



Malaysian English Language Teaching Association



**Developing Sustainable Quality in English Language Education:
Evolving Policies, Innovating Practices, Transforming Learning**

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

ISBN: 978-983-9411-03-4



PROCEEDINGS OF THE 12th INTERNATIONAL ASIA TEFL CONFERENCE AND 23RD MELTA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2014

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G-11-2, Putra Walk Commercial,
Taman Pinggiran Putra,
Bandar Putra Permai,
43300 Seri Kembangan,
Selangor, Malaysia.
2014

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia DataPengkatalogdalamPenerbitan

12th International Asia TEFL Conference and 23rd MELTA International Conference 2014:
Developing Sustainable Quality in English Language Education:
Evolving Policies, Innovating Practices, Transforming Learning

28-30 August 2014, Kuching, Sarawak

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ISBN: 978-983-9411-03-4

Published by:
Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA)
Malaysia

The papers in the proceedings of this conference are the personal views and beliefs of the respective authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of MELTA.

The papers in the proceedings underwent peer review and light editing.

Originality of the content is the sole responsibility of the writers and not the conference organisers.

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, VIETNAM

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Transformations of English Language Cultural Values' and Transnationality of Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements are everywhere. They come in and influence everyone's lives whether we like them or not. The minute we wake up from bed and have breakfast, lunch, dinner and on the way to bed; advertisements would usually come in through popular culture's media such as the radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and pop up internet sites. Although we do not intend to study them closely, the bombardments of so many advertisements in their different forms and ways would eventually capture our attention. As teachers of English language, we can employ advertisements as a way for students learning the particularities of a textual language. A picture means a thousand words, so through advertisements' illustrations certain textual language could be transformed from them, thereby allowing us to learn about the cultural values of the English language. What are the cultural values that have been brought transnational through advertisements? The paper aims to share the result of a research which finds a number of transnational values brought from advertisements whose main texts are in English language. Through a semiotics reading, it is found that there are certain universal values from advertisements, which cross the borders of the world's many countries.

KEYWORDS: advertisement, popular culture, semiotic, transnational, values

1.0 THE TEXT AND CONTEXT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ADVERTISEMENT

Teaching English language as a profession means that a teacher must at least make students learn that language is an "instrument" to which "people use to send various messages" (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 18). In teaching about language, students should also be made to realize that language is an inseparable part of human being. This is because as messages of communication, language is "born within the interaction of people" (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 19), which enforces some understanding that through language the differences and similarities of various nations' cultures can be simultaneously learnt. A philologist and literary historian, Roger Fowler supports this when he describes that word meanings in a language may employ signs as a "representation "of a community's established knowledge (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 28). Upon this idea of representation, Stuart Hall (1997, p. 15) explains that by use of "language, of signs and images", representation is "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture". How then is a nation's culture represented through advertisements? Advertisement, being one of the forms of language that people can learn about other's cultures makes use of not only textual but also

visual languages. Consequently, in studying about an advertisement, the study of semiotics which sees texts as a fabric of quotations that resulted from a thousand of cultures (Barthes, 1986) becomes the best method of analysis. This is similar to Mikko Lehtonen (2000) who believes the culture of a nation is represented through the contextual surroundings of the English language advertisement's text. But, what is a text?

A text is whatever is written or drawn on paper. It can be either a verbal (written or spoken) or non-verbal (images or sounds) one because it is "any form of signification: writings, photographs, movies, newspapers and magazines, advertisements and commercials; all and all, every kind of human signification practice" (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 48). Thus, using today's media, students can study the context or building up of English language through advertisements' texts. With regards to advertisements, students can find abundant samples from television, movies, videos, radio, recordings, magazines, books, internet, email, and billboards. This list of currently utilized media could be endless, yet as a case for this article's discussion, advertisements published in magazines is believed to be one of the best way of studying about the text and context of the English language. Magazine advertisements in comparison to other forms of media is considered more reliable because of the following history and recent survey.

