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ESL/TSL BRIDGING CHUUK'S CULTURAL DISTANCE WITH COMMERCIAL SPEECH

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Abstract

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This paper examines the relationship of language and culture and points to the importance of this relationship to English Language Learners by looking at commercial speech from television advertisements as a source of insight. This study relies on the work of anthropologist Edward T Hall (1976) and theorists from the socio-cultural perspectives (Vygotsky 1978), (Banks 2008) and the New London Group (1996). Four randomly chosen American TV advertisements were analyzed for literacy and cognitive content through students' cultural viewpoints. They were first shown to a group Chuukese communication students on the island of Chuuk, Micronesia, and later presented to American college students studying in Hawaii.

The objective of the study was to explore ways (L2) Chuukese students learning English as their second language and Americans using English as their first language (L1) respond to four chosen American advertisements. The four messages included two beer commercials, an insurance ad, and one for a company that handles electronic data management. The responses can be summarized as follows: 1) The visual images entertained the students even without the understanding of socio-cultural metaphors used in the commercials, 2) The cultural stereotypes depicted US experience and were not easily understood by the Chuukese students and other L2 students in the sample 3) Learning level in their L2 (English), i.e. how well they could speak and write in English, did not help them understand the messages. While the American college students' performance was considerably better, it did indicate that language spoken at home and geographic origin had a significant effect on understanding. The study suggests that TV commercials could be sourced as an ESL teaching aid as Banks (2008) asserts that new approaches to literacy learning can have positive outcomes. Evidence of socially situated literacies can be bridged through a more contextualized approach to learning using "multiliteracies" (NLG, 1996). This will help students and teachers alike develop creative ways to teach the English language in multicultural classrooms.

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Statement of the Problem

Educators teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adult students must keep course materials relevant, up-to-date and low cost. This research examines the viability of using television commercials as a supplement to existing teaching materials by comparing innate understanding of a series of messages as observed in two groups, English (L1) students and students for whom English is a second language (L2). This examination looks at ultimately defining materials that could be used in making lessons more culturally relevant.

Often direct translations reveal that the translator, while knowing the rules of the language, did not fully understand the nuances of that language's culture. The idea that language and culture are interwoven is well established. (Vygotsky, 1978; NLG, 1996; Cummins 2001) While some understanding of one without the other is possible, finding ways to blend language and culture in the classroom can give non-native speakers an aid to understanding implied and literal meanings. As a consequence of these literacy events, new words and concepts are understood.

Purpose of the Study

This research explores ways in which non-native speakers of English understand American culture as depicted in the ubiquitous television commercial. This examination is designed to ultimately look at how these 30-second "slices of life" could benefit ESL education. It examines American concepts that are embedded in key cultural metaphors and idioms depicted in television advertisements, as shown to students on the island of Chuuk, Micronesia, and a more diverse group of American students in Hawaii.

Review of the Literature

Focus on learning as social (Vygotsky, 1978; Gee 1999; Street,1995) encouraged scholars to look into academic institutions to re- evaluate learning processes and understand how the socio-cultural environment shapes the individual. Lee Vygotsky (1978,1997) an early proponent of learning as social explains cognitive processes in

term of social interaction through semiotic mediation process (like “talk”) with-in joint activities. Street, B.V. (1984) talks about the autonomous model which is in fact a narrow, culture specific literacy practice versus the ideological model which stresses the significance of the socialization process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for participants and it is therefore concerned with the general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the explicit ‘educational’ ones.’ New London Group (2003) argues that the basis of a new pedagogy requires that:

Every classroom will inevitably reconfigure the relationships of local and global difference that are now so critical. To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore or erase the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning. (p. 18)

Television commercials offer to students who use English as a second language (L2) enormous opportunities to increase their vocabulary. But by recognizing the socio-cultural differences in audience’s perceptions, commercials that are less accessible culturally to students may not increase their cognitive and critical thinking skills. This study is meant to explore the responses of students to TV commercials who are from L1 and L2 classrooms.

