

WORKING ON TV COMMERCIALS IN EFL CLASSES: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE (*)

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ABSTRACT

TV commercials and ads are ideological works through which identities, values, meanings and world views are constructed and negotiated. Their use as an aid to the development of basic language skills is widely accepted in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). In fact, however neglected, TV commercials/ads entail many potential features that can be exploited to help EFL learners develop critical thinking skills. In an attempt to utilize these features of TV commercials to this end, this study offers a sample task cycle to deconstruct TV commercials from a critical perspective based on a model of critical commercial interpretation.

Key Words: Advertising Discourse, Critical Commercial Interpretation, Task Cycle.

ÖZET

Televizyon reklamları ve basılı reklamlar kimliklerin, değerlerin, anlamların ve dünya görüşlerinin üretildiği ve uzlaştığı ideolojik çalışmalardır. Reklam metinleri yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenimi ve öğretiminde temel dil becerilerini geliştirmek amacıyla sıklıkla kullanılan yardımcı metinlerdir. Ayrıca, reklam metinleri eleştirel düşünme becerilerinin kazandırılmasına yönelik kullanılacak, çoğunlukla göz ardı edilen güçlü özelliklere sahiptirler. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, bu çalışmada öncelikle bir eleştirel reklam yorumlama modeli üzerinde çalışılmış ve bu model çerçevesinde televizyon reklamlarını eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla çözümlenmeye yönelik örnek bir görev döngüsü hazırlanmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Reklam Söylemi, Eleştirel Reklam Yorumlama, Görev Döngüsü.

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1. Introduction

The global status of English in science, technology, international relations and education is no longer contested. Whatever the reasons for its earlier spread, the unprecedented rise of English has correlated with globalization. Following the end of the Cold War which brought about the victory of one type of economic system over another, there has appeared a rapid increase in the flow of information in the wake of the advances in communication technologies and a rapid growth in trans-national trade on account of capitalist free-market economies. These developments resulted in the increased permeability of national borders and a global interdependency, bringing about the death of time and space metaphorically speaking. Accordingly, the scope of English has widened day by day, as globalization has required a so-called "shared *linguistic code*" (Block & Cameron 2002, 2). Today, whether perceived as a gatekeeper to positions of prestige and privilege or intrinsically good and useful for global development, the English language has obviously become an international phenomenon.

With English taking up such a key status, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions (Pennycook 1995, 40). Associated with linguistic imperialism, English threatens other languages (Phillipson 1992). Furthermore, English is the language through which much of the unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and knowledge operates (Pennycook 1995, 54). In this respect, TESOL resides at the very heart of some of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time. The tensions resulting from this high correlation between globalization and the global English as outlined above have brought about a burgeoning literature on critical approaches to TESOL (see Fairclough 1992; Norton & Toohey 2004; Pennycook 1994, 2001; Ramanathan 2002; Toliefson 1995; Wallace 2003). Critical approaches to English language education offer no static body of knowledge and practices but attempt to find ways of relating micro relations of language use to macro relations of social context. "In the context of looking at implications of the global spread of English, such a relation is possibly at its most extreme, where the micro may be anything down to a conversation in English and the macro may be the global capitalist relations" (Pennycook 2001, 65).

In an attempt to respond to these challenges and tensions, we argue that advertisements, which are daily products of our lives, are valuable sources for helping EFL learners develop critical thinking skills incorporated into basic language skills. Having accepted that 'mass media' texts, which 'mediate' a world-view and, thus, are radically different from 'unmediated' texts (Corbett 2003, 178), ads and TV commercials are also important sources for showing

how particular ideologies and worldviews are (re)produced through language and discourses. However, many promises of advertising discourse as an aid to the teaching and learning of English remain unfulfilled. In this article, we offer sample activities to work on TV commercials in ESL/EFL classes following a brief introduction to advertising discourse with particular reference to power and ideology.

2. Discourse, Power, and Ideology

The term 'discourse' is used in many different senses in the social sciences: While discourse refers to continuous speech beyond the level of the sentence in structural linguistics, a second meaning of discourse concerns what might be called conversational management describing rules for turn-taking and similar interactive phenomena (Mesthrie et al. 2000, 323). However, such a limited conception of discourse does not suffice to account for various levels or dimensions of discourses in our age. Discourse in social theory is a much more slippery term, denoting different ways of constructing and organizing knowledge, meaning and identity. Pennycook (1994, 32) defines discourses as "relationships of power/knowledge that are embedded in social institutions and practices".

