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USING ADVERTISING TO EXPLORE FRENCH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that authentic materials such as advertisements are beneficial to language learners. In addition to stimulating students' interest and motivation, advertising in the target language exposes students to different styles of expression and offers a window into another culture. This article proposes a more comprehensive approach to integrating commercial advertisements into the foreign language classroom through content-based learning. In an effort to develop its international business curriculum, California State University, San Bernardino has added Introduction to French Advertising to its already strong business course options in French. This article describes the course in detail, including topics of discussion, collaborative activities for the classroom, and the use of interactive Web technologies to build critical reflection skills needed for lifelong learning.

KEYWORDS: advertising, international marketing, languages for specific purposes

INTRODUCTION

This article examines different ways in which advertisements can be used in the French classroom to develop both linguistic and cultural competence while underscoring the importance of diversifying foreign language course offerings for students pursuing careers across disciplines. Indeed, to meet the increasing desire for interdisciplinary studies and content-based language learning, more and more language teachers are venturing into the realm of language for specific purposes (LSP) with foreign language courses in engineering, healthcare, and other areas now being offered across the US (Wright, Geissler, & Cowell, 1997; Long, 2010; Berka, 2011; Grandin, 2011; Lear, 2012). Much creative vision and funding, however, has been funneled into business, given Chinese, Arabic, and other language demands for businesses to compete globally (e.g., Gao & Prime, 2010; Mili, 2011; Wang, 2011; Spring, 2012).¹ From certification and

¹ See Sacco (2006) for a comprehensive list of private and public funding available for programs in international business.

online programs to full-fledged MBAs and joint/double degree programs with overseas partners, there are a multitude of options for international business education (see Fryer, 2012; Long & Uscinski, 2012).

BENEFITS AND APPLICATIONS OF ADVERTISING FOR LSP

Despite the growing interest in languages for the professions, international marketing and advertising have received scant attention in the literature on languages for specific purposes (Swift, 1991; Angelini & Federico, 1998). Advertising, however, offers many potential benefits for foreign language instruction. Designed to facilitate brand recall and recognition, advertisements are carefully scripted for maximum comprehensibility, are often short and succinct, and use visually supported text, making them accessible to all levels of second language (L2) learners. If tailored to specific markets, they are also full of local cultural references and humor (see Taylor, Hoy, & Haley, 1996; Angelini & Federico, 1998; Graby, 2001; Martin, 2006). In their description of French ads, Angelini and Federico (1998, 120) note:

The universe of reference for the French consumers is all of France: its regions, its history, its art, its literature, the character of the people who live there and their mentality. French advertising continually makes reference to French culture rather than just simply to the product itself.

The same is true, of course, in any other country for advertising that has been created or adapted to appeal to local audiences.

Advertising messages trigger emotions, grabbing and holding the attention of an audience, and therefore stimulate students' interest and motivation. Although images and music typically have the greatest impact, the language of advertising can also be highly entertaining and particularly worthy of analysis. An ad can be used to introduce or review a grammar point (*Il n'y a que Maille qui m'aïlle*, slogan for Maille Dijon mustard), explore puns, metaphors, idioms, and tongue twisters in the target language (*Aussi bon cru que cuit, qui l'eût cru?*, brand name for St. Hubert margarine), and illustrate how rhetorical devices such as polysemy, rhyme, and alliteration are used to create slogans.² Different registers and varieties are also reflected in advertising discourse, including French slang—such as the *verlan* dialogue in SNCF (French National Railway) commercials featuring the inversion of syllables in each word (see Tejedor de Felipe, 2004, 19)—and Quebec French expres-

² The phrase *qui l'eût cru* in the slogan for St. Hubert margarine is a reference to the classic French play *Le Cid* by seventeenth-century playwright Pierre Corneille.

sions used in locally produced Canadian advertising (Bouchard, 2006). The other advantages that advertising presents include its availability online, the possibility of exploiting textual, aural, and visual elements, and its contextual variety in terms of product, intended audience, and media.