Short Descriptions of the four commercials

The four commercials were selected for their stereotypical American themes through the use of cultural metaphors. The cultural content in the themes, while not necessarily realistic or even valid, are common elements in American television commercials and in the American lexicon. We have identified key cultural metaphors in each of the commercials to find out how students from different cultures, one as the host culture, primarily identified to use English as a first language (L1), which is the United States. The other classroom is from Chuuk, Micronesia whose students use Chuukese as a first language and English as their second language (L2).

Budweiser Beer

The first commercial shown, the oldest from 1996, was for Budweiser beer. The 30-second spot featured two teams of the iconic Anheuser Busch Clydesdale draft horses loose in a mountain field. After a few seconds the audience sees that they are actually playing football. Finally one horse kicks the ball and it flies between two telephone poles as if they were goal posts. As the horse gallop back to the field for another “scrimmage,” one observing cowboy turns to another and asks, “Do they always do that?”. To which the reply is, “No they usually go for two.” The cultural metaphors embedded in this commercial include reference to details about the game of football, popularly known in the United States. As the two cowboys discussing the horses’ seemingly bizarre behavior, i.e. playing football, the answer, “No, they usually go for two,” exacts from the audience a specific detail about scoring in football said seriously by a real fan. In this case, scoring for two is assured through the horses’ skills. The use of this idiom is not explained and presumed by the cowboy speaker to be understood. This shift in understanding, and the second cowboys, matter-of-fact attitude add humor to the spot if the view understands the meaning of the phrase. The famous (in America) Clydesdale horses and rugged individualism and freedom as personified by the American cowboy are also cultural concepts that viewers from an American culture can reference.

EDS Consulting Firm

The second commercial also featured a Western theme. This time the cowboys are lamenting the hard life on the trail, but saying that they love the work. We see, as it is revealed to us, that they are actually herding hundreds of cats across the prairie. The message is an obvious reference to the cultural metaphor “like herding cats” used to describe any difficult task that requires order from chaos especially among discordant and independent parties. The term, as a cultural metaphor, has been in the lexicon since the early 1980s was first documented in reference to computer work and here, dramatized, it is being used by EDS, a firm that offers consulting to solve data management problems. To be counted as understanding the metaphorical content, the subject had to include some reference to, and demonstration of, an understanding that this was the foundational concept.

Budweiser

The third commercial, again for Budweiser, depicts a bored young man sitting at his office desk throwing pencil up to stick in the ceiling. He receives a phone call from his beautiful female partner who asks him to come home, obviously for a night of romance. But, even this seems to bore him. When his wife announces that she has Bud Light on ice. He then becomes so excited that he puts extra thrust behind his last pencil throw which goes completely through the ceiling, the floor above and the seat of a chair in the conference room above. It spears an older executive sitting in a meeting, When he jumps up and bends over, a group of Japanese business men in the room misinterpret the gesture and all stand to bow. The key scored metaphor/cultural concept in this commercial was of a husband, bored with work and bored with his relationship, reluctantly responding to a wife's "demands" \used to highlight the more "persuasive" invitation, i.e. drinking beer.

E-Trade

The fourth commercial was for stock investment firm, E-Trade. It is set in a hospital. A team of emergency medical workers crash through a door with a patient on a gurney. A young doctor begins to work on the victim, then announces, "This man's got money coming out the wazoo!". At this point an older doctor, apparently of Indian decent, shouts that they should get this man a "private room." The next scene shows the patient now being worked on by the Indian chief trauma surgeon in a deluxe room. A hospital representative is asking the patient's beautiful spouse if he has insurance. To which the surgeon interjects, "Insurance? He has money coming out the wazoo!". The E-Trade tag then adds, "we should all be so lucky." The healthcare environment is a popular thematic device for dramatic executions and, in this portrayal it is rife with stereotypical imagery. The key concept studied in this survey was the cultural metaphor for being wealthy, i.e. having money out the wazoo.

