



PROCESSING OF ADVERTISEMENTS BY EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The study investigated EFL students' ability to comprehend and analyze advertisements and identify their stylistic features. Results of a test with sixty six EFL college students showed lexical and structural features that are easy to identify and those that are difficult to identify. Responses also reflected the difficulty level of the lexical and syntactic features. Correcting faulty punctuation marks was more difficult than correcting faulty capitalization. Lexical features were easier to identify than syntactic features. Faulty responses showed areas with which the subjects had comprehension difficulties. Causes of ad comprehension problems and recommendations for instruction are given.

Introduction

Although EFL students are surrounded by advertisements in the streets, the shopping malls, newspapers, magazines, flyers, mail, e-mail, internet, and T.V. in L1, they are seldom taught how to process or comprehend them in L2. As a result, L2 students have more difficulty processing and comprehending ads than L1 students. In a study conducted with Brazilian and American college students', Silva (1994) tested L1 (Brazilian) and L2 (American) students' ability to process implicatures in Brazilian television commercials in Portuguese, and found that native speakers' interpretation of implicatures was very uniform, with an average of 93.3% correct answers, whereas non-native speakers' performance varied, with an average of 47.3% correct answers. L1 students scored better than L2 students, even in cases where implicatures in Brazilian Portuguese operated in the same way as in American English. The researcher concluded that each case of successful inference requires some specific knowledge that may not be equally shared between native and non-native speakers. She recommended that language instruction address the pragmatic competence of American learners of Portuguese.

L2 students' difficulty with ads is partly due to the variety of their layout and their graphological, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and cultural elements. According to Deutsch (1984), ads use various kinds of puns, break grammatical rules, cultural generalizations and information, use variety in diction, connotations, sentence structure, openings, and use economy of expression, and persuasion. Assessment of reader reactions to a broad range of lexical, syntactic, and text layout conditions, in isolation and interactively, by Motes and Others (1992), has shown that certain perceptions are significantly affected by specific lexical, syntactical, and layout combinations. When 9-18 year-old students were asked to explain the meanings of lexically ambiguous advertisements from magazines, newspapers, and brochures, older subjects were able to correctly explain lexical ambiguities more frequently than younger subjects (Nippold and Others, 1988). The psychological meanings of ads were found to be more difficult to explain than the physical meanings.

Another source of difficulty in processing ads is abbreviations. Results of a study by Pycrzak (1980) indicated that abbreviations in classified ads were difficult to comprehend. He suggested that instruction in understanding abbreviations be given as a real life reading skill. In a similar study, Sokol (1981) found that the mean correct scores of high school students' who read ads with and without abbreviations were significantly lower on the form with abbreviations than that without abbreviations. A grade-by-grade analysis showed that the differences between scores on the two forms occurred in all grades but decreased as the educational level increased. Differences were not significant in the twelfth grade sample.

A third source of difficulty is figurative language. Processing of figurative language in ads was investigated Kreuz (2001). Forty five subjects read one version of a scenario and answered a comprehension question. Results revealed that the subjects were slower in reading ironic statements than any other condition, and were significantly slower in reading simile than hyperbole or understatement. Kreuz concluded that people take longer to process ironic statements than literal statements or other forms of figurative language, and recommended that irony be employed effectively to increase the effectiveness of ad messages.

To conclude, while the marketing literature is rich with advertising research that focuses on the effect of ad language on consumer attitudes towards the product advertised, research that focuses on EFL students' ability to understand the lexical, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic aspects of ad language is lacking. Henceforth, the present study aimed to investigate EFL students' ability to comprehend and analyze English advertisements; to identify their stylistic features; to find out the lexical and syntactic features that are easy to identify, and those that are difficult to identify by the students; to explore the causes of students' difficulties and the strategies that they use in determining stylistic ad features.

Subjects

Sixty six EFL female college students majoring in translation at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated in the study. Their ages ranged between 19 and 20 years old and they were all native speakers of Arabic. They were in semester 5 of the translation program and were enrolled in a stylistics course (3 hours per week) that the author taught. They were concurrently taking the following courses: semantics (3 hours), text typology (2 hours), linguistics (3 hours), contrastive analysis (3 hours) and 2 interpreting courses (4 hours). They had completed 4 levels of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary building in the first four semesters of the program. Later in the program, the students take media and commercial translation courses, in which they are required to translate advertisements from English into Arabic and from Arabic into English. Therefore, the stylistic features of advertisements constituted one of the topics covered in the stylistics course.