Historically, the first printed advertisement in English was a handbill produced in 1473 by a London printer, William Caxton (Rodman, p. 428) whereas the first illustration in an advertisement was done in 1728 by the American, Benjamin Franklin (Goodrum & Dalrymple, 1990, p. 16). Recently in a survey done by VVT, a Finnish research institute (2013) in Brussels asked more than 700 consumers in 13 countries about what kinds of media are effective in transferring advertisements messages. The result of the VVT research showed that 63% trust advertising more on paper, i.e. in magazines and newspapers rather than what is on television (41%) and internet (25%). A respondent admits that "Reading from paper enables me to concentrate without distraction; I can put it to one side and then pick it up again later..." (2013). Another respondent commented that re-reading a magazine advertisement helps her to find a relaxed kind of feeling, so she can later decide on whether or not she should purchase an advertised product. This is different when seeing advertisements on the internet. Unlike the relaxed feeling magazine advertisements give, in internet advertisements, a student may feel rushed and would not have time at all to decide on a certain purchase.

Learning a language also means learning "the values and preoccupations of its culture", which becomes the "chief of socialization" (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 23). With this grounding, henceforth, it becomes logical to understand why "language is always used in certain contexts" (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 34). Thus, studying advertisements that uses English language texts, would naturally mean that the contextual cultures underlying the people will also be learnt, either consciously or subconsciously by an advertisement reader or viewer.

According to Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure (1998) the study of advertisement is within popular culture. Thus, before dealing with samples of advertisements information on how it fits in popular culture and the history of its emergence is elaborated in the next section.

2.0 ADVERTISEMENT VALUE: A TRANSNATIONAL POPULAR CULTURE

As written earlier, the study of advertisement is within popular culture. Here, popular culture consists of the words: popular and culture. In this sense, students need to be informed that culture is the "knowledge, belief, art, custom" of a member of society (Nye R. B., 2006, p. 23), which includes the "values of a particular group" (Hall, 1998). The so called cultural

value of a society actually refers to the “goodness or desirability of certain actions, or attitudes” which has been uniformly agreed “among members of a culture” (Stewart & Bennet, 1991, p. 14). Thus, as a consequence, when English language students are asked to analyze a certain cultural product of a society, such as advertisements, students will need to understand also that the English language society has a consensus of certain values.

Advertisement as a form of popular culture nowadays is widely globalized through the use of recent media’s technology such as the television, radio, and movie or cinematography. With the word popular to mean “of the people” (Petracca & Sorapure, 1998, p. 2), it is interesting to find out why certain advertisements from English language speaking countries have been brought transnational to countries which claims English as not only mother language but also as a second and foreign language. How is this possible? What historical facts have made the English language advertisements globalized?

If years ago, advertisements are usually published in catalogues, newspapers, or magazines, which needed to be mailed to reach certain projected customers; nowadays, advertisements can freely pop-in any internet sites in any way it likes and at anytime it wants to. With this method, more and more advertisements have better chances of being seen by anyone using the internet. Today’s modern technology, therefore, is one of the factors that enable the easy and quick globalization of advertisements. With regards to television and magazine, Lindsay Elleker (2005) pronounces that “one-third of a half-hour sitcom will be commercials, that magazines will contain more advertisements than articles” and that there are never ending pop-up advertisements on the internet. Thus, advertisements can be found everywhere.

Advertisements are so many and come through various communication media that some people may condemn them as an intruder, since their existence can bother people’s daily lives. Yet, to others, people seem to have depended upon their lives on advertisements. Tizzy Asher reports that she is someone who actually dislikes listening to the radio, but she cannot avoid turning on to the radio’s intense promotion on women’s strategies of having a sexy body in order to attract men’s attention (Asher, 2002, p. 24). Similar to Tizzy’s experience, Nicole also benefits the information given through advertisements.

She admits in Oprah Winfrey’s talk show on television that she means something or feels alive only if she puts on the shoes or clothes from the recognizable brands she sees advertised on popular magazines. Although, Winfrey explains to her that what she sees in the magazine is an “illusion shown on the red carpet moment”, Nicole announces, “I don’t know who I am without them” (Winfrey, 2007). The reactions such as above, is said to be caused from a large part of today’s society beliefs who find entertainment from advertisement’s “representation of realism” (Chaney, 1996, p. 174), which are regarded as messages of society’s “dramatic daily lives”(Williams, 1995). In the country referred to being the number one consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1970), the average American according to Jean Kilbourne are exposed to an average of three-thousand advertisements every single day and will spend three years of her other life watching television commercials (1999, p. 12). Not only are advertisements an intruder and yet at the same time a relied source of information, the too many advertisements may make some people have difficulty in seeing which is real and unreal. Thus, to some people, like Tizzy and Nicole above, life shown to them in advertisements may be equivalent to real life happenings. Why are there so many advertisements?

