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EXPLORING PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE  
THROUGH HOTEL ADVERTISEMENTS AND  
REVIEWS**

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**MULTILITERACIES MATERIALS:  
EXPLORING PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE THROUGH HOTEL  
ADVERTISEMENTS AND REVIEWS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This working paper describes a workshop I conducted at CAMTESOL 2013. I shared reading and writing materials I had designed based on a multiliteracies design of reading and writing instruction, adapted for second and foreign language learners. Such an approach involves using multiple genres of authentic text to foster students' awareness of the relationships between the text's conventions and context of use, as well as critical reflection (Byrnes et al, 2006; Kern, 2000). The theme of the presented materials was online advertisements and reviews of Japanese inns. The purpose of the workshop was to demonstrate to teachers in training how every authentic text has a purpose and the language used in the text varies accordingly. The main message I conveyed was that teachers should make students aware of the connection between language use and purpose, and teach them how to read between the lines of words to find hidden meaning. This is a way to 'empower' language learners. During the workshop, I described how students in my IC freshman reading class explored the use of persuasive language in hotel reviews and then experimented with the language by converting a neutral descriptive paragraph of their home into an alluring bed and breakfast advertisement. Audience members left the workshop with the sample lesson handouts and ideas on how to design their own materials.*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper reports on the workshop I conducted at the Cambodia TESOL conference (CAMTESOL) in February, 2013. In the workshop, I briefly introduced the concept of multiliteracies and then shared a set of materials I designed as part of a unit on reviews and advertisements in the International Communications Department's Reading & Writing course.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Since the start of the English classes in the International Communications department, reading and writing courses were held separately. Textbooks were used in both classes, and the main goals of the class were on reading and writing as cognitive skills and strategies. All contents were of an academic genre. Readings were essay style with comprehension questions and writing assignments were themed paragraphs and a final essay. Although it goes without saying that there is a cognitive aspect to reading and writing, Kern (2000) demonstrated that there are also sociocultural and linguistic elements that are often unintentionally ignored in a skills based approach.

In the academic year 2012, ELI teachers in the BEPP IC research group, piloted joint Reading Writing classes in the IC curriculum. Textbooks were replaced with in-house made materials and the main focus became multiliteracies. This new curriculum was inspired specifically by work described in Byrnes et al (2006) where learners are involved in reading, writing and close textual analysis of a variety of discourses. Both primary and secondary discourse types (see, e.g. Gee, 1998, 2002) were incorporated into the curriculum to provide teaching materials that emphasize how “interactional patterns” make up the core component of language use. The distinction between primary and secondary discourse types can be conceptualized as “beginning with the oral language use of familiar interactions and gradually moving into public, institutional, and professional settings.” (Byrnes et al, 2006, p. 90). Based on this distinction, topical units were designed in sequence to take learners through a range of discourse types with related focus on how each text type represents different interactional patterns. The

sequence began with primary discourse through emails and personal narratives and was followed by blurred, or literary discourse, which was covered by 3rd person narratives and folk tales. Finally, the sequence shifted to secondary discourses of public life with instructions and procedures, news articles, reviews and advertisements, and lastly, the academic essay. The aim of these new materials was to show students the different written genres, make them explicitly aware of the audience and purpose each text was written for, and draw their attention to the unique organization, vocabulary, and style that each genre is written in. Students would finish each unit with a written assignment to produce their own sample from that genre.

The materials I was responsible for were part of a section of a larger Unit on Reviews. The topic I chose was hotel advertisements and customer reviews. The authentic images and text on the handouts were taken from an accommodation booking website. The goals of these specific materials were twofold: one goal, which was applied to all the multiliteracies materials in the curriculum, was to familiarize students with the organization and formulaic language used in accommodation advertisements; an additional goal unique to these materials was to help students read between the lines of an accommodation advertisement and reviews and to recognize possible euphemisms. For example, a hotel advertising their rooms as ‘cozy’ may actually be trying to candy coat the fact that the rooms are small; ‘traditional’ can some times be used as a euphemism for old. The idea behind the second goal was to empower learners to make sound choices by training them to read between the lines in a foreign language and possibly even become more aware of such tricky usages of words in their native language.