Data collection and analysis

The subjects received direct instruction in ad features such as layout, typeface, punctuation, capitalization, graphological, pragmatic, lexical, syntactic and semantic features. The subject matter (ad features) taught was adopted from Goddard (2002), Cook (2001), Freeborn, French and Langford (1993), Hodges and Whitten (1982), and Brook (1977). The syntactic features taught were as follows: Ads use a deviant method of punctuating and paragraphing which depart from the convention. Ads are divided into sentences marked with capitals and full stops. They can be corrected by changing the punctuation marks or by adding some deleted words. Ads consist of several paragraphs marked by indentation, but some paragraphs may contain only two or three words. Sentences are sometimes incomplete

and sometimes the ad as a whole can be one complex clause or one long sentence. Ads are economically worded. Economy is achieved through ellipsis, which allows the writer to avoid repetition. Ads make frequent use of emphasis. Ideas are emphasized by placing important words at the beginning or at the end of the sentence; by using loose sentences in which the main idea comes first and less important ideas or details follow; by arranging ideas in the order of climax, i.e. order of importance with the strongest idea last; by using active voice instead of passive voice; by repeating important words; by putting a word or phrase out of its usual order; or by using a balanced sentence structure. A sentence is balanced when grammatically equal structures are used to express contrasted or similar ideas. It emphasizes the contrast or similarity between parts of equal length and movement; and by abruptly changing sentence length.

The lexical features of ads taught included the following: Choosing a name that is easy to pronounce in many languages, using inflated language to make commonplace products seem glamorous, using long words to give an air of glamour and to describe properties of the product that are either commonplace or disadvantageous, love of euphemism, use of vogue words such as '*top*' and '*smart*', frequent word coinage as in '*cookability*, *Bugzilla*, *wheatables*', use of rhythmic language, use of figurative language, visual puns, metaphors, metonymy, connotation and use of lexical repetition for reinforcement.

Each syntactic or lexical feature was explained and illustrated by examples. Three ads were used for practice (analysis and identification of features) in class. A week later, the students took a test that consisted of an advertisement taken from Reader's Digest magazine which was not seen before. The picture was deleted from the ad so that the students could focus on the language. The students were asked to identify the linguistic features of the ad and illustrate each by an example from the ad itself. In addition, they had to fill in incomplete sentences in the ad and correct punctuation and capitalization deviations.

The students' written responses were marked by the author. In grading responses, features which the students had studied in class were taken into consideration. To be marked as correct, each feature had to be associated with a correct example. Features which were not associated with an example or were associated with wrong examples were considered incorrect. Percentages of students who could identify each lexical or syntactic feature were calculated.

To find out the strategies that the students used in identifying ad lexical and structural features, all incorrect written responses were compiled and subjected to further analysis. There was a total of 425 anomalies. This corpus consisted of responses where examples were incomplete or totally incorrect. Percentages of faulty responses within each strategy were calculated.

Reliability of the test scores was calculated using the Kuder-Richardson 21' formula as it estimates the internal-consistency of the test items. The reliability coefficient of the test scores was .91. Inter-scorer reliability was also calculated by having a colleague who taught stylistics mark a sample of answer sheets and by comparing both analyses.

Results and discussion

Frequency of ad features identified

Analysis of the correct responses has indicated that 66% of the students identified 6-9 features, 22% identified fewer than 5 features, and 12% identified 10-11 features (See Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of Ad Features Identified by the Subjects

# of Features	%	# of Features	%	# of Features	%
No features	1.5%	5 features	4.5%	9 features	14%

1 feature	1.5%	6 features	18%	10 features	7.5%
3 features	6%	7 features	20%	11 features	4.5%
4 features	6%	8 features	14%		

