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AUTHOR Killian, Patricia A.
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ABSTRACT

Teaching Intensive English students about American culture by having them analyze the advertising content of popular American magazines is suggested. A sample analysis of a typical "People" magazine reveals Americans' interests in nationalism, national pastimes, youth, sex appeal, diet, food, glamour, and cleanliness. Because each magazine reflects only one segment of the reading public, it is advisable for several different magazines to be analyzed, contrasted, and discussed. This method of teaching culture can also be used to study the cultures of other nations or peoples and to compare the cultures of different countries. A 22-item mini-bibliography is included. (JL)

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LISTEN TO THE CHEERIOS; THE ABC'S OF A CULTURE COURSE

Patricia A. Killian

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"Listen to the Cheerios: The ABC's of a Culture Course" ❶

Patricia A. Killian

If you were to look at the curricula offered by most intensive English programs (IEPs) in the United States, you would most likely find courses in grammar, reading, writing, and listening/speaking. The rare program would offer a course in American culture, yet it is just this kind of course that many IEP students have requested wanting or wanting more of (Killian, forthcoming). These students have a great deal of curiosity about the people that they see and deal with every day, curiosity that is not answered by learning about subject-verb agreement. Subject-verb agreement is a fact that can be readily explained in concrete terms, but when it comes to who Americans are or what Americans think and want, the question necessarily begs a much more complex answer, if it is one that can be answered at all. Our multi-ethnic history has given us a rich, diverse, and complex national persona, one that surely defies neat, definitive labeling. Nevertheless, take a look at national advertising and you can learn much about the "American persona". This article explores this national image, granted, an image perceived and created by advertisers, and how this perception of who and what we are can be used as the basis for a course in American culture, cross-cultural studies, or a content-based ESOL class. And though I am addressing those planners and teachers of adult IEPs, this type of course could be adapted for and by younger students.

This course is based on an analysis of the advertising of the May 29, 1989 issue of People magazine. People was chosen because it is a magazine that is bought by both Americans (indicating that this kind of magazine reflects current American concerns and interests) and non-Americans. It contains short articles and large numbers of pictures about contemporary stories, ones that interest IEP students (sports, music, personalities, etc.). The reading level of the typical People magazine is one that the intermediate ESOL student could read, thus making it a magazine with high accessibility and interest-level for both groups. The analysis of the advertising in this issue of People is similar to the advertising in three other later issues of People, indicating that this specific issue is a "typical" People. Because of the large number of advertisements in any magazine, I chose to look at only those that were 1/4 page or larger in size (the largest advertisement was an eight-page spread for automobiles). There were sixty-four such ads.

- ❶ Although this article discusses a plan for an American culture course for students learning English as a foreign or second language, the suggested activities could be used in any foreign language curriculum.

So just what are the ABC's of an American Culture Curriculum? They are, according to People: A = America; B = Bodies; C = Cleanliness; D = Diet; E = Ease; F = Food; G = Glamour.

A = America

Nationalism and national pastimes are evoked in several different advertisements. They sell beer (at a baseball game), charcoal (family picnics on the weekend), cars (with Disney World and spectacular 4th of July fireworks in the background), and touring bicycles ("a kinder, gentler ride" past the White House).

B = Bodies

Sex appeal and youth are most clearly shown in healthy, lean bodies, and advertisers use tanned, fresh-faced, young ones to sell soap ("soft light, soft colors, soft kisses, soft skin-Caress"), alcohol, cars, shampoo (for bleached blondes), shavers ("for the way a woman wants to feel"), and a pharmaceutical company (hair loss products).

C = Cleanliness

The greatest number of ads (22%) were about cleaning products, all kinds of soap, detergents, and good-smelling things to whiten, brighten, freshen, sweeten, and remove stains. Deodorant is sold claiming "confidence shows" and your breath and shoes will keep you popular if you chew "Big Red" gum and use Dr. Scholl's "Sneaker Snuffers". Diapered cats praise the virtues of plastic cat box liners.

D = Diet

America's growing health concerns are witnessed in ads for the three 80's products: sugar substitutes (sugar-free drinks and gum), crunchy fiber (thus the title "Listen to the Cheerios"), and calcium supplements (fortified orange juice).

E = Ease

Americans have less free time today than we did even ten years ago, and so advertisers sell products that reduce the amount of time we have to spend on drudgery by selling products that make our lives easier and more tranquil. There are ads for cordless phones and vacuums, suitcases that have hangers and hooks already inside, and quiet ceiling fans.

F = Food

Food is very important for most people, and so it is for Americans. People also had many different kinds of ads about food-snappy pickles, gourmet foods vs. the traditional tuna casserole, pasta (another 80's phenomenon), and dips.

G = Glamour

Glamour as seen in products that help us prepare for excitement and the good times was the seventh discernable category of advertising in People. The ads for perfume ("Put Paris in your pocket"), cars, computers (competition to win a sports car), alcohol ("for perfect drinks" and the Tour de France), and cigarettes ("the freshest" and "the slimmest slim") touted the beautiful life.

There are two additional major trends that run throughout the above ABC's—the importance of cars and youth to Americans. Cars are as American as the family and Mickey Mouse (so says Chevrolet); they are sexy and dependable according to Toyota and Ford; and they give you the freedom to get away to exotic places (says Plymouth).

