

EXTENDING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: SEMIOTICS AND CULTURE IN EFL COURSES

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Abstract:

This essay describes a semiotic analysis exercise designed to enhance students' cultural and critical literacy, a skill necessary for language comprehension, pragmatics, and proficiency (Liton and Madanat). Rather than observing and comparing cultures as monolithic and unchangeable, students are encouraged to develop complex cultural understanding based on the reading of their surrounding semiosphere. Following Yuri Lotman's concept of "semiosphere," defined as a totality of signs in a certain system, students apply semiotic analysis on their local physical and media space in order to understand the signifying processes in their hybrid cultural environment. Rather than looking at the target culture as a separate Other, students observe the incursion of that culture into their own environment. The relevance of this approach is ensured by the system of signs in the Gulf – its semiosphere - being heavily influenced by mixing of Arabic and English, as well as Filipino/Tagalog, Bengali, and Hindi languages, by entertainment and media outlets of multiple cultures, and the logoed and branded presence of multinational companies. The semiosphere of the Gulf involves an array of signals that function both on the global and local scale, what Yuri Lotman describes as "a semiotic continuum filled with multi-variant semiotic models situated at a range of levels." The exercise described in this paper invites students to use semiotics for analysis of culture and its objects, in turn increasing their integrated motivation, their agency, and their cultural literacy by getting them involved in "the processes of reflection and negotiation through which shared cultural understanding emerges" (Weninger and Kiss)

while relying on standard practical techniques for teaching culture in the EFL classroom, “noticing,” “prediction,” and “research” (Cullen and Sato).

Keywords: semiotics, semiosphere, cultural literacy, glocalization, global citizenship.

1. Introduction: Teaching Culture in EFL Courses

Research indicates that students' comprehension and language skills require intercultural competence and instruction (Byram and Feng, 2004; Risager, 2011). Liton and Madanat (2013) also show a range of scholarship supporting the notion: successful EFL communication depends on "the understanding [of] the cross-cultural matrix" (p. 37). Aside from being influenced by non-linguistic factors and intrinsic connections between language and culture, however, language comprehension is also increasingly influenced by "diversification of culture and learning" (Liton and Madanat, p. 39-40).

In the Gulf countries and the UAE, where this study was conducted, the need to address the influence of globalization on culture and language learning is evident, emphasized by the strong international presence wherein expats comprise as much as 80% of the UAE population. Such presence of foreignness creates "areas of multiple cultural meanings" that interact and compete with one another (Lotman, 2005, p. 211). An intercultural learning environment surrounds many EFL speakers, including those of the UAE. Therefore, in order to better understand the target culture, students need not only to understand its origin points, but the incursions of the target culture (English-speaking) into their own environment.

2. Hybrid Culture, Global Learning

The situation in the Gulf reflects a wider trend toward cultural hybridity and globalization, including education. Students in the UAE represent a larger group of "learners who engage with globalized popular culture" that forge new identities and ways of language use (Higgins, ix)¹. As the goals of EFL courses reach beyond the grammatical and communicative competence and into the teaching of culture, this raises a central question of the current EFL pedagogy: what kind of "culture" is being taught and presented to students?

Here, too, researchers increasingly agree that the view of ‘culture’ as monolithic and unchangeable does not provide an effective approach to teaching it (Weninger and Kiss, 2014). In his book on educating the nationals to become teachers of English in the UAE, Matthew Clarke (2008) writes about cultural reductionism of researchers who overgeneralize and overdetermine the Islamic-Arab identity of the Emirati students and their relationship to their teachers. “The problem with these views,” writes Clarke, “is that they rely on an essentialized notion of culture that is potentially reductive and is unable to do justice to the complexity of history and society in the UAE. Moreover, they ignore past and present contestations over the meaning of the ‘values’” that might be formatting the glocal culture” (p. 21). Clarke’s argument shows that cultural reductionism exists in defining and viewing both the host culture and the target culture.

Aiming toward an expanded understanding of teaching of culture that would involve diversity and glocality expands the aims and goals of EFL instruction². Weninger and Kiss argue that “teaching culture today has moved beyond the integration of cultural content into the language syllabus. It aims to develop the learners’ ‘global cultural consciousness’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) and promote their ‘intercultural citizenship’ (Byram, 2011)” (2014, p. 714). Clarke echoes the idea by stating that “what is needed are constructs that move beyond this [limited] framework and allow for a more dynamic, developmental view of both individuals and society” (22). Beyond learning a language and the associated culture, students are encouraged to become intercultural communicators, proficient in global transactions. The culture that they need to learn might involve multiple perspectives and identities, different generations, and modernized traditions.