Advertising also lends itself well to other content. A course in French literature can exploit literary references seen in French ads (as in the St. Hubert margarine example cited above), not to mention the many other socio-cultural aspects of advertising (history, geography, music) that can be integrated across the curriculum. Students of French linguistics can unravel the many rhetorical devices used to create slogans and debate the pros and cons of language legislation in France and Quebec affecting the advertising industry. The rhyme and alliteration found in advertising are also ideal for practicing pronunciation and analyzing the phonetic properties of French.

DEVELOPING A COURSE IN FRENCH FOR ADVERTISING

To further develop our international business curriculum and provide a wider range of possible career paths for students in the humanities and social sciences, California State University, San Bernardino has added Introduction to French Advertising to its already strong business course options in French. Listed as an elective for the B.A. in French and Certificate in French/English Translation, the course also attracts students with a high-intermediate to advanced level of proficiency in French majoring in Marketing, International Business, Journalism, and other disciplines, providing greater incentive to these students to take French language classes while completing their various degree programs.

Taught entirely in French, Introduction to French Advertising begins with a bird's-eye view of the advertising industry, from the typical organizational structure of an advertising firm and agency-client relations, to the development of creative briefs, copywriting, and media planning. Additional course discussion topics include the representation of minorities in French advertisements (Amalou, 2000), translation practices in international advertising (Guidère, 2000), and localizing global ad campaigns for francophone markets (Martin, 2011). Collaborative learning activities engage students in a variety of tasks, such as pitching their own TV commercial design with storyboards; creating advertising slogans using French cultural references, proverbs, and rhetorical devices; role-playing agency briefings with their company clients; and designing innovative products and/or packaging solutions. Students also learn to develop a target market strategy for their originally designed advertising campaigns using consumer lifestyles (or *SocioStyles*) outlined by the Center

for Advanced Communications (*Centre de Communication Avancé*, CCA, <http://www.lecca.com>).

Through an examination of award-winning campaigns (Unilever's Omo detergent) and marketing failures (IBM's basketball imagery in French commercials), advertising is explored from both a French and a global perspective, highlighting the culture-specific dimensions of humor, wordplay, and other components. French advertisements, for instance, make greater use of emotional appeals, humor, and sex appeal as compared to American ads, which tend to be more informative (Biswas et al., 1992).³ A classic example is the French advertising campaign created by the agency BDDP/TBWA for Spontex kitchen sponges featuring an amorous male hedgehog engaging in various kama sutra positions with the product, a commercial that most American students agree would be banned in the US. Appeals to humor using different sexual orientations (McDonald's) and marital infidelity (Perrier) are also woven into ads for French audiences. A public service advertisement encouraging Parisians to clean up after their dogs, on the other hand, is laced with scatological images (equally rare in American ads). The visual component depicts an unsuspecting disabled woman about to plant her hand in freshly deposited dog feces accumulating on her tires as she navigates her wheelchair through a pedestrian zone in Paris. The slogan reads: *Vous avez raison de ne pas les ramasser. Elle le fait très bien à votre place* [Why bother picking up your dog poop when this woman will do it for you?].

Profanity is also featured in French ads, whether it is the F-word, in English, splayed across a billboard to promote AIDS awareness (in the posh 16th arrondissement of Paris, no less) or the French expletive *Merde* [shit] indexed by the single letter M in signs for the Paris Metro (Graby, 2001). The slogan *Voilà ce qu'on lui dit nous, à la pollution* in this case basically signifies a middle-finger salute [Take that, pollution!] by commuters choosing metro trains over cars. Similar examples abound in French TV commercials posted on online advertising databases (<http://adforum.com>, <http://culturepub.fr>).

In addition to making cross-cultural comparisons of advertising appeals, students complete each of the steps involved in the planning and creation of advertising campaigns. They become familiar with the best practices for sustaining a successful agency-client relationship, design advertising across media for different products and services, and develop their own media plans using online data from Médiamétrie (<http://www.mediametrie.fr>), Tarif Média

³ Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions model (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) is also useful for understanding cultural differences in advertising. See the country comparisons charts on <http://geert-hofstede.com/> for further details.

