

Socially Based Learning: Using Advertisements in the ESL classroom

Roger T. Williams

&

Patrick Rates

コミュニケーション場面における文化的価値を見出すことは語学教師にとって極めて重要である。ESLやEFLの教室において目標言語を教えるために教師は社会活動のシミュレーションを試みる。この場合教師が教える学生の人数やテキストの制限というような要素を考慮するときさまざまな問題が生じる。本論は日本のある高等学校及び社会に根ざした学習を推進する手段として雑誌広告が使われるある大学で行われた二つの研究結果の概要である。何故学生が目標言語をそれが使われる実際の社会的背景をも同時に学びながら習得し得るようになるかという問題の背後にある概念を分析し理解するためにこれらの研究は著者達によって利用されたのである。

Abstract

Finding cultural value in a communication event is of the utmost importance for language instructors. In the ESL and EFL classrooms, teachers try to simulate social activities in order to teach the target language. There are various problems with this when one considers factors like the ratio of students to instructors, as well as the limits of textbooks. This paper outlines the results of two studies conducted at a Japanese senior high school and a Japanese university, where magazine advertisements were used as a medium to promote socially based learning. These studies were used by the authors to analyze and understand the concepts behind why students will be able to learn their target language while also learning an authentic social context in which that language is used.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. It focuses on language from the perspective of culture and cultural situations. Language is conventionalized

into a special genre because it depends on who speaks and who writes to whom in a given context (Trudgill, 2000).

Advertising reflects the language in communities and reveals realities of people's apprehension to their society. While non-commercial advertisements target a different audience by different authors with different purposes, discourse of commercial advertisements generally links the common relationship between writers and readers. It is the relationship between producers (companies) and consumers, and the aim of the discourse is always to promote the purchase of the item being advertised. Therefore, the language of any advertisement has a powerful function, aim, and role to fulfill (Caples, 1987).

For this reason, analyzing commercial advertisements contributes to the study of language in use in society. Especially, since English is being diversified with the rapid change of modern society, advertisements immediately reflect the change of English itself (Williamson, 1983).

It is also useful if analysis of commercial advertisements is applied to the second language learning classroom. Because English is often taught separately from the context where it is used in society, learners need to know the function of language for communication. Language reflects society and society consists of various cultures. Therefore, language must be taught in the culture. When the culture is studied, the context where language is used will be understood and it helps support meaning and sending the message (Wardhaugh, 2003).

In this paper, the usefulness of applying the study of advertisements to the second language classroom will be argued. This will begin with a discussion of advertisement as written and spoken texts. How practical advertisement language is used in a real society will also be discussed. This will be followed by an explanation of how code is needed to interpret text of advertisements. This analysis is based on the two studies that explained the relevance of the function of codes. The next section will explain how to apply advertisements as language to the classroom and what features of advertisement language should be focused on and why it is important in the second language classroom. Finally, through the study of advertisement language how contextualization works in social conversation from ethnographic point of view.

Advertisements as written and spoken texts

The discourse of advertisements as written text is simultaneously spoken text because it is

individualized and often colloquial. It is a monologue but it is also a dialogue. Advertisements not only send messages but also offer people an action of interpretation. They construct the meaning by comparing them with the culture inside themselves. In other words, they reflect ideology and produce new meanings through the social codes in communities. This is a cultural interaction between readers and writers (Trudgill, 2001).

Language is a means to express or send messages, but there is also a nonlinguistic communication in a society. Much of the language is used by making linkages between symbols and people's mental images, which is the function of a code (Trudgill, 2001). When people see text, they do not only follow the written language, but they reflect and standardize it in their cultural experience, even though the process a new meaning is produced. In other words, their interpretation is greatly related to an individual's culture which involves sense of values, social roles, and life styles in communities (Wardhaugh, 2002).

Advertisements are most effected by cultural, social and empirical codes. They are expressed through the media which have the systematic function of code which consists of the writers' intentions and social contextualization of language and pictures. When people see an advertisement of a cigarette with a picture of a cowboy, they reflect the existing image of a cowboy and share it with an image of the cigarette. If they have no knowledge of a cowboy, they do not construct the meaning which a writer intends to offer. Advertisements require readers have a code system which is already captured. In other words, they depend on their ideology for interpretation (Williamson, 1983).