Suyanto (2004, p. 3) offers the explanation that in the United States of America (U.S.A.) a great number of advertisements is available because of the market’s purposeful intention of spending about eighty-nine million dollars each year for advertisements. With this number, although never been thought of initially by some people, some advertisements seem to have successfully grabbed people’s attention and influenced them to buy the products

advertised. Most advertisers do this by making a significance of advertisements context, so they are willing to spend money to do the necessary research on the condition that the product they have to advertise is popular. How else do advertisers make their money's worth? The answer is to make advertisements as transnational as possible. What does the word transnational imply?

As previously informed, some American industries intentionally invested their dollars on advertisements. To make the investment worthy, there is a strong need from the industries to transfer as many American advertisements as possible about their products across many nations' borders. This border crossing of advertisements to different nations or countries is referred to transnational. The definition of transnational is taken from the concept of the "transnational turn" offered by Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2005), John Carlos Rowe (1998) and Alfred Hornung (2005). All three of them, stress the importance of studying the American culture of the U.S. by taking into consideration the different Americas, which consist of the Caribbean islands, Latin and North America and their influence of the cultures to other countries and vice versa. Studying about the U.S. through advertising that experiences a transnational turn, mean an understanding also on the capitalist globalization or imperialism of the U.S. This statement is propelled by Lawrence B. Glickman's who believes "consumption is a central part of American commercial and popular culture" (1999, p. 4) thereby giving the reference to why Jean Baudrillard believes the U.S.A. as the host country for a consumer community (Ritzer, 2004, p. 136). What historical facts help promote this condition?

Glickman offers the historical account in his *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (1999) by stating that the Americans have been actively engaging commercial exchange with the Europeans since early colonial times. During the American Revolution, however, there was a boycott with the British in the Boston Tea Party event that gave way to a better focus on the spreading of more home products to other nations. Later in 1877 N.W. Ayer & Son became the first advertising agency to make the American industry's products a big business. In the nineteenth century, "mail order catalogs led to the creation of consumption communities" group (Glickman, 1999, p. 3). Also in this century, immigrants and urban newcomers start to assimilate in the "bridge of consumer culture" (Glickman, 1999, p. 4).

In a website's chart "Why did a boom happen in America during the 1920s?", it is also learnt that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the U.S.A was abundant with a huge supply of natural resources that they are being sold cheaply in and out of the U.S. (N.N., 2014). Consequently, core goods such as oil, timber, iron and coal have given the country an important foundation to its huge economic power, so that it becomes one of the reasons for the country's popular reference as a superpower country. This powerful state is backed up by the condition of World War I where in comparison to other European countries America had plenty of money to invest. With America's ease of providing electricity, therefore the Americans, initiated by Henry Ford could build factories, which mass produced goods using a line system. Fortunately, the *laissez-faire* that gave the economic freedom for big businesses without being held back by the government to develop in the 1920s and the lowering of taxes promised by the republican President, Warren Harding, also give way to advertising's celebration of telling people how to use the newly mass produced goods, such as the refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. To ensure that as many people can buy the goods advertised, the method of shopping by ordering through catalogues that offers a hire-purchase system and an installment system of payment or credit have developed America as the number one consumer community. James B. Gilbert supports this when he states, "American society is the most consumer-oriented in the world" (1988, p. 2). Although America has developed a consumer culture, not all of the goods can be consumed up by the

American society alone. It is for this reason that the Fordney-McCumber Tariff Act imposed on imports of products, thereby at the same time persuaded advertising to cross national borders. This condition enticed people outside of the U.S. to buy goods from America. Similar to magazines, the invention of the television in the nineteenth century is a factor that helped the quick spreading of American advertisements. In short, the historical facts have paved the way for American popular culture products to begin its transnational trail.

3.0. CROSSING NATION'S BORDERS WITH AMERICAN CULTURAL VALUES IN MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENT

American advertisements are so many that to make the dollars worth, advertises device ways for it to come through many nations' borders through magazines.

Not many people realize in the beginning that the advertisements have also cleverly imposed with them the cultural values of the U.S. (Tinarbuko, 2005, p. 3).