Distribution of correct ad features

Analysis of the correct responses indicated that the percentage of students who could correctly identify the general ad features were as follows: faulty capitalization (61%), typeface (55%), lexical features (32%), faulty punctuation (27%), and syntactic features (22%). These results show that faulty capitalization was the easiest and syntactic features were the most difficult to identify. Lexical features were easier to identify than syntactic features. Moreover, analysis of the correct responses revealed that the percentages of students who could identify the specific lexical features were as follows: Use of inflated language (74%), use of lexical repetition (67%), use of evaluative adjectives (46%), use of long words (30%), use of words that are easy to pronounce (18%), use of emphasis at the word level (8%), use of vogue words (4.6%), use of compounds (4.5%), and use of rhyming words (1.6%) respectively. The higher the percentage, the easier the feature. Furthermore, analysis of the correct responses revealed that the percentages of students who could identify the specific syntactic features were as follows: Use of parallel structure (80%), use of complex sentences (44%), use of long sentences (26%), use of ellipsis (26%), use of balanced sentence structure (9%), use of incomplete sentences (7.5%), use of emphasis (7.5%), use of pronouns (4.5%), and use of extraposition (4.5%) respectively. Result show that parallel structures were the easiest and extraposed structures were the most difficult to identify.

Distribution of incorrect responses

Analysis of the incorrect responses indicated that the percentages of students who failed to recognize the lexical features were as follows: Inflated language (3%), informal language (6%), evaluative adjectives (6%), euphemism (7%), imagery (8%), misused words (11%), intensifiers (28%) and vogue words (50%). Here, the subjects failed to supply correct examples to illustrate the lexical features. The percentages of students who failed to recognize syntactic ad features were as follows: Questions (3%), faulty sentences (3%), using exclamatory sentences (9%), using short sentences (11%), using simple sentences (15%), and giving the wrong number of paragraphs in the ad (35%), using ellipsis (61%). The higher the percentage, the more difficult the feature.

Discussion

Poor processing of English ads by EFL college students at COLT may be due to inadequate linguistic competence as revealed by the incorrect words the subjects supplied to recover the ellipated parts. Results showed several syntactic problems. For example, '*There is a better choice!*' was classified by some students as an exclamatory sentence. (*Your health*) was added as a complement in '*Be sure (your health) with GarliPure*', and (*that*) was substituted by (*and*) in '*(and) guarantee fresh Garlic key marker compounds in every batch*'. Some students added an indefinite article before a plural noun as in '*Because (a) miracles of Nature is (a) miracles of Health*'. Some added a preposition before the gerund as in '*(By) using our ...*'. Others added verb '*to be*' and the definite article '*the*' before a plural generic noun as in '*Natrol (is the) Miracles of Life*'.

Analysis of the incorrect responses also revealed several lexical problems. The students failed to match the lexical items in the ad with their corresponding lexical features. The following faulty examples were supplied by the students to illustrate each feature: (i) "*Cool-dry, guarantee, process, supplement, exclusive, miracles of nature, fresh, Natrol* were classified as vogue words"; (ii) '*First, better, fresh, optimized, cool dry, guarantee, miracles,*

preserved, be sure, exclusive, maximum were classified as intensifiers; (iii) *'Maximum benefits, guarantee, GarliPure is the first, high potency'* were given as examples of use of imagery; (iv) *'Key marker, fresh, optimized, there is a better choice, wellness formula, supplement'* were categorized as euphemisms; (v) *'Cool dry, delicate'* were provided as examples of inflated language (vi) *'Fresh, cool-dry, wellness'* were categorized as evaluative adjectives; (vii) *'There is a better choice, Natrol'* was considered an example of informal language; (ix) *'Key markers, potency, cool dry, optimized, maximum, each delicate, Natrol'* were given as examples of misused words. Inability to select lexical items to illustrate the lexical features could be due to unfamiliarity with some lexical items used in the ad such as *'optimized, potency, Natrol'*. These incorrect responses also reveal inadequate transferring and application skills. They reflect the students' inability to apply the lexical features to ads that were not taught in class.

In addition, incorrect responses revealed ineffective and inefficient study skills. Some students just memorized the ad features, and wrote a list of all the features on the test paper, in the order in which they were presented in class and in the handout, whether they all apply to the ad in the test or not. They did not give examples at all. Some errors showed that the subjects are visual. Since *'There is a better choice!'* ends with an exclamation mark, many students thought it was an exclamatory sentence, without taking into consideration the structure of the sentence. Analysis of students' correct responses indicated that parallel structures and lexical repetition were the easiest to identify as those can be noticed and do not require higher level thinking. Other incorrect responses consisted of incomplete wording of features such as saying *'punctuation'* instead of *'faulty punctuation'*; *'capitalization'* instead of *'faulty capitalization'*; *'use of adjective'* instead of *'use of evaluative adjectives'*; *'evaluative'* instead of *'evaluative adjectives'*. Some confused words and made up their own labels for the ad features. For example, they used *'language information'* instead of *'informal language'*; and *'informal vocabulary'* instead of *'informal language'*. Others used nonsense words instead of the real words to refer to ad features such as using *'fault capitalization'* instead of *'faulty capitalization'*; *'rapition & repition'* instead of *'repetition'*; *'inflative language'* instead of *'inflated language'*; *'imagar'* instead of *'imagery'*; *'ellips'* instead of *'ellipsis'*; and *'use of glamour'*. These inadequate (faulty) strategies probably reflect incomplete learning of the new terms used for ad features. They might also be due to the interaction between inadequate linguistic competence and faulty study skills and strategies. The subjects did not probably master the ad features taught in class or did not probably know what the actual labels referring to the ad features mean.