In trying to explain discourses as social and cultural processes in and through which meanings and ideologies are expressed and produced, the notion of power comes to the fore. What do we mean by power? According to Foucault, power is not an entity which has some ultimate location or origin, or for that matter which can be owned or possessed. Further, relations of power are not outside other relations, but are part of them; and so, there is no position outside power (Pennycook 2001, 91). Then, what does power have to do with discourse? Informed by the Foucauldian conception of power, discourses are outcomes of power relationships. Discourses are, thus, contested terrains where knowledge, society and identities are constructed and negotiated. In a similar vein, Fairclough (1995, 219) argues that we live in an age in which power is predominantly exercised through the generation of consent rather than through coercion and through ideology rather than through physical force. He (*ibid.*) asserts that it is in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt. Moreover, as particular sets of discourses achieve a high degree of naturalization, they come to be seen commonsensical. The more commonsensical particular discourses have become, the more invisible particular ideological representations come to be.

"Discourses are manifested in particular ways of using language and other symbolic systems like visual images" (Mesthrie et al. 2000, 323). Gerbner

(1985, 18) underlines that such elements of a symbolic system as time, space, characterizations (people) and their fate (success, failure; domination, submission, etc.) denote the symbolic functions of a particular discourse. As the production and reception of discourses are always done in a socio-cultural context (Corbett 2003, 170), as long as equipped with necessary tools, a critical language learner might challenge the ideological assumptions and representations by analyzing the language and other symbolic systems in particular discourses. A crucial component of critical work is always turning a skeptical eye toward these naturalized assumptions, ideas, notions, meanings and practices embedded in particular discourses. In today's increasingly globalizing world, if English language learners are to "read not only the word but also the world" (Freire 1993), they must be given access to discourses that can allow them to analyze the world.

3. Advertising Discourse

In recent years, advertising is everywhere. In fact, we are surrounded by advertisements so commonly that we do not even realize that we are looking at them. Advertisements do not only sell products but also construct images, ideas, dreams and even life styles. They contribute to the image we shape of our lives in a symbolic world. They do not just reflect the world but construct it. Advertising discourse is an ongoing negotiation of social and cultural roles, images and relations at particular times and places in a society. If mass media is one of the most important social institutions through which ideologies, meanings, values and identities are transmitted in contemporary societies (Fairclough 1995, 219; Gerbner 1985, 14-16), then, the study of advertising discourse as one of the most common forms of mass media today helps us define and shape the course of life and the nature of society.

3.1. Basic Features of Advertising Discourse

Advertisements as discourse must be recognized as paid, non-personal communication forms used by identified sources through various media with persuasive intent (Rotzoll 1985, 94). Advertisements are used for many purposes with many different possible effects. That is to say, while the intent of advertisements can range from altering behavior to affecting the way people think about a particular social or economic position, their results can range from enormously influential to a waste of the advertiser's money (Rotzoll 1985, 94).

Mesthrie et al. (2000, 328) describe the basic features of advertising discourse with respect to language as follows: (1) code-play (i.e. the frequent use of puns, rhymes, alliteration, parallel statements and other poetic devices);

(2) cohesion (i.e. the link between sentences in forming a unit like a paragraph or stanza formed by some of these forms of code-play); (3) outrageous exaggeration (usually relating to the quality of the product); (4) occasional euphemism (e.g. cars are never *second-hand*, they are *pre-owned*); (5) intertextuality.

Advertisements show a further characteristic: they are multi-modal. They can use pictures, music and language, either singly or in combination (Cook, 2001). Therefore, in addition to their language, advertisements can be studied in terms of other audio-visual symbols employed in them. By studying the overall image system of advertisements including its language and other symbolic systems, we are able to reveal the way ideology works in advertisements.