(<http://www.tarifmedia.com>), and other media agencies consulted by marketing and advertising executives.

INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES: A SURVEY OF EIGHT WEB ACTIVITIES

To extend learning beyond the classroom and better prepare students for a variety of careers in global marketing, Introduction to French Advertising also includes eight Web Activities directing students toward multiple advertising-related resources available online.

Web Activity 1 introduces students to *Culture Pub*, a highly innovative and popular television program about advertising that was broadcast weekly on the French channel M6 for almost 20 years. Created and hosted by the late French journalist Christian Blachas, the show went off the air in 2005, resurfacing as an online database (<http://culturepub.fr>) with advertising from around the world. After comparing American and French TV commercials on the *Culture Pub* Web site, students post their impressions and cross-cultural analyses on a Moodle discussion forum.

Web Activity 2 features a podcast interview from a career Web site (<http://www.lesmetiers.net>) with Elodie Renier, a copywriter working in a French advertising agency. After completing an oral comprehension exercise based on the video, students explore other careers in advertising on an interactive Web site hosted by the prestigious School of Advertising and Marketing Communications (*École Supérieure de Communication et de Publicité, or Sup de Pub*) in Paris (<http://www.supdepub.com>). They then complete a self-assessment quiz on <http://www.onisep.fr> to determine which careers are most suitable for them before perusing jobs in advertising posted on Jooble (<http://jooble-fr.com>).⁴

Web Activity 3 presents Bertrand Vivier, a French voice-over artist working in the advertising and movie industry. Students watch his video interview and examine his portfolio online (<http://www.leon-voix-off.com>) before learning about possible paths to their own voice-over careers on Ezvoices (<http://ezvoices.com>).

By completing Web Activity 4, students familiarize themselves with language legislation restricting English in French advertising (1994 Toubon law) through articles and studies made available online by the French Television and Radio Supervisory Council (*Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, or*

⁴ ONISEP is the acronym used to designate the *Office national d'information sur les enseignements et les professions* [National Office for Information on Teaching and the Professions], a non-profit organization sponsored by the French Ministry of Education.

CSA, <http://www.csa.fr>). While reviewing the CSA Web site, students search for French-government-recommended equivalents for advertising terms commonly displayed in English (such as *airbag*, *marketing*, *spot*, *scoop*, *packaging*) using the France Terme database (<http://franceterme.culture.fr>) compiled by the French-government-appointed terminology commissions. Additional links direct students to the French advertising self-regulatory organization, ARPP (*Autorité de Régulation Professionnelle de la Publicité*) and the General Language Delegation (*Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France*, or DGLFLF), both of which play a pivotal role in advertising regulation in France.⁵ Students also read and comment on a blog written by film distributor Christophe Courtois (<http://christophecourtois.blogspot.com>), whose witty observations about “Frenglish” in advertising are both informative and entertaining, and introduce them to a number of French slang expressions (including the term *franchouillard* to designate someone who is quintessentially French).

In Web Activity 5, students discover an array of copywriting techniques used to seduce French consumers. Print ads for Mercedes-Benz available online (<http://www.ma-collection-de-pubs.com>) provide powerful examples of the historical and literary references frequently seen in French ads (a creative strategy used rather sparingly in the US). Each of the slogans features an excerpt from a famous literary or musical work, with images of the product substituted for words that have positive associations. From the fables of La Fontaine (*Maître Corbeau, sur un arbre* [image of Mercedes]) and Gounod’s opera *Faust* (*Ah! je ris de me voir. Si* [image of Mercedes] *en ce miroir*) to *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Molière (*Belle* [image of Mercedes], *vos beaux yeux me font mourir d’amour*), the slogans featured in this campaign provide attractive, authentic texts for students trying to reconstitute each slogan and identify the author or composer. The second part of the activity requires students to create similar advertising slogans (for Mercedes-Benz or another brand) using French quotations as inspiration.