Finally, incorrect responses indicate inadequate situational, cultural and world knowledge. The subjects seemed to be unfamiliar with garlic supplements and therefore found it difficult to process an ad about garlic supplements due to lack of exposure to English ads. They probably could not identify the general ad theme. Swasy and Rethans (1986) found that prior product knowledge affects the extent of ad-evoked curiosity, cognitive responses as well as questions concerning product class-related attributes and values. Finally, inability to recognize garlic supplements and hence process ads about garlic supplements may be due to the cultural and linguistic differences between English and Arabic. Arabic ads do not have compounds with internal capitalization as in *GalriPure* and *GarlicActives*.

Pedagogical implications

Ad comprehension is a developmental process and instruction in ad comprehension should be part of the reading, vocabulary and grammar courses at COLT. Reading, vocabulary and grammar instruction at COLT should focus on the types of ads, ad elements, ad message, ad theme, and the lexical, syntactic, morphological, and pragmatic features. Students can be taught about variety in diction, connotations, sentence structure, openings,

economy of expression, and persuasion techniques. This would help develop their awareness of ad language. In a study by Stone (1978), students were assigned six papers on advertising topics in a composition course. The six topics were: explain why an ad is effective; discuss a poor ad; compare or contrast two ads on any basis; write a public service ad and explain why it is effective; argue that advertising is one of society's evils, that it ought to be controlled by the government, or that it benefits the consumer; and write on a controversial thesis regarding some aspect of advertising in the United States. Instruction resulted in the students learning about variety in diction, connotations, sentence structure, openings, use of detail, economy of expression, the sound of *language*, and persuasion techniques.

Ad instruction may proceed in a series of graded stages. First, the features are introduced starting with the title, typographical features, paragraphing, capitalization and punctuation deviations, product advertised, lexical features, and structural features. Lexical and syntactic features are practiced one at a time with easier features practiced first and most difficult last. Specific lexical features may be introduced and practiced in the following order: Use of inflated language, use of lexical repetition, use of evaluative adjectives, use of long words, use of words that are easy to pronounce, use of emphasis at the word level, use of vogue words, use of blends, and use of rhyming words respectively. Similarly, specific syntactic features may be introduced and practiced in the following order: Use of parallel structure, use of complex sentences, use of long sentences, use of ellipsis, use of balanced sentence structure, use of incomplete sentences, use of emphasis, use of pronouns, and use of extraposition respectively.

Each feature can be highlighted, and displayed using an overhead or LCD projector. Students can fill in words, phrases, or text segments in ads. Difficult lexical and syntactic features can be subjected to extra practice. Instructors may use pre-questions as advance organizers to help the students focus on certain ad elements while reading. In this respect, MacLachlan and Jalan (1985) found that recall of brand name for advertised products substantially increased when advertisements were preceded by questions concerning facts, ambiguous or unfamiliar phrases, incomplete versions of a slogan, or questions encouraging a personal connection. Different types of ads may be used for analysis and feature identification. Students can compare and contrast two ads advertising the same product and compare the linguistic features of English and Arabic ads advertising the same product. Instructors at COLT may use tests that require students to analyze ads advertising the same product. Studies that investigate students' ability to process ads advertising different kinds of products are needed.

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Appendix

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Better Choice!**

**GarliPure
With Optimized GarlicActives™**

GarliPure is the *first* garlic supplement that guarantees fresh garlic's key marker compounds in each and every batch. Using our exclusive *cool-dry* process, each delicate GarlicActive™ is preserved for maximum benefits. High potency wellness formula. Be sure.....with GarliPure.

NATROL
Miracles of Nature ... Miracles of Healt

Source: *Readers Digest.*