3.2. Advertising Discourse as an Ideological Work

As is constantly underlined, advertising is an ideological work "that constructs consumption communities ... 'through ideology'" (Fairclough, 1989, 202). Fairclough (ibid.) explains how advertisements work ideologically on three dimensions:

1. Advertising discourse builds relations between the producer/advertiser and the audience to assist the progress of ideological work (*building relations*).
2. The audience who becomes part of advertising discourse assigns an image to the advertised product through 'visual and verbal cues' which parallel with an underlying ideology (*building images*).
3. The process of equating an image with the product manifests itself in consumer building. The audience assigning an image for the product becomes subject or member of a consumption community. Thus, a consumer type is built through an ideology. (*building the consumer*)

Consumer communities are exposed to particular ideologies through the images and symbols employed in advertising discourse. In this sense, deconstruction of advertisements and TV commercials is an attempt to reveal the hidden features of advertising discourse and, further, to problematize the ways these features shape our perception of the world.

4. A Model of Critical Commercial Interpretation

We offer a model of critical commercial interpretation on the basis of Fairclough's (1989) three dimensions of discourse (i.e. text, Interaction, context), determining how advertisements work ideologically. This model is based on an iceberg analogy. Advertising discourse is likened to an iceberg,

and only the tip of the iceberg, or the product advertised, is visible. The vast bulk of the iceberg is hidden from the view.

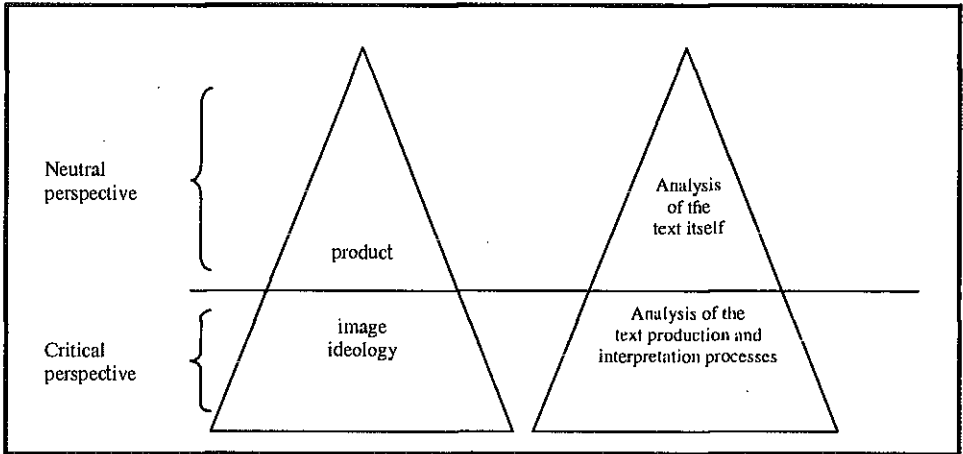


Fig. 1: Iceberg Analogy: A Model of Critical Commercial Interpretation

The overt features of the commercial constitute the tip of the iceberg above the surface of the water. A naive approach to these features that does not question what those features refer to can be called a *neutral perspective*. Although it is impossible to define a perspective that is totally neutralised from one's own experiences and perception of the world, it is possible to define a text disregarding its underlying ideology. Thus, the receiver of the commercial can evaluate it with respect to the taken-for-granted aspects of discourse without unearthing its covert features and hidden messages. However, such a perspective is apparently a shallow one.

Underneath the waterline, invisible to sight, are image and ideology. In line with Fairclough's claim on how advertisements work ideologically, a deconstructive approach to the underlying messages through reading *beneath* the commercial is more than seeing what is 'obvious'. A *critical perspective* questions the elements of commercials through which images and ideologies are produced and imposed. Based upon Fairclough's definition of discourse, we break down critical perspective into two dimensions: analysis of the text production process and analysis of the self-interpretation process. In his model of discourse as text, interaction and context, Fairclough (1989, 25) maintains that a text is inextricably intertwined with the social conditions. Thus, processes

of production and interpretation are connected with the broader social context. Further, he states that "these social conditions shape the members' resources¹ (MR) people bring to production and interpretation, which texts are produced and interpreted." In this sense, a critical perspective helps the audience realise the mutual relationship between text production and reception processes. Once one realizes these relations, the covert ideologies underlying TV commercials and their effects on their own interpretation processes and the production processes become more visible.

The iceberg analogy also corresponds with a *criticality continuum*. Thus, a reflection on the discourse of commercials from surface to the hidden features displays a parallelism with a criticality continuum. In questioning a commercial from the overt features to its corresponding covert references, the audience moves from a neutral or the least critical to the most critical perspective on a criticality continuum.