Before the materials packet was started, students were asked to write a descriptive

paragraph of their family home, including it's outside appearance, location, surrounding area, and things inside the house. I collected these paragraphs before distributing the materials packet and I held onto the paragraphs until the end of the unit, when they were used for the Unit writing assignment (to be explained in further detail later). As a warm-up to the topic, the students talked about their travel experience, favorite places to stay, and what features are most important to them when deciding where to stay when traveling. Then the students looked at a page in the packet that contained only photos of the ryokan that the students would later read about. For example, one photo was the front of the building, another was the bathroom; another was of the bedroom. They had to write a few words that came to mind when they saw each photo and then predict what kind of place they'd be staying at.

After producing language to describe their own first impressions of the ryokan, based on the photos, students turned the page and read the accommodation advertisement. We briefly ran through a series of questions about the text that are repeated in each unit, based on Halliday's (1978) view of language as a social semiotic: what is this text, who wrote the text, what is the purpose of the text, who was it written for? After answers to these questions were shared, students then compared their first impressions of the text with the description of the ryokan written by the owner. The purpose of this part of the lesson was to have students notice discrepancies between how they would describe the ryokan and how the owner described it. They then tried to find specific polite euphemisms in the text that could match up with some of their own more negative descriptions of the ryokan. The class ended with the students looking at a real review of the ryokan they had read about to see natural examples of critical language.

The focus of the next day was on the organization and content of the advertisement. For example, students were asked to identify the topic of each paragraph in the advertisement: a site-seeing paragraph, location paragraph, description of the rooms, and services provided. Formulaic expressions such as ‘each room is equipped with’, ‘facilities include’, visiting this restaurant is a must’, had also been boldened in the text and students were asked to fill out a chart where they rewrote the formulaic expressions in neutral everyday English. For homework, students had to browse the website that the original text came from, and choose another hotel that looked interesting to stay at. They had to print the information page and bring it to the next class.

On day three, students got into groups of 3-4 and were given a hypothetical situation. A foreign friend was coming to visit and they had to plan a trip. As a group, they had to share the information about the hotel they had researched for homework. They had to compare and contrast the pros and cons of each hotel and then come to a unanimous agreement about which hotel to stay at. The purpose of this activity was to get students to see the repeating formulaic language used in multiple samples of the hotel advertisement genre, as well as give them the chance to recycle the new vocabulary words they had learned.

On the final class day using the materials packet, I returned the description paragraphs that students had written prior to studying the materials. Students were then given the task to give their paragraph a makeover. They had to change it into a persuasive advertisement; they would imagine they were converting their home into a bed and breakfast. I gave students a graphic organizer to help divide their information into the different parts of a hotel advertisement: a site-seeing paragraph, location paragraph,

description of the rooms, and services provided. After revisions, the students' final products were posted on the class Edmodo site.

### **3. DISCUSSION**

In this section I will discuss the parts of the activity that students found easy, as well as those that they found challenging. I listed these problems in my workshop and had the audience brainstorm solutions or changes to the materials that could eliminate the problems.

The students had no troubles with the initial descriptive paragraph homework assignment in terms of language and style. However, surprisingly, I took for granted that students knew a lot about their local neighborhoods. This was not true in some cases and those students had to do some extra research in order to complete the assignment. The students also had plenty of vocabulary to describe the photos of the ryokan and how they felt about it.

