

Materials for EFL: Using Ads in English Classes

Helda Alicia Hidalgo & Magda L. Caicedo V.

Universidad de Nariño, Pasto, Colombia

Materials definitely play an important role in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language. The term itself refers to anything which is used by teachers and students to facilitate the learning of a language.

One of the hardest tasks a teacher is faced with corresponds to selecting teaching or instructional materials for a specific group of students. This simple task becomes complicated if we consider that materials should:

- Provide input for students.
- Be at the right level of comprehension, or
- Be at the $i+1$ level, as stated by Krashen (1995) for providing students the opportunity to acquire new language and relate it to their already existing knowledge.
- Motivate students in their language learning process.
- Be attractive to students.
- Permit variety in English classes.

According to Tomlinson (1998), “Impact is achieved when materials have a noticeable effect on learners, that is, when the learners’ curiosity, interest and attention are attracted”.

To facilitate the acquisition of any type of language, teachers should present students with a representation of the new knowledge. Instructional materials serve the purpose of substituting the direct knowledge by a representation of the reality, which contains itself, information that can be worked and learnt. In this sense, Gimeno (1991) states that “instructional materials consist of any kind of instrument that can serve as a resource for learning or the development of knowledge”.

Selecting Materials

Some of the considerations that have to be taken into account when selecting materials were mentioned above. Nevertheless, when choosing materials it is of paramount importance to analyze not only your point of view as a teacher, but also students’ characteristics and interests.

The following suggestions can help you make a good choice of your materials:

1. Think about who needs the material: is it going to be used individually or in small groups, or have you decided to use it with the whole class?

2. Is the material you chose versatile?, that is to say, can it be used with different groups at different levels?
3. How long will it take to present the material? Are you planning to write on the board, or read with or to your students? Will they be asked to read?
4. How difficult is the material? Remember that it is preferable that the material be easy rather than difficult. Will you be able to handle it without problem?
5. Is the material interesting? Nothing which is too difficult and which cannot be understood is interesting. Therefore, it is advisable to keep materials simple and within the students' range of experience.
6. Will the material be useful to the students? For examination, for their other studies or for practical use?
7. Does the material stimulate the students' curiosity? What counts in most of the cases is not the material itself but the lively presentation the teacher makes of the material.
8. Is the material relevant to the class or the individuals? Does it lend itself to be used in natural situations?
9. Is the material fun to do? Interest derives not from what is done but from the way it is done.
10. Will it seem worth doing to the

students? Students need to see the point in doing something so that it becomes relevant and significant to their learning.

However, the task of selecting materials becomes even harder if the teacher is deciding which materials to use for a beginner group of English students who are just starting to listen, speak, read, and write in the foreign language.

For the first class, it is very important to consider the motivation of students since it is from this class that they will appreciate or reject the idea of studying English.

One important aspect to decide on which material to use for this first class so the students achieve a degree of motivation is what Carrell (1983) calls **Schema Theory**. This is a theory based on the assumption that comprehension and retention of texts depend on the schema or background knowledge we have on the different topics we are faced with in our learning task. For instance, in reading the background knowledge on the topic of a text and its structure or physical appearance helps in understanding its content.

Therefore, it is necessary for a teacher to consider both language and experience. The experiences students have had with a language are of primary importance for them to use, integrate, comprehend and remember input. You always remember something that has impacted you to such a degree that when you receive the impact all your senses perceive what is presented to you.

A very closely related hypothesis to the point stated above is the **Episode Hypothesis** proposed by Oller (1983). He argues that “Text (i.e., discourse in any form) will be easier to reproduce, understand and recall, to the extent that it is motivated and structured episodically”.

Oller also states that when in language programs teachers provide fully contextualized and meaningful language to the students, they can optimize their ability to use “previously acquired expectancies”.

Taking into account that for the first reading class it is very difficult to achieve understanding from our students, since they have very little knowledge of English, thus this aspect about “previously acquired expectancies” can be used for deciding on what texts to use for the first class.

Why Use Ads

As it has been said before, materials must stimulate production. In this new era of globalization we are all bombarded by all sorts of products together with their presentation. All of them make part of the background information our students already have about something they are presented with and that calls their attention for it is part of their reality in their daily life situations.