Therefore, when cultural backgrounds of both writers and readers differ from each other, there will be a misinterpretation. Possibly, this will lead to a misunderstanding and incomplete transmission of the intended message. In the global communication context, it is necessary to analyze how people interpret the meaning of text and how ideology changes (Erickson, 1996). Advertisements are a great source for the reflection of the society. In this paper, the authors argue that code is related to the interpretation of advertisements and how advertisements should be applied to the second language classroom.

Analyzing how code is used to interpret text

In second language acquisition, context does play a role in influencing language performance.

Hymes (1974) suggested frameworks of context and it is known as “speaking mnemonic.” It is obvious that this concept shows how complex context is physically, psychologically and socially. However, language has often been taught with provision of practical examples, but they do not give learners a chance to consider how they are reflected in what kind of social structure. Fairclough (1989) and Erickson (1996) represent the importance of teaching context in classroom. Billmyer (1989) also emphasizes the necessity of analysis of language function while language is being taught. Cohen (1996) suggests that language teachers comprehend the characteristics of speech events.

In the second language classroom, however, it is difficult to raise communicative competence in proper context under the current situation. First of all, there is commonly only one language teacher for 30 to 40 students in a class in Japan. This makes it very difficult for all of the students in a class to interact with the teacher by using the target language. Secondly, classrooms themselves are removed from the real society. It is a tentative space for practicing and imitating the real world. Moreover, textbooks are restricted. Most language textbooks which are used in classroom are written for non native learners and they are not authentic text in a real society (Winnail, 2006).

Texts of advertisements require readers have a common code with writers and give them a chance to consider the choice of language used therein. In other words, advertisements function as a speech event and contain a context from the real world (Williamson, 1983). Consequently, it is worthwhile to use advertisements in classroom in the second language classroom.

A simple survey was completed in order to find how common code is used for expressing ideas. 46 Japanese high school students and 15 university students were told to create their own advertisements for orange juice. They were free to use any language to send a message of how the product was excellent. The students were 17 to 20 years old, and this is old enough to know general social function. Furthermore, their English is fairly good enough to write a sales-type copy. The analysis of their work is as follows:

Percentage of the students	Indication in advertisement	Examples
9%	name of the source place	California, Ehime(Japan), Kochi(Japan), Wakayama(Japan)
26%	numerical indication	100%
2%	name of the kind	Valencia
9%	metaphor	Sunshine, Scent of the Sun, Blessing of Nature, Taste of Adolescence
4%	artificiality	Sugar-free, Chemical-free
13%	naturalness	Organic, Vitamin C,
46%	direct explanation	Healthy, Fresh, Sweet, Nice, Juicy, Beautiful Incredible Taste, Extreme Taste, Great Taste

From the results above, it can be said that while 46% of the students used concrete words or phrases to express the product, 54% students used words or phrases that built an image of the product. That is, more than half of the students used their code relevant to the product in order to appeal its good point. All the images which students used are easily understood and appeal to each other. This shows that code is useful in society to interact, and it is also significant to conceive the meaning of the message. If someone does not know that California oranges are famous for their good taste, he or she never knows why the text mentions California. When readers see the text, they reflect on their image of a California oranges to the quality of the product. This process is important when readers understand the text of advertisements, and it requires them to exhibit the comprehensive interpretation of the context of the language. This is because advertisements do contain various kinds of information about this context.

Another study was done in order to find how much information is demanded to understand a certain context. 34 different students in the same Japanese high school and 12 students in the same university class were told to interpret an advertisement from an American magazine. They are also 17 to 20 years old students and their English is good enough to read the English headlines of the advertisement.

In the advertisement, there is a picture of a little young girl, probably 5 or 6 years old.

She is eating spaghetti using a fork and exhibiting a messy face. She is looking at the camera rather seriously. The picture occupies two-thirds of the page, and below the picture, the headline reads: "Watch them say 'Yes!' to veggies." There is also a body part after that which says "The Ragu pasta sauce they love is filled with more than a full serving of vegetables in ever 1/2 cup. And that's something everyone can say 'Yes!' to." There is also a signature line which says "100% Natural. Serve up some YES!" Beside the body, there is a picture of the jar of the product without a lid. From the mouth of the jar, a plant is coming up with pictures of real tomatoes and illustrations of onions and garlic.

