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Using Advertisements in Class 1 'Why rediscover America?'



Duchamp's Idea: The great 20th Century artist Marcel Duchamp came up with an extraordinary notion. He thought that in the past artists had to create something from scratch; yet the industrial era had churned out a multitude of objects, many of which were undoubtedly beautiful by dint of their design. So a sculptor for instance could simply peruse various items, take one out of context and present it as something original! After all, it is the thought rather than the execution that sets the artist apart! Following this logic, Duchamp produced a series of pieces which he dubbed 'readymades' – of which this one, the 'fountain', is the most famous; incredible as it may sound, in 2004, 500 art experts voted this the most influential work of Art of the 20th century!!

All the commercials mentioned below can be found on YouTube under 'Ads for ELT' – but you can also find the links at the end of this article. You can download sample handouts from my site: www.michelioudakis.org

Taking a leaf out of Duchamp's sketchpad: As teachers, our number one problem is how to motivate our learners. To that end we rack our brains on a daily basis, trying to come up with interesting / exciting / original ideas – ideas that will intrigue our students and motivate them to work harder. Yet there is fantastic material out there, which with minimal work on our part can become part of our arsenal as EL teachers – advertisements.

Advertisements are short, authentic and many of them have an unexpected element – indeed they often have to, otherwise they cannot attract the consumers' attention. All we need to do as EL teachers is select some carefully and think of how we can use them to get students to practice the L2. Ads which contain language obviously lend themselves to the development of listening skills (Part I). But even commercials without language can be exploited as we can see below (Part II).

Part I – Ads with Language: These ads contain a dialogue or a narration. Once we have typed this up, we have a script and then we can use the full battery of activities normally use in classroom listening tasks such as gap-filling (a), sentence completion, word deletion or insertion

of extra lexical items, summaries containing mistakes etc. However, certain ads have special features which we can use when designing activities; for instance in the fantastic '[Genie](#)' the obvious question to set our students is 'What are the girl's 3 wishes?' (for other ads with 'special features' see b – d)

- a. **Fill in the gaps:** Some commercials contain a lot of language and as it is scripted and rehearsed the delivery can often be extremely fast! To help our students we can type up the text and leave some blank spaces for them to fill in. A good example of such an ad is '[Condoms](#)' – which could also form the basis for an awareness-raising discussion on safe sex and STDs.
- b. **Spot the beep!:** Other ads lend themselves to a different kind of treatment. For example, in the hilarious '[Sex and the City](#)' the message is 'censored' as some words / expressions are deemed unacceptable! A natural first task would be to ask our students to make a note of which lexical items these are! Then they can go on to listen to the text and again change it according to what technique we have decided to use.
- c. **Spot the mistake:** In the amazing '[LA Fair](#)' the girls, their mother and the shop assistant make all kinds of factual (not linguistic) mistakes. Here again, the most natural task is to ask students to spot the latter. Incidentally, the idea of people making a fool of themselves through sheer ignorance is such a straightforward one that students could go on to script their own versions, record themselves and perhaps upload the clips on YouTube!
- d. **Flesh out the text:** The brilliantly creative '[E-bay Motors](#)' produces a funny effect by using the kind of abbreviations which are familiar from Classified Advertisements in newspapers (e.g. mls = miles) Here it makes sense to ask students to list the advantages of the new way of advertising ('E-bay Motors') and then you can give them the text with some gaps and get them to fill them in with the actual words – not the abbreviated forms they hear!

Part II – Ads without any Language: Being a great Ad lover, I used to get frustrated when I saw a brilliant one and I thought I could not use it in class. Not anymore. There may be no text, but the ad shows a sequence of events. This means, we can write the text ourselves!! Then we can use most of the activities we saw above as in (a) and (b). Alternatively we can use a more 'natural' ways of exploiting the ads, as in (c)

- a. **Spot the difference:** In the handout of this very original commercial ('[Huggies](#)') the story is told through the eyes of the main character. The text describes the events but I have included some inaccuracies. Students read the text, then they close their handouts and they watch the ad. After that, they look at the text again and they try to spot the mistakes. The more subtle the changes, the harder the task! This means that this activity can easily be used as H/W; students choose their favourite ad, they change some things about the way things happen and then they challenge another group to spot the differences!

- b. Watch and select:** If you are the one writing the text, there is nothing to prevent you writing more than what is in the commercial, thus getting more ‘mileage’ out of it. In [‘Harvey’](#) a number of household chores are shown, but we can add even more! In this way we can in a sense use the ad as a springboard for teaching vocabulary. Having done a preliminary task, students can then watch the commercial and underline the items (in this case household tasks) which are actually shown.
- c. Describe and Rate:** We could also use ads with little or no language to give our student practice in reading. We could write a short paragraph describing each ad and then ask students to rate it. They can then watch it and give it a second mark which could be higher or lower depending on whether they felt the ‘concept’ was realized effectively. Finally, the class could vote for the best one. An excellent set of three such ads which have proved extremely popular with my ss are the [‘Banned Ads’](#).

Last words - keep it simple!: Very often the best activities are the simplest ones. These tend to replicate real communication as it happens in the world outside the classroom. Now think about commercials – what do we normally do with them in real life? Well, we watch them and then we talk about them. So here is the best fluency activity in my repertoire: I describe to my students one of my ads I like best – the amazing [‘Art’](#); then I tell them to turn to the person next to them and talk about their personal favourites. Having done that, I know that if I feel like it I can just walk out of the classroom and have a cup of coffee... chances are, when I get back they will still be at it!

YOU TYPE	DURATION	THE LINK
Ads for ELT – Genie	0:31	http://youtu.be/hBzKHcmYDEI
Ads for ELT – Condoms	1:01	http://youtu.be/_ESj1WHWmg
Ads for ELT – Sex and the City	1:02	http://youtu.be/gKluzLTBxI0
Ads for ELT – LA Fair	0:32	http://youtu.be/l7wM0KzUgnM
Ads for ELT – E-bay Motors	1:00	http://youtu.be/YafyB-SKkiE
Ads for ELT – Huggies	0:42	http://youtu.be/LfKXGRZ1DNg
Ads for ELT – Harvey	1:01	http://youtu.be/B1gh4JdRIiI
Ads for ELT – Banned Ads	1:34	http://youtu.be/MK_U1QIqUJs
Ads for ELT – Art	1:02	http://youtu.be/xtPH1y9rGRI