Analysis of text production processes is basically turning *what* questions into *why* questions. Such questions direct the attention of the receiver to the target of the producer and hidden or taken-for-granted ideologies of commercials. Analysis of self-interpretation processes, on the other hand, is in deep connection with analysis of text production. One's evaluation of self-interpretation processes improves hand in hand with one's awareness of the relationship among social conditions, the production process of advertisements and his own interpretation process. An attempt to answer questions like "How and why do I (the audience) interpret the commercial like this?" and "What makes me interpret the text like this?" are manifestations of a self-interpretation process. What is suggested here, then, is that through a critical perspective the audience can unearth the ideology that underlies social conditions and see the ways these ideologies shape their own interpretation processes and text production processes.

In the following part, we offer sample questions based on the Model of Critical Commercial Interpretation. On the left hand side some sample questions are provided to display neutral perspectives of the receivers, while the questions on the right hand side aim to unearth the underlying ideologies of TV commercials with a critical perspective.

¹ "Members' resources" embraces representation of anything that one stores in his long term memory. These representations are prototypes one constructs through his experiences both on linguistic and nonlinguistic dimensions. (see Fairclough 1989 for further information)

Table 1: From Neutral Perspective to Critical Perspective

A Neutral Perspective	A Critical Perspective
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the advertised product in the commercial? 2. What other elements do you see in the commercial? 3. What is the scenario? 4. Where does the scenario take place? 5. Are there any characters in the scenario? 6. Who are the characters in the scenario? 7. What is the motto/slogan of the commercial? <p>Etc.....</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the purpose of the commercial? (to inform/persuade/entertain etc.) 2. Why does the advertiser use these particular elements? (i.e. music, image, setting etc.) 3. Why does the advertiser come up with this scenario? 4. Why does the scenario take place in? 5. Why does the advertiser use these characters in the scenario? 7. What message does the motto/slogan try to communicate? 6. Who is the target group of this commercial? (age/gender/class/life style) 7. Do you find the commercial effective? Why / why not? 8. How does the commercial relate to your personal needs/expectations?

4.1. Implementation of the Critical Commercial Interpretation Model

The critical interpretation model offers a powerful way to deconstruct TV commercials and reveal their hidden messages. *Critical* means "to see deeply what is below the surface-think, critique, or analyze" (Wink 2005, 1). In this respect,





- Students must be given the opportunity to reach the ideology behind TV commercials and question that ideology through classroom activities.
- As part of advertising discourse students must have the chance of reflecting on their subject positions in that discourse and realize the significance of other components of advertising discourse such as producers/advertisers and the social context.

Below are some sample activities to enhance a critical perspective towards TV commercials within EFL classes. Each of these activities can be adapted or extended for different language levels and age-groups. Further, they can be used with different TV commercials and also print ads by making slight changes.

Stage 1: Pre-viewing Tasks

Pre-viewing / Task 1

Purpose: This activity is designed to provide students with an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about TV commercials. It allows students to realize and define their attitudes towards TV commercials and the effect of TV commercials in their lives. As students choose one of the categories given in the activity or add another choice, they could find out the reasons of their reactions to TV commercials.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your favorite TV commercial?• Think about a TV commercial which you really like. Why do you like it? Explain what you like about it.	
Where do you fall in the following chart? Depending on the category you have chosen, discuss the effects of commercials/ads in our lives. Support your argument by giving examples.	
 <p>Images from commercials stick in my head.</p>	 <p>I sometimes really want to look like someone I have seen in a commercial.</p>
 <p>I usually ignore most commercials.</p>	 <p>Some commercials make me feel bad about myself.</p>

Pre-viewing Task 1: My Favorite TV Commercial

Stage 2: While-viewing Tasks

While-viewing / Task 1

Purpose: This activity is designed to answer the simple “what” questions of the neutral perspective. This activity will allow students to realize the overt features of TV commercials. An awareness of the surface level features will help them question the covert references of these overt features in the following activities.

What does this TV commercial say at first sight?	
Advertised product :	_____
Other elements :	_____
Scenario :	_____
Characters :	_____
Slogan/Motto :	_____

While-viewing Task 1: What Does TV Commercial Say at First Sight?