The students were shown the advertisement with the body of the text and signature line covered. Then they were asked to write their answers to three questions. The first question is, "what does the headline mean?" The second question is, "What kind of information about the girl do you get from this advertisement?" And the last question is, "What do you think are good points about this product?"

An analysis of their answers proves that 24% of the students understood the headline, and 12% of the students understood the message from the picture although they did not know the meaning of the headline. A total of 71% of the students did not understand the message of the advertisement. Students already learned the English structure of the headline, and the picture of the little girl eating spaghetti and the picture of the product were clearly shown. However, only about a quarter of the students were able to interpret the message of the writer and three-fourths of them did not understand it.

There are several reasons a lot of students did not understand the text. As for the linguistic aspect, they did not know the function of the phrase "say Yes! to veggies." They knew each word, but they have never learned the expression in their English language textbooks and could not understand that the meaning was "they love them," or "it is delicious." Also, they did not know the word "veggies." A few of them assumed it meant vegetable from the similar spelling but most of them could not know the meaning because they did not learn the slang word in the classroom. Consequently, they did not know what "them" indicated. This confused them in the course of interpreting the text. In the cultural aspect, since they did not understand who "them" are, they could not assume whose utterance the text was and to whom the message was sent. More importantly, they did not know the culture that most children do not like eating

vegetables. If they had known this culture and the function of the phrase “say yes to...” and the meaning of the slang veggies, they might have assumed that the text was sent to children’s parents, or someone who cooks for them, using an imperative sentence and “them” means children who usually do not like vegetables like the little girl pictured in the advertisement. The whole sentence is not complicated, rather very simple, and it is a colloquial expression in a daily life. However, the basic information in this advertisement is not dealt with in the classroom because it never appears in the English language textbooks used by the students in the study. It is seldom explained by language teachers because the language in the textbooks is not always taught in context of usage (Winnail, 2006).

The results of these two studies show that for second language acquisition, not only linguistic ability but also cultural and social understanding of contexts under which the language is used. Learners need to understand the code that writers use when message is sent, and language teachers have to make an effort to teach language in real use in a real society.

Applying advertisements as language in class

Burns (2001) suggests that in the classroom context the range of genres dealt with is fairly restricted, as they will be those which are pedagogical in their purpose and powerful within the context of the school curriculum. This is true especially in the EFL context.

Using texts of advertisements in the language classroom will be more open since these materials have a lot of cultural information. It requires a comprehensive understanding of the social context and the function of language is focused through the texts. It also motivates learners because the texts of advertisements are authentic from a real society. This is what genre-based approach promotes in the classroom (Wardhaugh, 2003).

In this section, the authors’ clarify what must be taught in the classroom through advertisements based on their research. First of all, the relationship between writers and readers of a text must be clear. Hyland (2002) maintains that the text is the place where readers and writers meet and that it is a dynamic realization of a social relationship, cognitively and linguistically accomplished. In advertisements, readers will be consumers and writers will be producers, or companies. However, writers sometimes say the texts from the view of readers or people close to them. This immediate grasp by readers is crucial to understand the advertisement. Here are

examples of advertisements to show how important the relationship between readers and writers is to understand the whole texts.

One text reads, "My mom has a knack for Snacks." (JELL-O by KRAFT.) Another text says, "Taste the way ranch is supposed to taste. We made it first. We made it right. (Ranch by Hidden Valley)" Another one says, "Trade? As if! Make Fun of Lunch." (Sandwiches by Oscar Mayer.) Each advertisement has a picture of a young boy or boys eating the products happily. The first text was written as an utterance from the boy of the picture who loves the product. He is definitely one of the consumers. In the second one, "we" means clearly that the producer and the utterance is not from the boy in the advertisement. And the third one is rather ambiguous. The text means 'Enjoy this lunch,' and it also means 'Laugh at your friends' lunch.' In this context, the writer probably intended two meanings and the latter is sent from the main boy who has the product as other boys look disappointed at their own lunch. Consequently, the recognition of sender and receiver of the text is significant to understand the whole context. In this case, beyond the language used, readers should know the culture that mothers make snacks for children, and that children sometimes enjoy trading their lunch with friends.