The standard ways of bringing culture into the classroom include “pedagogical use of authentic materials and techniques” such as video, film, and newspapers, (Liton and Madanat, 2013, p. 10); “proverbs, role playing and culture capsules,” the latter containing objects from the target culture (Purba 2011, p.52-3) and “giving learners experience of interacting with native speakers” through internet, e-mail, and electronic conferencing (Byram and Feng, 2004 p. 152). While important, many of these methods assume an

acute and clearly defined distance between the host and the target culture. Instead, the patterns of migration, travel, and intercultural exchange are so prevalent that they challenge “key concepts in applied linguistics such as language socialization, acculturation, and identity reconstruction” (Higgins, p. ix). Byram and Feng quote work or researchers such as Kramer (1995) and Zarate (2003), who call for “new purposes and re-definitions of language study to respond to ‘epistemological shifts occurring in academia’ (Kramer, 1995, p XIV).” This includes Zarate’s concept of “third space” and “stressing the significance of in between or border locations ... as nation states and national identities fuse and change” (Byram and Feng, 2004 p. 152).

3. Semiotic Analysis Assignment and Lotman’s Semiosphere

An effective way to understand and approach cultural hybridity in language instruction and to further understand the cultural and textual border spaces is through Yuri Lotman’s concept of “a semiosphere,” defined as a totality of signs in a given system. As Lotman states, “semiosphere is a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space” (Lotman 2005: 207). Likening the dynamics of biosphere to semiosphere, Lotman asserts that “in reality, clear and functionally mono-semantic systems do not exist in isolation” (p. 207). Lotman describes how a series of textual encounters and semiotic processes form any given semiosphere (p. 207). Therefore, semiosphere possesses “the structural heterogeneity” that implies myriad localized and temporal details, a diversity and hybridity of “a semiotic continuum” of culture (208). Lotman also argues that texts in a semiosphere can serve as “boundary mechanisms” that attempt to “connect two hostile cultural spaces” or that replace the central texts with the peripheral ones (p. 211). Subsequently, Lotman offers a concept of the dynamic cultural space in which meaningful exchanges occur on a variety of levels.

Following Lotman’s idea of an environment structured by an interaction of its signs, an assignment was created asking students to examine their physical and media semiosphere. Students were instructed to re-view their surroundings, from architecture to ads, as an array of signs that create meaning and send a message. Next, students were

asked to trace the spreading of signs originating in the West – such as logos, slogans, and commercials -- in the local landscape and mediascape. In order to prepare, students read Naomi Klein's essay on the intrusion of ads and corporate signs into the private and shared public spaces (1999, *No Logo*). Next, they read some brief pieces about advertising techniques, watched and examined selected images, newspapers, and video-clips, and participated in the class discussion. Finally, they were asked to look at images, logos, slogans and video clips from their semiosphere, to identify particularly ubiquitous ones, and to interpret their message in order to argue how these signs that they encounter daily shape their culture³.

Students were shown how to read and analyze commercial signs and ads from the surrounding semiosphere, in part following Klein's idea that "logos, by the force of ubiquity, have become the closest thing we have to an international language, recognized and understood in many more places than English" (2009, p. xi). Their assignment instructions were to find a recurring and pervasive commercial image from their environment, identify and describe those images, associated symbols, and comment on the techniques of persuasion. They were advised to pay attention to photographic and editing effects, and to comment on the emotions and the story-telling involved in their chosen ad. They were also asked to refer to Klein's ideas and to specific advertising techniques discussed in class. Finally, students were encouraged to voice their own personal reaction to the ads, together with the comments and reactions that they might have gleaned first-hand from other observers.

4. Results: Expanding Beyond the Classroom

The semiotic analysis assignment yielded a variety of responses and papers on the intrusion of the commercial 'language' into the public, communal, and individual space – the Gulf's semiosphere. Here is a brief review of three representative papers. First is a student who wrote an essay titled "Hello Happiness" about

“an ad that shows a phone booth [Coca Cola company] calls “Hello Happiness” that allows poor workers in Dubai to make a phone call to their families and friends outside the country by using Coca Cola bottle caps instead of coins. In Klein’s book, she analyzes ideas and facts about such ads in communities and how corporations invade our privacy and public spaces by publishing their brands everywhere. According to Klein, these corporations also harm society.”

This student goes on to show how, by using nostalgia, diversion and “weasel words” – all advertising techniques introduced in our class – the company profits from promoting “unhealthy risks to the laborers,” illustrating the increasing “connection between [branding,] products and lifestyle.” The student shows that Coca Cola inserts itself into the lives of laborers, as well as middle class viewers (by re-assuring them that the workers are, indeed, happy), offering its products as a solution to otherwise serious situations: “So what if every Coke came with extra happiness?”

Another student, analyzing an omnipresent ad for a Nespresso machine featuring George Clooney, concludes that the company “falsely sells us luxury and exclusivity, with only a side of coffee.” She points out how “a massive image of George drinking his espresso, staring deep into your eyes and giving off a slight smile” encourages mall dwellers to actually visit the Nespresso store and purchase its products. But, this student notes, the celebrity face also looks at us from the airplane seats before take off and from the streets of Dubai while driving. The message, according to my student, that “no matter who you are or what you do, you will always be treated like a star” in Nespresso universe, capitalizes on the celebrity culture that, too, is imported and aggressively distributed worldwide.