According to Upgreen (2002), ads are created to “stimulate” people. They are enormously important in human society and they have their own special feature to express or to communicate. They use color, size, images, written texts; they can be

clean and simple, or very complex. Ads also use psychology. There are two psychological factors underlying the impact of advertising: the central message and the peripheral message. Central methods, such as pictures, explain the message directly, while peripheral methods, such as expressions or color and size, explain indirectly or imply their aims and meanings. Students have to make use of their background knowledge to find out the messages.

Our students in our own contexts have some knowledge of simple English words they have observed on newspapers, magazines and TV. Headings, names of shops and names of products are of widespread use in our cities now. Consequently, when our students read “Nike” they know what to expect, in this case a pair of tennis shoes. The teacher, then, does not need to explain what the word means. In this same way, other advertisements provide students with authentic meaningful and contextualized language that can be anticipated because they know what to expect from them and what they represent. These texts are motivating because their English format is something new for them but follow the patterns students have in their logical experience of the organization of ads and can be easily understood. Culture is also depicted here. Ads are designed taking into account cultural values and interpretations. Therefore, English ads reflect English culture in certain ways. They also provide good input for developing comprehension exercises and writing exercises at beginning levels. Pictures on ads make it possible to

clarify meanings or get general ideas on specific ads. This finding as well as the identification of main ideas motivates students greatly.

Some Activities with Ads

In the materials design process it is very important to consider learners' needs and the kind of material aimed for. With the use of ads as a material for foreign language learning, it is necessary to consider that the skill worked with is mainly reading, although the four skills are involved in the discussion to comprehend and fully understand the sociocultural meaning.

Below you will find some possible activities to be carried out with ads:

1. The work with ads can benefit from reading skills since it is necessary to train students starting in the format (Dubin and Olshtain, 1996) in which ads and the topic and message it sends are presented. Then, for working with ads in a reading class the teacher can go through the following steps:

a. **Identification of the format of the text.** In this step students recognize the kind of text they deal with and establish certain general characteristics of ads. For instance, they can say that ads are short texts. They can also talk about the length of sentences and the nice presentation of ads.

b. **Identification of the features of the text.** In advertisements, students can identify linking elements, reference and repetition. In this stage the help of the teacher is paramount since it is the teacher

who can make the features presented above clear.

c. **Identification of the message.** Here students have to use all the clues provided in the text of the ad and those non-verbal clues such as graphics or images to get the meaning across.

2. To motivate students from the first class, start with the observation of English ads and a description of the items advertised in the texts. Make students realize they already know some English words. Read the ads and make the students read them too. Expand vocabulary with the help of the ads. For instance, use expressions such as:

- This is a can of diet coke
- This is a bottle of shampoo
- This is a City Bank credit card, and so on.

Once you have worked out some language content make students develop a word puzzle. In so doing you involve not only boring English structures but also games like exercises that motivate students of languages.

3. For more advanced classes, make students play with authentic ad texts. Divide the class into small groups and then give each group an envelope with pieces of ads.

Ask students to build them up to answer the following questions:

- What is the ad about?
- Is there a brand name in it? If so, which one?
- Does the ad have a picture? If so, describe it.
- Is there any important title on it? Which one is it? Why do you consider this a title? And, why is it important in this kind of text?

Conclusions

When the purpose of language instruction and language learning is to develop communicative competence, a special emphasis should be made on materials. Materials should be directed not only to conveying meaning in the four language skills, but also to conveying meaning in sociocultural aspects of the foreign language (Dubin and Olshtain, 1996)

The culture of the people who speak the foreign language is very important not only as a general culture indicator but also as a means to understand the foreign language and why some things are said the way they are.

Working with advertisements makes students aware of the culture involved in these kinds of texts and the language that attracts people to buy specific products. It is necessary to mention that the same ad cannot be used in two different languages for two different communities since the words used in the two languages can have different connotations for the people. In

other words, if we translate an ad from Spanish to English, the effect of the ad on English-speaking people can be totally different from that in Spanish.

The language used in advertisements is culturally related since to fully understand the message conveyed by some ads, it is necessary not only to know the language but also the cultural referents presented in them. As Upgreen (2002) states, ads are very important in human society. They have a very specific way to be seen by consumers. "In order to attract buyers in consumer society, each advertisement must have its own special feature to express". Then, students of English who use advertisements must be aware of the special language and messages ads send. Both, teachers and students will realize that working with ads implies learning language, meaning and culture.

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