The culture of youth pervades twenty-nine ads (45%). Young people are either the center of the advertisement (a two-page ad with twenty-four lounge chairs filled with glistening, bronzed sun worshippers) or are the reason the product is being sold in the first place (premature hair loss). Only one ad had a mature central figure (AT & T's ad for calling grandma).

Madison Avenue, the advertising center of the United States, tells us that Americans aspire to be clean, young, sexy, diet-conscious, fun-loving people. These characteristics are reinforced today by television and the movies. The "Brat Pack" and Rambo-type films and soap operas are examples. Soap operas are further proof of our obsession with physical cleanliness in the fact that they have traditionally been sponsored by soap companies. There is, therefore, a great deal of easily accessible, public cultural information about who and what Americans wish to be in People magazine.

The question, then, is "Is this really "America"? And the answer is indeed it is, but only one face of America, one that can quite successfully start many interesting discussions of America and American culture as seen through certain advertisers' eyes.

The course then revolves around seven suggested basic types of activities:

1. Choose or have the students choose a magazine/magazines that interest them and that contain sufficient and appropriate advertising. These magazines may be more general rather than more specific ones (e.g. Life and Newsweek vs. House Beautiful and Sports Illustrated) in order to find a wider variety of advertising, i.e. advertising that is aimed at more than one type of consumer. (See Point 3 below)

2. Have the students prepare their own analyses of the advertising, develop the relevant statistics, and come to their own conclusions about trends that they have found.
3. When the students have discussed "general" advertising and trends and in contrast to Point 1 above, a second analysis involves targeting specific kinds of magazines to discover any trends in their advertising and who the advertisers perceive their readers to be (e.g. Ebony, Mademoiselle, Smithsonian, Time, etc.); students will then compare and contrast these trends to those of the People-type magazines.
4. Have class group discussions/presentations based on the results from above.
5. Bring in readings and materials that supplement the newly-discovered trends (see the suggested bibliography at the end of this paper)
6. Compare American magazines with equivalent foreign ones in order to find out how they portray their cultures. Brief reviews of two foreign magazines below will show the potential this comparison has.

The November 1989 issue of Marie France, a French women's magazine, and the December 26, 1989 issue of Al Mojalla, a magazine similar to Time or Newsweek, also found strong advertising trends.

Marie France, as stated above, is a French women's magazine and as such, would contain advertising aimed at the French woman. The issue examined contained eighty-six ads, largely one- or two-page ads (96%). It appears that the French also have their own version of the ABC's of advertising, and they are: A = "Anti-"; B = Beauté (beauty); and, C = Cuisine (kitchen).

A = "Anti-"

Eight of the advertisements in this issue (9%) were for anti-products: anti-depressants, antibiotics, anti-fatigue capsules, and hypertension pills.

B = Beauté

Forty-eight (56%) of the ads were for beauty products. In fact, thirty of the ads (35%) were for skin care products (moisturizers, face creams, etc.).

C = Cuisine

The French are well-known for their food and drink, so twenty of

eighty-six ads about food (23%) should be no surprise.

The remaining ten ads were for a variety of products—clothes, furniture, cigarettes, cars, eye glasses, and books.

Al Majalla, called "The international Magazine of the Arabs", is one that is printed in Saudi Arabia. Its audience is likely to be an educated, traveled male, one who wishes to keep up on current events. As such, the nineteen advertisements in this magazine would be expected to reflect male concerns and interests. However, one soon learns this is not entirely the case. Although six ads are for cigarettes (32%), perfume and jewelry were featured in four ads each (21%). The other five ads were for cars, leather goods, video equipment, computers, and travel to India. With the exception of the ad for computers, which was entirely in Arabic, all the ads contained varying amounts of English. One was completely written in English.

Are there any themes that underlie the advertising in Al Majalla? Yes—the themes of luxury, sophistication, and internationalism. One would hardly know that these ads were meant for Arabic readers; the European-looking models could have come out of any of the pages of People or Marie France (this fact itself could lead to an interesting discussion). The perfumes and jewelry are those that are found in every department store in the US. Winston, Kent, Sharp, Honda, and Lladro were other advertisers in this issue. In fact, the advertising in this magazine would not look out of place in any issue of Time or Newsweek, another intriguing topic for discussion.

The seventh and final suggested activity follows.

7. Discuss the conundrum of "the chicken or the egg": Do advertisers produce ads to get consumers interested in wanting/needing/buying products that they never knew existed until they saw their ads, or does the public want/need/buy these products first, getting the advertisers interested in them only later?

By picking and choosing among the above activities, the suggested activities provide a teacher and class with anywhere from a week's to a semester's worth of classwork. The activities have an added pedagogical advantage in that they are largely student-generated and student-controlled. The students are in charge of the research and the comparisons. They can also conduct the discussion sessions and choose the foreign and English magazines to compare. In short, there is a great deal of intense student involvement. The teacher is in large part a facilitator. Students use and develop their language skills out of a need and want to communicate with each other, the goal and outcome of language acquisition (see Krashen's numerous discussions

of communicative competence and language acquisition).

Below are some reading materials that can be used to supplement class discussions of culture, advertising, and America. I have also included some references to materials that develop basic language skills and that discuss Krashen's language acquisition theories. This list is by no means meant to be an exhaustive one.

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