While-viewing / Task 2

Purpose: This activity is designed to enhance a critical perspective towards TV commercials. Students are encouraged to analyse text production processes by interpreting the purpose of the commercial and the target group of the product. This activity also allows students to analyse their own interpretation processes with the help of the questions that guide them to question the effectiveness of the commercial.

The Hidden Message: What does this TV commercial say?
* <i>The purpose of the commercial</i> (to inform/persuade/entertain/etc) :

* <i>The target group for this product:</i>
Age: Does the commercial address to children, teens, adults or the elderly? How do you know?

Gender: Does the commercial address to women or men? How do you know?

Class: Does the commercial address to a specific class—lower-class/middle-class/upper-class or a professional-class? How do you know?

<i>Life-style:</i> Does the commercial address to a specific lifestyle – modern/ traditional/ healthy/simple/ etc.?

* <i>The effectiveness of the commercial:</i>
Do you find the product effective in terms of visual elements, music, characters and scripts? Why / why not?

How does the commercial relate to your personal needs/expectations?

What is <i>your</i> overall impression of the commercial? Think of three adjectives that describe the commercial.

While-viewing Task 2: The Hidden Message: What does this TV commercial say?

Stage 3: Post-viewing Tasks

Post-viewing / Task 1

Purpose: Receivers of TV commercials are manipulated to assign an image for the product through other visual and verbal elements used in commercials. This activity is designed to enhance a critical awareness of images created by TV commercials in relation to local and global contexts. It gives students an opportunity to compare commercials of global and local brand names on the basis of image building. This activity will give students a chance to discuss and compare building image processes in advertising discourse on the basis of different social contexts. It will further help them to see the relation between advertising discourse and the wider social context.

A Commercial Review Global vs. Local

Remember that:

"Commercials always create an 'image' for their products."

"A global product (Product X) is advertised in this TV commercial for a local target group (Turkey)."

Now work in pairs. Try to evaluate the image of this commercial in relation to the local context. Depending on both your statements about its message and your responses to the following questions write a review of the commercial. In your essay, initially, discuss the differences between commercials of global and local brand names.

- Do the national traits influence the reception of TV commercials?
- Does the image created for this global product appeal to the Turkish local context? Why/why not? (e.g. Are there any X lovers around you? If yes, does the image created in the commercial fit to their image?)
- Are there any localized items in the commercial (audio/visual/linguistic)?
- What would you do to make it more effective and appealing?

Post-viewing Task 1: A Commercial Review: Global vs. Local

Post-viewing / Task 2

Purpose: This activity is designed as an oral activity. It allows students to evaluate text production processes on the basis of the target group of the advertised product. Moreover, students have the chance of deconstructing the

references of the overt features exemplified in the activity and revealing the image that corresponds with gender roles in the commercial. This will enable them to see how TV commercials create or promote gender roles and analyze to what extent these gender role creations are compatible with their social context.

Focus on Stereotypes: Gender Roles in TV Commercials

What is a "stereotype"? What are the most common kinds of stereotypes? Explain and exemplify them.

* A stereotype is _____
e.g. _____

.....
* Remember that:
* "Advertisers create different campaigns and commercials for women/girls and men/guys. Often a commercial or an ad will tell you whether a product is something "masculine" or "feminine", although the product can be used by either gender."
*

Work in groups of 4. Examine the **Product X** commercial regarding the gender roles. Think of 3 adjectives to describe the woman and the man in the commercial. Is the product advertised specifically to either *guys* or *woman*? How do you know? Do the actors in the commercial promote specific gender roles (remember their clothes, their age, their hairstyle, the setting they appear, their body language and facial expressions)? Do these images and roles seem to you positive or problematic? Create an outline and give an oral presentation of your views.