The section of the material that was most challenging to students, and perhaps not fully successful, was the 'reading between the lines' euphemism portion. They understood the concept of euphemism because they had been given a previous assignment where they had to think of some in Japanese. However, the main issue may have been unfamiliarity with the vocabulary used in the text. Many of the euphemistic words were new to the students. They hadn't been exposed to certain vocabulary words in natural contexts often enough to understand which were more frequent, which were being used more creatively, and which had negative nuances. In retrospect, this kind of lesson would have to be repeated with multiple samples of text before the students are

able to read between the lines without the teacher explicitly drawing their attention to the language.

With the exception of the euphemism portion mentioned above, the majority of the students performed well on the materials as assessed by their work on the handouts and the final unit writing project. The easiest task for the students was to identify the writer, audience, and purpose of the text. This is most likely due to the fact that these same questions are repeated in each unit with each new genre. In addition, it's not difficult to answer these questions even in a second language, but students simply needed to know that they should think about the answers to these questions, in order to make connects between the purpose of the text and the formulaic language used for the genre.

One issue some students did have, was in finding formulaic language unassisted by the teacher. Students could easily understand that boldened words were formulaic, and it was easy to rewrite them in more commonly used expressions. For example, 'amenities include toothbrush and towel' could be rewritten as 'we'll give you a toothbrush and a towel'. However, there were additional formulaic expressions that I had intentionally not boldened, and most students did not notice them. Looking back on the lesson, I realized it would have been much better to provide students with multiple examples of hotel advertisements on the very first day, so they could scan through all the examples for repeated phrases. When teaching this lesson again in the next academic year, I would try this new idea to see if students would become capable of discovering formulaic language without the explicit referencing from the teacher.

A final issue the students faced was that some of them did not reproduce the



formulaic language in their personal hotel advertisements for the unit project. I questioned them about this during individual meetings about their first draft. The reasons they gave for not using the language were varied. Some students didn't realize it was necessary, other students thought they shouldn't because it would be considered 'plagiarism' and other students explained they weren't sure how to use the expressions correctly. For example, one student asked about when to use 'facilities' and when to use 'amenities'. A possible solution to the first two problems would again involve the teacher in being more explicit. Perhaps saying to the students, "these are special words used in all hotel advertisements and you must use them when you write your own." In addition, in the context of ESL, it may be necessary for the teacher to tell students when they are supposed to copy exact language phrases and when it is forbidden. Otherwise, they are given mixed signals about plagiarism in a second language. The final issue of how to use specific words and phrases could be addressed by providing multiple samples and also scaffolding the material in more detail. The preparation handout for the final project, could include a section on which phrases should be used in each of the specific content paragraphs. For example, focus questions could be paired with appropriate phrases: "What items will you provide so the customer does not have to bring their own?" (Amenities include...). Overall, it seems I needed to give more explicit instruction and include more structured steps in the materials.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Teaching materials based on a multiliteracies approach was a new experience for me. Similar to when I first started teaching grammar, I realized that, before, I had not been consciously aware of formulaic language and how different words and patterns are used in different genres of texts. I had to rediscover my own language in a new way in order to design materials to efficiently teach these patterns to second language learners. Not surprisingly, some of my initial attempts were not completely successful because I was not explicit enough with drawing students' attention to language patterns. The gave advice to teachers in training at the CAMTESOL workshop based on my own successes and failures in designing materials for the pilot of the Reading & Writing course. I would advise any teacher who plans to design multiliteracies material for their class to do the following: Make sure there is enough structural activities in the handouts to properly scaffold the learning process, make the language focus explicit by boldening vocabulary phrases students need to learn and have them rewrite the new phrases in their own words, paragraph content graphic organizers, and above all, give students multiple samples from the same genre so they can recognize repeated patterns. Although I do believe this advice is helpful, I also recognize that I am still a novice at materials design for multiliteracies and my advice is therefore not definitive. I chose to present these materials at CAMTESOL 2013 because the theme was Language and Empowerment. If multiliteracies training materials are designed properly, students should become able to recognize different genres of text and the formulaic language that comes with it, as well as read between the lines to find hidden or additional intended meaning. This is a way to

make them empowered language users in an increasingly multilingual world.

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