AESTHETICS IN READING: CAN TEXT AND IMAGES HELP OR HINDER READING?

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Mostly ignored, poorly understood and under-exploited, text and images have a role in facilitating reading, especially for learners of English. Some people believe that the aesthetics of a page can affect the reader emotionally. An aesthetically pleasing layout can put a reader in a mood conducive for reading, just like an advertisement. This paper will explore and examine the benefits of aesthetically pleasing text and images and how they can induce a good mood. Strategies from the advertising industry will be used as a model for this purpose.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Reading, Text and Images, Learners of English, Advertising Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Mostly ignored, poorly understood and under-exploited, text and images have a role in reading, especially for English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Some people believe that the aesthetics of a page can affect the reader emotionally and that aesthetically pleasing layouts can put a person in a mood conducive for reading. A study on English Language Teaching (ELT) reading materials shows that 92.9% of the students felt it was very or somewhat important to have positive feelings when using an ELT textbook (Hsu 2009). The literature shows there is a relationship between positive emotional experience and student motivation. In fact, positive emotional experiences were found to be necessary for learning motivation (Meyer and Turner 2006, cited by Hsu). A study of the impact of positive emotion demonstrates to a certain extent that high quality typography (which translates into attractive, uncluttered, easy-on-the-eye and well laid-out text) appears to induce a positive mood, “similar to mood inducers such as a small gift or watching a humorous video” (Larson and Picard, 2005). Kirschenbaum (2006), citing Deloux (2003), opines that “the most effective learning strategies motivate readers by activating their emotions”.

Much has been written and researched on reading and there is a proliferation of research materials on the various aspects of reading. The literature is overflowing with studies investigating the facilitative effect of pictures on text processing. Gyselinck and Tardieu (1999) citing Levie and Lentz (1982), and Levin, Anglin, and Carney (1987) identify that illustrations (in various forms like photographs, maps and pictures) can serve several functions in promoting memory for factual information for example, representational, organisational, interpretational, transformational and even decorative. Images are added to the text for their aesthetic properties or to increase the interest of the learner. A study by Levin et al. (1987) shows
that all functions, but the decorative one, facilitates memory, and the ones that benefit memory the most are those where the text is presented visually or orally.

The most notable and widely known research studies range from learning from graphic material (Vernon, 2000), the effects of text illustration (Levie & Lentz, 1982) and visual literacy to the influence of graphic illustrations on text learning. However, it is surprising to discover that there is a lack of material on the application of strategies from one of the oldest professions in the world – the advertising industry. Coming from an advertising background, the author is interested to find out whether the strategies from advertising can be applied effectively to reading and, if so, what lessons can be gleaned from them? There are common threads between these two extreme poles – print advertisements and academic texts – in the extrinsic such as text, fonts, layout and graphic illustrations, just to name a few; and the intrinsic including comprehension and retention of information, cognitive effects while extracting relevant data and the emotional environment related to the task of reading.

The focus of this paper is to determine whether strategies from the advertising industry can be used to make text reading more conducive and ‘enjoyable’, therefore more memorable as aids in retention of information and comprehension. The argument advanced here is that the same kind of strategies and mnemonic devices that brought about dramatic response and recall in advertisements can be adapted to yield comparable benefits with respect to information contained in the reading text for the ESL learners.

LITERACY AND THE NEW GENERATION

Multimedia, or new media, is changing the way society communicates in the virtual and real world. Reading has lost its appeal to a new generation that is fed on a diet of fast-paced multimedia technologies. In colleges and schools all over the world, students are expected to present visual ideas using a variety of multimedia applications. We are moving towards an increasingly visually-dominated culture – think iPhone, Facebook, online games. Students are comfortable using laptops, instant messaging, chat rooms, and the ubiquitous cell phones to connect with friends, family and people in communities and around the globe. The availability of technology in classrooms is altering the speed of communication in an overwhelming manner and now is the time to address visual media literacy, asserts Riesland (2005). Kress (1998) concurs that literacy instruction includes visual media literacy as one of its objectives. This school of thought defines visual literacy loosely as the ability to communicate and understand through visual means. The way students read and collect information is altered by the increase in their use of online hypermedia (where the word or media is a link that can be navigated to explore the idea behind the link further) for serious information gathering. In other words, students are involved in a lot of ‘noise’ such as activity, movement and action happening all at once. This is common knowledge to the most up-to-date industry (the advertising industry) through information feedback from their research partners, as knowing their target audience is one of the advertising strategies which contribute to a successful advertising campaign.