Survey Methodology

Survey data collection was conducted in two phases – 2011 in Chuuk and 2012 in the Hawaii, United States. Two classrooms from Chuuk and three from Hawaii were recruited through professors who were able to ask their students if they were willing to

participate in the survey. Students from Chuuk used English as a second language (L2) and students from Hawaii that were included in the final survey used English as a first language. A few (5) students from the Hawaii population also had English as their second language, so these individual responses were included with the Chuukese group. Following the initial agreement to participate with the classroom teachers, the DVDs containing the four commercials were provided to the professors. They chose the days that would be appropriate for the survey. Courses taught by professors in Hawaii were not necessarily communication classes and included a biology, religion, and algebra classes. Students were asked to answer a questionnaire and were not told the storylines of each of the commercials. They were also told that the showing of the commercials can be repeated if they felt the need to do so. Each classroom visit lasted about 30 to 40 minutes.

Data Collection

Respondents were shown four television commercials each of which had been selected for a “Best Superbowl Commercials” show. To ensure that these particular advertising messages would not be in current rotation, or retain top-of-mind awareness, no commercial newer than ten years old was selected to be one of the four. All 65 respondents viewed the four commercials in the same order.

Once the responses had been coded for all 65 subjects, two former advertising professionals were asked to look at each answer. One analyst had been an advertising writer and creative director, the other had been an account executive. They separately evaluated each of the 260 written responses and marked whether they thought the individual had demonstrated any understanding of the underlying conceptual theme and target metaphor of the commercial. They marked each one with a “Y” to indicate some level of understanding, an “N” for misunderstanding and a “O” if they were not able to tell for sure. If a respondent indicated “I understand this,” but did not explain how or why in some sort of narrative way, they received a “O” meaning that understanding had not been demonstrated.

An example of the type of response that would earn a positive score would be “They are showing that if you have lots of money, you can get good healthcare in America,” or “Cats are difficult to herd, they’re showing that EDS can do difficult things.” An example of a response that would demonstrate misunderstanding, or no understanding, would be, “These

men love cats and are taking them to people who want to make them into pets,” or “I think this man ate some money and now it is coming out.”

All the coded responses were also analyzed for common elements such as respondent gender, age, hours spent watching television, language(s) spoken at home and geographic area where the individual was raised. Also, each respondent was asked to describe a favorite TV commercial. These were compared based simply on the length of detail in the description and ranged from none at all, to several sentences.

Even though all the analysis codes from the commercials were added together, respondent answers that received two “Ys” were only counted once, and, in effect showed no more demonstrated surety of understanding. Single “Y” answers counted as having demonstrated equal understanding. In cases where there was disagreement, one “Y” and one “O” for example, that answer was not counted. Only responses that convinced one or both ad professional of an understanding were counted.

Data Analysis

While the classroom teacher who surveyed the Chuukese students indicated that they clearly enjoyed watching the commercial (after the survey questionnaire had been completed, they even asked to see the reel again), results suggest that their responses did not demonstrate a great deal of understanding of the conceptual basis for the messages. In some cases the respondents did not even grasp that there were four separate messages and thought it was one ongoing story. The 20 respondents got an average correct score of .3 (8.75%). While the explanations of what they thought was happening in the commercial was often times very detailed, they were almost always wrong. The exception was the commercial that depicted the interpersonal nuance of the relationship between the office-working man and his wife who was calling him on the phone. All the correct responses presented for this particular commercial. The commercials with cowboys and doctors, with their dependence on metaphors and American iconography, drew zero correct narratives from the Chuukese respondents.

The level of understanding by the more varied group of respondents surveyed in Hawaii, which included 17 individuals who were raised in Mainland states, while not perfect was considerably higher. The 17 people with Mainland background averaged 1.88 (47%)

conceptual messages correctly identified. The 31 people who indicated that they grew up in Hawaii averaged 1.35 (33.75%) conceptual messages correctly identified. This particular group also included five people who were raised outside of the United States (China, Chuuk, Japan, Mali, and Palau). Like the Chuukese students, this group scored substantially lower on their ability to identify cultural metaphors, idioms and iconography and only managed one correct answer between them for an average of .2 (5%).