Web Activity 6 explores rhetorical devices that have been proven effective in advertising (Tom & Eves, 1999), such as synecdoche, metonymy, and paronomasia, through the analysis of a French ad for Peugeot 806. The ad features the image of a child eyeing a plate of sausages accompanied by the following slogan: *Huit saucisses. La voiture que les enfants conseillent à leurs parents* [Eight sausages. The automobile that children recommend to

⁵ The *Office québécois de la langue française* or OQLF [Quebec Board of the French Language] monitors the linguistic situation in Quebec with regard to advertising and other industries.

their parents]. In this example, the French expression *huit saucisses* [eight sausages] produces a pronunciation similar to that of the model number of the automobile (806). This activity also provides an opportunity to discuss advertising practices considered illegal in France, such as portraying children explicitly requesting the product from their parents (hence the tacit visual subtext evoking the product name in this Peugeot ad, as opposed to a direct verbal command). Students then comment on several slogans from a research article on rhetorical devices in advertising presented in French (Brouland, 2006) before using this technique to create their own advertising slogan for a product of their choosing. One slogan included in Brouland's (2006) analysis, for instance, uses metonymy to associate Bergerac wines from the southwest of France with the romantic hero featured in Edmond Rostand's (1897) famous play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The French wine term *nez* [nose] appearing in the slogan evokes the wine's exquisite aroma while alluding to *Cyrano de Bergerac*'s unusually large nose and heightened sense of smell: *Bergerac, des vins qui ont du nez* [Bergerac. Wines with exquisite aroma]. By combining additional rhetorical devices with cultural references to create ads inspired by Brouland's analysis, students let their creative juices flow and gain a better appreciation for the types of advertising messages that appeal to the French.

Culture-specific humor is the focus of Web Activity 7, which begins with an insider's view of creative strategy. Students are introduced to freelance creative director and designer Nicolas C erisola, who explains the pros and cons of using humor appeals in advertising. The panoply of French TV commercials that follows this reading illustrates the types of sexual humor seen in French ads that Americans might find surprising. From a transvestite having deceived his newlywed husband who is eagerly awaiting a honeymoon with his new wife (Nomad Telecom), and love-struck ladybugs frolicking on the dashboard of a parked automobile (PSA Peugeot Citro en), to an older gentleman hiding a gay lover from his wife having her own secret extramarital affair (Hyundai Motor Company), the themes featured in French ads can be strikingly different from those typically seen in the US. Streaming episodes of *Culture Pub* on humor in German and Japanese advertising provide further evidence of the cross-cultural differences in advertising appeals.

Web Activity 8 explores the world of street marketing and the ad campaigns featured on Smart cars provided by *Movin'Pub*, a media sales company specializing in renting advertising space on automobiles. Motorists who agree to have an advertisement wrapped on the front, back, sides, and top of their automobile—while being tracked by GPS to ensure maximum visibility—can

earn up to 390 euros a month. Students learn about this innovative advertising medium on a French television station Web site (<http://www.tf1.fr>) before exploring the contract agreement proposed by *Movin'Pub* and competing companies (<http://movinpub.com>, <http://caregy.com>, <http://carlogo.com>). Students then peruse a gallery of guerrilla and street marketing examples before posting their own street marketing proposal on Moodle.

CONCLUSION

With its exploration of cross-cultural differences in advertising and its comprehensive overview of the various stages involved in planning and executing an advertising campaign, *Introduction to French Advertising* provides an extensive review of marketing and advertising practices and is a perfect complement to other LSP courses preparing students for careers outside the humanities. It can also be a valuable component of a French program at the undergraduate or graduate level, as it allows students to delve a bit deeper into the French psyche, language patterns, and culture. It uses authentic texts that are richly layered with meaning, reflect wordplay, language contact phenomena, and other linguistic behaviors, and provide an insider's view of the discourse surrounding global brands. In an age of dwindling university budgets, creativity and innovation have become crucial to the retention, expansion, and articulation of foreign language programs. Offering content-based courses in foreign languages with a focus on international marketing and advertising will further impress upon students across disciplines the importance of being multilingual and multicultural in today's global business environment. Students entering the workforce will also learn about career opportunities in marketing communications and advertising while confronting the myriad potential pitfalls associated with doing business internationally.

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