose (Q20). The specific information of the analysis results is placed in Table 3.

Based on the data of Q11, it is welcomed for the students' to treat English on signs as a resource for English learning. Although the postgraduate students maintain a little higher mean value (M=2.5, SD=0.74), they still expect to make good use of English on signs; and the interview showed it is the "nonstandard" application of English in city space that causes their anxiety, therefore they call for more attention being paid to improve the "standard usage and dissemination of English in city space". At the same time, the students of different groups all agree that English on signs creates an authentic environment for learning English. The reason most frequently cited in the three groups is that the public English provides more casual and usual information on practical and social English usage in real context than the classroom English materials. Q13 aiming at investigating to what extent English in city space can help students to learn English vocabulary, the findings show that with the grade level increases, the students can get less and less assistance to learn vocabulary from English on signs. And such a situation may also be related to their knowledge accumulation in different English levels. For example, the English used in LL is, more often than not, common words which are not obstacles for postgraduates to recognize.

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Table 3. Three groups' mean score from Q11 to Q20

Question number	Senior high school students		Undergraduate students		Postgraduate students	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
11	1.9	1.67	2.1	0.83	2.5	0.74
12	1.8	0.84	2.1	1.74	2.0	1.68
13	1.6	0.87	2.7	1.16	4.2	0.68
14	3.4	1.68	2.5	0.81	3.8	1.59
15	4.1	1.27	2.6	0.65	4.0	0.94
16	2.2	1.02	2.1	0.85	2.2	0.76
17	2.6	0.75	3.0	1.31	4.6	0.81
18	2.2	0.69	2.8	1.41	3.8	0.79
19	2.1	0.92	2.6	1.04	4.7	0.65
20	2.0	0.89	2.2	0.76	2.1	1.66

However, as for their attitudes to the extent that English can help improve their literacy skills and critical thinking ability (see the data of Q14 and Q15), there is a different story. For these two aspects, it is the undergraduate students who believe they can get benefits from English in LL in promoting literacy skills and critical thinking, but the senior high school students and postgraduate students are both keep an opposed attitude. In the interview part, the students speak out their reasons for such attitudes. The representative answers of the three groups are listed below:

I think to improve English literacy skills needs knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and text organization, and so on. In addition, the guidance and help from a professional English teacher are also essential for us to advance our literacy skill. I don't think the English on signs is powerful enough to get my literacy skills promoted. As for critical thinking, it seems much more complicated which needs more means and contents in different fields of knowledge, I cannot even connect English in city space with critical thinking together.

--Coming from a senior high school student

It is useful and interesting to learn the texts of public English, which has different writing styles with different stories. From different vocabulary and sentences, I can feel different writing purposes and emotions, and that can help me to select the appropriate word to describe something or express my emotion. I can also by comparing the frequency of occurrence between Chinese and English to consider the social-historical and economical differences indifferent areas which, I think, is a kind of critical thinking

way. So, we can know lots of covert information via English on public signs.

--Coming from an undergraduate student

I don't think that English in China's city space is standard enough to be able to shoulder the tasks of improving my literacy skills. On the other side, English on signs is not academic enough to foster my literacy skills. As for critical thinking, I think it is a kind of thinking model which is a long term construction and influenced by many factors, so it is not simply English on signs that can influence my thinking model.

--Coming from a postgraduate student

From Table 3. we can also see that all students agree that English on signs can help them review the knowledge they have learned (see the data of Q16), the mean values are all-around 2.0. With the grade level increased, their English-learning interests raised by English on the public are decreased (see the data of Q17), and it is similar to their experience of using English on signs (see the data of Q18). The data of Q19 show that the senior high school students and undergraduate students are more likely to collect English on signs as learning materials, but the postgraduates are unwilling to gathering English as learning materials. However, all of the students support the teacher to use the English in city space as teaching material (see the data of Q20).

3.3 The Learners' Attitudes towards English Schoolscape Construction

In the third part of the questionnaire, Q21-Q28 were designed to test how the students think

Table 4. Three groups' mean score from Q21 to Q27

Question number	Senior high school students		Undergraduate students		Postgraduate students	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
21	1.7	0.88	1.6	0.94	1.6	0.83
22	3.7	0.74	3.5	1.24	3.6	0.79
23	4.2	1.35	4.0	0.89	4.1	1.75
24	2.0	1.17	2.1	0.65	1.9	1.21
25	2.1	0.85	2.8	0.73	4.0	0.84
26	4.2	0.75	4.3	0.96	4.2	0.76
27	1.8	0.81	1.8	0.64	1.7	0.82

about English schoolscape construction. The related issues include the existence of English signs in school (Q21: My school has English signs) and the condition of English signs in school (Q22: The English landscape in my school is well constructed), the students perceptions towards the function of English signs in school (Q23: English signs in school are placed in order to improve students' English; Q24: English signs in school are placed in order to show its international vision), their attitudes to the benefits of English signs for English-learning in school (Q25: English signs in school is helpful for English-learning), who should manage and designed the English signs in school (Q26: English signs inside the school should be managed by school authorities; Q27: English in schools should be designed by teachers and students). The questionnaire results of this part are shown in Table 4.