The table below summarizes the results and shows the cultural background of participants in the study from different classrooms representing Chuuk, Hawaii and the United States. The columns indicate the percentage and number of students who positively responded to understanding the cultural metaphors/conceptual themes of the four commercials.

Respondents' geographic origin	28 Hawaii		17 Mainland		20 Chuuk	
Cultural metaphors from four ads	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Go for two = different football play	1	4%	6	35%	0	
2. Herding Cats = order from chaos	5	20%	8	47%	0	
3. Husbands bored/reluctant with demanding wives/alcohol	15	65%	9	53%	5	25%
4. Up the Wazoo = plenty of money	10	43%	9	53%	0	
Total	31		32		5	

Table 1. Percentage of students who correctly identified the use of key metaphors in the four ads

Key Findings

- Alienation from cultural metaphors could add to the viability of using television commercials for ESL students if teachers provided explanatory discussion. There is some insight or surprise nuance to explain.
- Understanding of the cultural stereotype within the husband and wife (“Bud on ice”) story were higher in both L1 and L2 groups appears to indicate that ads that tell stories about the relationship between couples can cut across cultures at some level. This provides insight on how more family oriented or interpersonal relationship ads appear to be more easily understood.
- If a student does not belong to the culture from w/c these metaphors are used inside ads, they do not understand their meanings.

The table below shows other factors that were considered in this study and lists the number of correct responses.

Factors Gleaned from Survey		
	N	Average correct
By language		
English	51/33	1.55
Bi-lingual	12/8	1.5
Non-English	1/4	0.25
Descriptive v Non-Descriptive		
Descriptive	9/5	1.8
Non-Descriptive		2.2
By Age		
18-19 yrs	8/6	1.33
20 yrs	9/8	1.13
21 yrs	15/9	1.67
22 yrs	11/5	2.2
23 yrs	6/4	1.5
24-26 yrs	6/5	1.2
28-37 yrs	12/7	1.71
By Region		
Hawaii	31/23	1.35
Mainland/Military	32/17	1.88
Abroad	1/5	0.2

Table 2: Number and Average percentage of correct responses, according to language use, description, length, age and region.

Conclusion

Considering other factors like using English as a first language (L1), the 33 respondents in the Hawaii survey population, who spoke only English at home, scored better than those who named an additional language other than English was used at home. The English only segment averaged 1.55 (38.75%) correct while the 8 respondents from bi-lingual households averaged 1.50 (37.5%) correct. Those from non-English speaking household only managed a single correct response between them for an average of .2 (5%).

The investigators also made an effort to see if people who had specific memories of favorite commercials were better at discerning cultural metaphors, idioms and iconography

in the TV advertising messages. Before the survey each respondent was asked to describe a favorite TV commercial. The five most detailed descriptions and the five least detailed descriptions were parsed out and analyzed. While the suspicion was that people who thought about, remembered and could describe a 30 second commercial message in detail would be better at discerning cultural nuance, this was not the case. The “descriptive” group of five respondents averaged 1.8 (45%) correct, while the five individuals who were barely cursory in their description came out with a counter intuitive score average of 2.2 (55%) correct.

A potentially significant result in this study was the observation that universal themes like love, marriage and work are key conceptual messages that could inform future ads for English learners in other countries. Street (1984) stresses the socialization process as an essential element in literary development.

The high level of interest observed in the individual respondents, regardless of the L1 or L2 factor, indicated that TV commercials could make good discussion aids. The fact that they are repeatedly seen, but change after a rotation period would mean that there is an on going supply of material. Since advertisers use the cultural nuance and metaphor to create a bond with the viewers, there would also be ample topics for discussion and enlightenment for English language learners. Advertisements for products (possibly excluding alcohol and other seemingly adult brands) would be ideal, could serve as a model since these data show that attention and recall are influenced by the students’ cultural background. These are areas that could benefit from further research to validate, refine and develop the possibility using commercials as low-cost, but effective ESL teaching aids.

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