Post-viewing Task 2: Focus on Stereotypes: Gender Roles in TV Commercials

More Sample Activities

Task 1

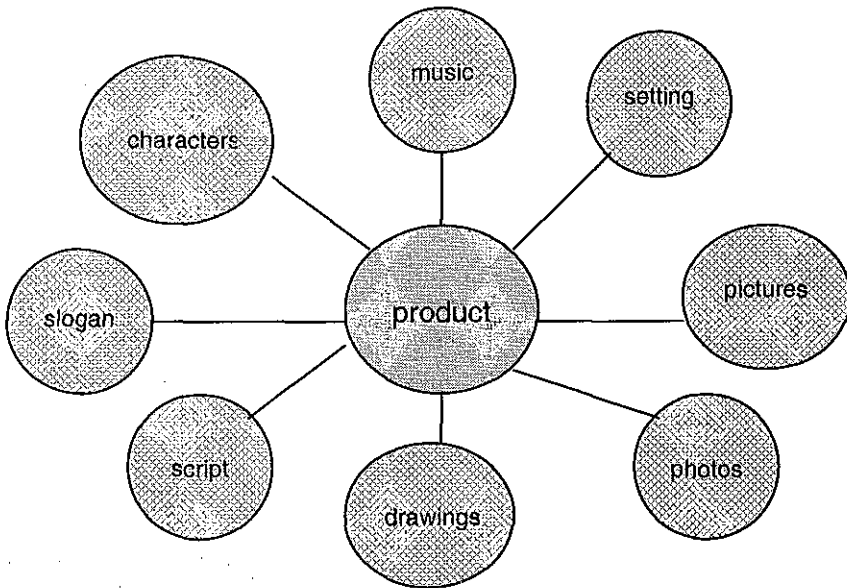
Purpose: This activity will allow students to experience text production processes as TV commercial producers. This will help them to have a critical eye on text production process both from the producers' and receivers' viewpoints. In the course of creating a TV commercial students will be able to identify the 'ideals' that are constructed through ideologies. And this will give students an opportunity to realize how and to what extent text production

processes are intertwined with these ideologies and it will also allow them to see how these ideologies construct their needs.

The Best TV Commercial Award

"From Global to Local: Same Product but Different Commercials"

Initially, ask students to work in groups and make them brainstorm of any kind of commercials they have ever watched on TV. Then make a list of the products in those commercials on the board and make them choose one product from the list. Ask each group to create a different storyboard for a TV commercial of the product chosen, aiming to reach a different target group (cultural group, age, gender, class, etc.) Pictures, photos, magazines, drawings and texts can be used for producing the storyboard. Encourage them to prepare an outline and create a catchy slogan. Choose the best group on the basis of the compatibility of the commercial with the local target group (create the criteria for the selection process together with the students) and give them the best TV Commercial Award.



More Sample Activities Task 1: The Best TV Commercial Award

Task 2

Purpose: Slogans are significant parts of TV commercials. This activity allows language learners to analyze the purposes of the slogans and their

effects on receivers' perception of the product. Questions in this activity direct learners to reflect on the effect of the slogans on their interpretation processes. Additionally, a comparison of the Turkish and English slogans of the same TV commercials will help them to see the effect of each slogan and the language on their interpretation of the message given through these slogans.

Critical Thinking: Towards Language Awareness
"Catchy Slogans"

"Slogan X"

"Slogan Y"

"Slogan Z"

- What is the purpose of the slogans?
- Do you find them attention grabbing/attractive? Why/why not?
- What message does each slogan try to communicate?
- Which of the product X slogans given above do you find the most effective and attractive? Why?
- Think of 2 slogans of product X in Turkish and in English. How do they differ from each other? Do they carry out similar messages?

Give an oral presentation of your views.

5. Conclusion

Given the high correlation between globalization and the global English, this article has argued that ads/TV commercials are powerful means of the development of critical thinking skills incorporated into basic language skills. The next step has been to outline the relationship between discourse, power and ideology. The presentation of advertising discourse as an ideological work has laid the groundwork for a model of critical commercial interpretation. Then, a sample task-cycle and further activities based on this model have been described in order to move toward a practical pedagogical plane.

Advertisements, as ideologically-loaded texts, open up spaces for English language learners and teachers to come to grips with the tensions resulting from the high correlation between globalization and the global English. From this point of view, the EFL/ESL classroom becomes a site of cultural struggle where different identities, meanings and practices are negotiated. Furthermore, through a focus on multimodality, use of advertisements in EFL/ESL presents an opportunity to maximize language learning with so many potential activities to engage with multiple signs in the form of written and spoken language, gestures, visuals, and the like. In this respect, space for defining, explaining and analyzing advertisements in EFL/ESL classes will be a chance for language learners to cultivate a critical and a holistic perspective towards any text they come across in the global world.

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