If previously a reader may not be interested in purchasing products, the history above on advertising's transnationality, people from other nations have learnt to become a consumer society through the Americans. Unlike T.J. Jackson Lears, not many advertisement readers realize the show of U.S.A's "power relations" over other nations (1983, p. 1). However, not many readers will realize this empowerment because the kinds of U.S. values offered to nations are felt as if they were their own values, too. What are the cultural values?

I am a graduate student at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia, who is doing research on magazine advertisements which become the basis for my dissertation research analysis on the transnationality of popular culture. I am also a full-time lecturer at Soegijapranata Catholic University in Indonesia, who teaches American Studies and Popular Culture. Through my semiotic reading of the more or less 3,000 advertisements, which I have analyzed from three selected U.S. magazines, i.e. the U.S.A. version of *Cosmopolitan*, *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *O: the Oprah Magazine*, I have found a number of cultural values Americans want to share to others. Although as learnt from previous paragraphs advertisement's main concern is for its readers to somehow spend their dollars to purchase products advertised, thereby showing the negative aspects; it seems readers and magazine publishers of other nations see some positive aspects about them. As proof, some of the U.S. advertisements are transferred as it is without any changes in the text and visualizations and have it published in Indonesia's popular magazines, i.e. *Cosmopolitan* and *Kartini*. Other cases are the transfer of the same kind of visualization but with a translation of the language text used. Other times are the transfer of the same kinds of product and advertisement message but using Indonesian language and Indonesian text.

Using Roland Barthes' semiotics, I used the denotative meanings of advertisements as codes of connotation, and from there also made multiple layered meanings based on the context of the advertisements analyzed. Thus, using Lehtonen's (2000, p. 74) sample of "a skull pictured on the label of a bottle" to connote the first level of meaning "poison" and then the second level meaning of "danger", thereby helped a reader to understand that the liquid in the bottle is not drinkable; I managed to give certain categories of types and cultural values to my data of advertisements.

Analyzing the advertisements, I found that there are three top U.S. values kept by other nations, which in this case is represented by the Indonesian magazines I mentioned. First, 38% of my data show the importance of giving a high value to the Middle Class family. This family class is believed to be the source of economy. It is in this societal class that just almost anything can be advertised. In support of this, the other value of putting importance in the use modern technology receives 32%. A successful family is then a family that owns

certain modern household facilities such as the need for a vacuum cleaner, microwave, automobile and the credit card; to cosmetic, perfume, hair and health products. Hiding under the value that keeping a body healthy is the most important thing in sustaining someone's life, most readers seem to have no problem at all in buying the products advertised.

Taking a hair coloring product as an example, if previously only Americans and other Caucasians have colorful hair, nowadays many Asians also like to have colorful hairstyle. Words such as "vibrant, fresh, bouncy, shiny, strong strands" and the visuals of happy, smiling, and cheerful ladies suggest that a coloring of the hair is a healthy way to maintain youth.

The third top most values are the freedom of expression, which receives 11%. In the cultural value of freedom, if it were not for advertisements, most people may not know about the freedom of choice. Advertisements have shown people that different kinds of products are available and it is a matter of choice to buy or follow the kinds of teachings the advertisements have shown. The magazine advertisement or catalogues make readers imagine that they are in a supermarket, where they are free to see, choose and decide which product is appropriate to the needs of an individual. Freedom of choice also helped emerge the freedom of expression. The kinds of clothing, shoe and make style a reader chose to use has more or less teach other nations how to confidently speak up like the Americans. Most Asians who usually have an indirect form of communication, have nowadays show some direct forms of communication and action to certain issues.

The other 19% is distributed in other cultural values found in the advertisements. The values include the importance of family institution, success in time management, importance of hard work, confidence in multicultural environment. A sample of the value of time management is when a woman is shown to know her place, be it in the household as wife and as a career woman at an office. The management of what to serve for the family's meal, whether cooking on her own or putting on the table a package of microwave meal is a challenge to a woman's position in a society. Another example is the value of multiculturalism, whereby a product is created to be made for people of different race.

By teaching students how to read the transformations of advertisements, which originally use English language texts, on the one hand, it can be learnt that advertisers know how to attract people who are more than ever living in a globalized world. This is because an easterner or westerner can now live in any country with the many variations of climate and culture. On the other hand, students can also learn that through English language texts in advertisements, people are more than ever clutched in the advertisers' hands. This is because everywhere people go; they are lured to read English language advertisements and its transformations, in order to purchase advertised products which meets the cultural values of the transnational world.

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