With regard to the learners' attitudes towards the English signs in school, the students in different groups show similar attitudes in most of the issues. For instance, all of them express that there are English signs in their schools (see the data of Q21), but they are not so satisfied with their schoolscape construction (see the data of Q22) which also entails that English schoolscape construction has not been well attended to in most schools. They all hold the idea that the English signs in school are mainly to show the international vision rather than to improve the students' English (see the data of Q22 and Q23). The results also indicate that the students in different groups expect that the English signs in school should be designed by the teachers and students (see the data of Q27), opposed to the idea that English signs in school should be managed by authorities (see the data of Q26). Meanwhile, it also suggests that students are willing to take initiative and play an active role in English schoolscape construction with teachers in order to facilitate English learning. As for the

benefits of learning English on English signs in school (see the data of Q25), the senior high school students deem it helpful to their English-learning process (M=2.1, SD=0.85), and the undergraduate students also keep a positive attitude towards English schoolscape for improving students' English (M=2.8, SD=0.73). However, postgraduate students refuse the opinion that English in school signs is helpful for their English study (M=4.0, SD=0.84). The reason can also be inferred from their ideology of "nonstandard" use of English.

4. CONCLUSION

China has the largest number of EFL learners in the world, totaling around 400 million or over one-third of its population [32], thus English in China has far-reaching impacts and has garnered substantial scholarship. Given the longstanding conundrum of separation of didactic learning and actual uses, the English in LL is supposed to provide a new promising solution for the connection of classroom-based English learning to the authentic learning environment in the city space as well as the school space. However, the reality is that the EFL learners in different levels do not keep a similar perception towards the English in LL.

For the first question of this study, the learners in different groups are all aware of the English in LL and they agree that the English in LL is related to the city's economic development. And the undergraduate students also mentioned that English in LL can enhance the city's development, therefore it is feasible and useful to keep English popular in LL rather than Hanyu Pinyin. Students in senior high school also refute the idea of replacing English with Hnayu Pinyin for learning English knowledge and gain information. Postgraduate students are willing to see Hanyu Pinyin in LL rather than English, and they express their confidence and faith towards

China's well-development condition and it is time for Chinese culture to walk out. It should be noted here, that the postgraduate students don't think the English on signs are "standard" enough, which also influences their attitudes towards the pedagogical value in the second part of the questionnaire. In spite of all the agreement on the symbolic function of internationalization and modernization, the senior high school students use English on signs for information and rarely find "errors" in English in LL. Conversely, the undergraduate and postgraduate students are more inclined to find "inappropriateness" in English on signs.

The results also reveal that senior high school students, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students hold different attitudes towards the pedagogical value of English in LL. First, they all admit English on signs is an authentic resource for English learning and support the teachers to collect English on signs as a type of English teaching material. But the three groups are not in line with issues that English on signs can improve vocabulary, English literacy, and critical thinking. Generally speaking, the research shows that the extent of promotion on such abilities is related to the students' knowledge background, English learning methods and perceptions of English on signs. The postgraduate students' "standard" ideology towards English make them feel negative on pedagogical values of English in China's city space, though they deem the English in LL precious and meaningful for English learning.

Although the students of senior high school, undergraduate students and postgraduate students share similar attitudes in most issues, for the advantages of helping students improve English, the postgraduate students still have a negative evaluation of the "correctness" of English in school; the senior high school students insist that English in school is helpful for improving their English, and the undergraduate students are with a neutral attitude.

All in all, the findings in this study show that the EFL learners in different levels all admit that the English in LL has played an important role in its symbolic function which is emblematic of internationalization, modernization, and well economic development. They also agree that English in LL is a valuable resource for English learning, and they hope the English schoolscape construction can be improved. The extent to the utilization of English in LL is determined by multiple factors, for example, the learners' English knowledge base, English learning methods and ideology of "standard" English. For the senior students, they are the most ones who are very interested and efficient in learning English in LL. Because the postgraduate students keep a strict standard requirement of English application in LL, they are more likely to seek "errors" or "inappropriateness" rather than absorb some knowledge or skills from English in LL. The undergraduate students are in the middle position. On one side, they use English in LL to learn new vocabulary, improve English literacy and enlighten their critical thinking ability. On the other side, they are also able to realize the "inappropriateness" of English in LL. However, they hold a different ideology towards "standard" English, that is, they are more likely to treat such "inappropriateness" as a kind of Chinese way of expression or "Chinglish" of which they are in favor.

According to the findings, some suggestions can be proposed for English education planning. Firstly, since the importance of English in LL are approved by all the students, it is feasible for the English teacher to use the English in city space as a resource for English teaching. Secondly, the contents and quantity of such resource should be carefully selected and controlled based on the different learners with different English levels. Last but not least, the English schoolscape is supposed to be constructed well with the efforts of professional English teachers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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