Similarly, the third student concludes: “McDonald’s is everywhere in Dubai!” She analyzes “the most recognized McDonald’s ad in Dubai – the ‘McDonald’s McArabia: True to Traditions’ campaign, showing how the company is “targeting Arab families” and trying “not only to sell a lifestyle, but also trying to invade our public and private spaces,” following Klein. “The McArabia ad in my opinion is an ideal example of what

Klein was trying to designate about the intrusion of products since the ad is being forced upon the viewers in their daily lives, whether while watching a movie or driving to work.” This student concludes that she personally is quite affected by the McArabia’s careful representation of family values, confessing that she goes to McDonald’s “not for the taste, but for the (false) sense of community” that the company offers through this campaign.

5. Conclusion

In their overview of scholarship on teaching of culture in EFL courses, Byram and Feng note that, based on recent publications in *Language Teaching*, they “concluded that intervention and development work is currently often focused on the ‘problems’ of difference and distance, and how to overcome them” (2004, p. 152). In the assignment described above, students come to understand that the cultural “Other” resides at a lesser distance than originally imagined (the “Other,” in fact, might be becoming “the same” through homogenizing forces of global capitalism). They also develop awareness that 1) meaning is created through a multiplicity of signs beside language; 2) that ‘culture’ is not monolithic and unchanging; and 3) that they have the ability and opportunity to decode complex intercultural phenomena around them. In turn, students’ integrative motivation for language acquisition, their agency as interpreters of culture, and their proficiency in generation of meaning is improved through this assignment.

The hybrid space of the Gulf’s semiosphere -- created by the cultural, linguistic, experiential, and commercial encounters – becomes an important cultural context for the learners of English. Asking students to analyze the semiotic elements from the target culture in their local culture helps them understand the importance of sign exchange whether it happens on the level of language such as slogans and messages or non-verbal communication such as advertising images and architecture. By analyzing the glocal culture and its signs, students are involved in “the processes of reflection and negotiation through which shared cultural understanding emerges” (Weninger and Kiss 2014, p. 716).

The relevance of this approach is ensured by the fact that the system of signs in the Gulf, is heavily influenced by mixing of Arabic and English, as well as Filipino/Tagalog, Bengali, and Hindi languages, by entertainment and media outlets of multiple cultures, and the logoed and branded presence of multinational companies. The semiosphere of the Gulf therefore involves an array of signals that function on the global and local scale, what Yuri Lotman (2005) describes as “a semiotic continuum filled with multi-variant semiotic models situated at a range of levels” (p. 216). Commercial and popular culture, including ads, seeks to reconcile traditional and progressive views. The role of contemporary culture in the Gulf might be that of a border text that, according to Lotman, “sets cultural precedents and, in the long run, literally conquers the cultural sphere of the centre” (2005, p. 212). Regardless of the outcome, students are better equipped to understand these dynamic shifts through the semiotic analysis assignment.

Recorded applications of semiotics in the EFL classroom include study of specific signs associated with classroom activities and discipline (McGill, 2014), studies on the semiotics of EFL textbooks (Weninger and Kiss, 2014) and investigation of the cultural differences in meaning of certain signs such as body language in different cultures (Unger and Walter, 2010). The fieldwork exercise described here employs a novel way of semiotic analysis that helps students understand the signifying processes at work around them and to develop complex forms of cultural understanding. Increased knowledge of semiotic analysis helps orient a generation of EFL learners facing both strong expatriate presence and a constant change in their environment. Students learn about signifying elements of the target culture, better understand their rapidly developing surroundings, and become involved in the global culture that is being constructed worldwide. The broader question raised by this approach, following Byram and others, is whether it is possible, through complex teaching of culture, to create a model for teaching English as a global language?

¹ A hybrid language called “Arabizi” or “Arabish,” mixing words and letters from Arabic and English, has become a popular form of communication, especially among Arab youth. See, for example: Nadia Al-Sakkaf (2012) “Arabish: Arabic Chat Language” *Yemen Times*, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1517/variety/408/Arabish-Arabic-chat-language.htm>

² Roland Robertson, who introduced the concept of “glocalization” to a wider academic audience, defines it as a “synthesis of the local and the global,” where the distinction between the two aspects is being leveled by an “increasing connectivity and global consciousness” in the present world (2005). “Since the mid-1990s,” Robertson writes, glocalization has gradually come to occupy an increasingly central place in studies of globalization” (2005).

³ *No Logo*, Klein’s 1999 book, describes an economic model in which big multinational companies outsource the production of physical goods and instead focus on the creation of brand names and on selling of a lifestyle. A big part of the growth for this companies is branding with the ads that “creep into cafeterias, common rooms, even washrooms,” of the universities, schools, parks, theaters, libraries, poor neighborhoods, sidewalks and even pieces of fruit (8). These brands establish emotional ties, values, and their own mythologies in order to spread and grow. As Klein explains “corporations are hitching a ride on our cultural and communal activities” (35) but also invade the mediascape, sports, music, and of course politics.

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