The second factor to be focused on is the mode of the text. This is naturally relevant to language choices made for usual conversations. In advertisement discourse also, whether the language is formal or informal will decide types of messages. For example, one headline reads, "Guess what our newest flavor is." (Country Style by BUSH'S.) There is another one which reads, "While your neighbors are busy taking care of their deck, you could be dancing on yours." (Timber Tech deck.) The former text is straight and casual. It is a spoken text and writer decides the closeness between the writer and readers. On the other hand, the latter is euphemistic and formal. The basic difference between these two texts is the level of politeness. The formal texts in the advertisement are objective and provide suggestions indirectly. It is often written by an explanatory or narrative style. Informal texts request that readers share the common understanding with writers. They depend on a "code" to send messages more than formal texts. Their forms are often imperative with more slang, vocatives. There is also an intermediate type between formal and informal texts. It emphasizes the sense of unity of a writer and a reader. The form is often conditional or testimonial and the phrases "if you. . ."

“Why don’t you. . .,” and “Let’s. . .,” are used frequently. An example is “If you take NEXIUM, free support can show up on some unexpected places.” (NEXIUM by Astra Zenea) This sentence is not imperative but still strongly inviting. Also, the writer maintains a level of politeness.

The third factor is how the message should be sent. For the reader to benefit, the text should arouse his or her curiosity. For example, there is a text which reads, “It doesn’t go with breakfast. It is breakfast.” (French Toast Swirl by PEPPERIDGE FARM.) The first sentence would surprise readers because the product appears to be suitable for breakfast with a close-up picture. Then the next sentence will satisfy them as it accords with the picture of the appetizing bread. It should be in communion with the picture. It must be persuasive yet factual because readers would not accept the text if it the content is larger than life.

The last factor is how the message should be read. Advertisements as written texts have a lot of physical information in size, place, color, and type of font of headlines and body texts. It could be said that these features are replacements of voice loudness, stress, intonation, and breathing in spoken discourse. It also shows the writers’ attitudes and moods, such as politeness, friendliness, reliance and responsibility. Readers feel the atmosphere at their first glance consciously and unconsciously, and then combine the meaning of the text and the atmosphere by using codes which they already have. It functions as building of the schema for the whole text. In a real communication setting, the same process will be done. People feel the atmosphere from the interlocutor’s mood and construct the meaning which is being sent. This process of contextualizing is necessary (Trugill, 2001).

Conclusion

The analysis of advertisements shows the universality of communication. The importance of the relationship of participants, presence of politeness based on the power balance, language choice and style, register of expression, conversational skills is applicable to both written and spoken discourses. Advertisements present various kinds of cultural information directly and indirectly. To know the cultural, social information helps grasp the context when interaction is going on. Therefore, analysis of advertisements is greatly helpful to promote communicative competence in the second language classroom.

Discourse analysis in ethnography shows that the knowledge of structure and vocabulary is part of the factors which functions for the process of interpretation. It reveals how influential and essential social norms relevant to a participant's cultural background, attitude, roles, and status are here. This is the cultural value in a communication event (Wardhaugh, 2003). In the second language classroom, both in EFL and ESL environments, how to contextualize during the real conversation must be taught properly and the teaching methodology of language which is based on a real use in a real society like genre-based approach is required.

References

- Better Homes & Gardens*. (July 1996), (October 1997), (June 2001), (February 2002), (April 2006).
Des Moines: Meredith Corporation.
- Burns, A. (2001). *Genre-based approaches to writing and beginning adult ESL learners*. London: Routledge.
- Caples, J. (1997). *Tested Advertising Methods*. Paramus: Prentice Hall.
- Cohen, A. (1996). Speech acts. In S.L. McKay and N.H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (pp. 283-306). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erickson, F. (1996). Ethnographic microanalysis. In S.L. McKay and N.H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (pp. 283-306). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London and New York: Longman.
- Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies Japanese Translation*. Tokyo: Cambridge University Press.
- Good Housekeeping* (February 1986). Des Moines: Good Housekeeping.
- Hyland, K. (2002). Directives: Argument and Engagement in Academic Writing. *Applied Linguistics*, 23 (2), 215-239.
- Kubota M. (2004). *Second Language Acquisition and Identity*. Tokyo: Hitsuji Shobo.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers Japanese Translation*. Tokyo: Cambridge University Press.
- Stubbs, M. (1989). *Discourse Analysis Japanese Translation*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Trudgill, P. (2001). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society* (4th ed.) London: Penguin.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2003). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (4th ed.) Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Williamson, J. (1983). *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Winnail, D. (2006). Classrooms in Chaos. *Tomorrow's World*. 8 (1): 16-21.