THE ADVERTISING (AD) STRATEGY

Advertising is about problem solving, offers Jewler & Drewniany (2005), two highly respected exponents in the advertising world, and it is done through a process that begins with the gathering of information about the client, its competitors and the target audience. John Lyons
(1987) in his book *Guts: Advertising from the Inside Out* says that “strategy is a carefully designed plan to murder the competition”. Jewler & Drewniany (2005) define strategy as “the way you plan to sell a product, not *just* the words and images you use to do so. Strategy consists of identifying what you need to say even before you’ve found the right way to say it. But mere facts do not a strategy make”. They add that insight must be added to the facts and you have to see a connection that no one else noticed.

The ad industry knows well that people respond best to rational and emotional rewards (the advertisement must make them feel good about themselves). As creative director John Stingley, observes, “The basic motivation of people boils down to the influence of love, sex, hunger and security”. The ad must appeal to and attempt to meet all these needs. It must activate the senses and stir the emotion for an effective response leading to recall and an affinity to the advertisement. An advertisement must communicate quickly and effectively. And if what needs to be conveyed to a target audience is not clear, understandable or useful to them, the prettiest ad is worthless (Jewler & Drewniany, 2005). It needs to be easily understood and a thoughtful ad gets as much information as possible to the audience in the shortest time possible. To achieve this, it must attract and stand out from thousands of media messages competing for the consumer’s attention. A good ad layout must also help consumers to remember the message, it must not only command attention but it must also hold it. Just like words, images have a grammar of their own, for example, a set of rules for processing and analysing them that combine, among other things, an element of psychology, the importance of colour, form, depth and movement (Keddie, 2009). Nothing will be communicated if the audience reading your ad is quickly bored. A good layout, with information carefully and strategically placed that breaks up the facts into digestible bits, will help produce facts that will stick in the consumer’s mind for information retention. Good layouts emphasise the most compelling information. Placement of the information, including where and how much information and how it is to be displayed in relation to other elements in the ad, can strengthen or diminish its importance. Gestalt (the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts), balance, contrast, harmony, proportion, rhythm and movement of text and images all play very important roles in a good layout.

And so, the three key points in the ad strategy can best be summed up as follows:

- The Power of Engaging Readers
- The Power of Images in Text
- The Power of Synergy in Text and Images

THE POWER OF ENGAGING READERS

There is a school of thought that believes that the solution to literacy problems “is right before our eyes – literally” (Kirschenbaum, 2007), that is, to engage readers visually through colourful images which act as a powerful stimulus to learning. Kirschenbaum quoting Zeki (1999) says that neuroscientists have found that when we read in black and white, many regions that process colour, form, motion, orientation and position are effectively shut down and put in sleep mode. By adding colour and design to our literature, we can activate the reader’s emotions in different areas of the brain (Zeki, 1999). The advertising industry understands this perfectly well and in reference to this, Kirschenbaum quips “if we could get even half the improvement in student learning that the advertisers are getting in consumer response, we would be ecstatic”. She
laments that students are “screaming for visually stunning, multi-sensory ways of reading”. Typeface size, style, colour and page layout all must be considered and implementing visual and sound elements into texts is exciting and well-received by students. Wilson (2009) opines that “the brain does not necessarily work in straight lines and in black and white; it uses images and colour as triggers for memory”.

THE POWER OF IMAGES IN TEXT

Keddie (2009) points out that to conclude that image is just an important factor for understanding the meaning of a piece of language is to “grossly underestimate its importance”. He strongly suggests that “image is meaning” and “the experience of meeting new language will surely be heightened for most if it is accompanied by memorable and engaging pictures, diagrams and images”. And further to that, an image “provides the teacher an invaluable tool for recalling, retrieving, revising, recapping and reactivating target language.” Quoting from Stuart Ewen’s book, All Consuming Images, Keddie reiterate that “if you really want to move people, don’t use words, use images”. The author would like to suggest that to move ESL readers, don’t just use words, use words and images for better impact in recall and learning. Images speak to us, they give rise to outbursts of emotions, thought and curiosity; and they bring back memories and remind us of the experiences we have had. Images refresh the parts of the brain that words alone fail to reach, asserts Keddie. Ron Hoff, an advertising professional concurs, “Visuals, when added to words, will more than double recall of your message” (Jewler & Drewniany).

THE POWER OF SYNERGY IN TEXT AND IMAGES

Traditionally, language is used to convey ideas and metaphors while images and graphs are added in for reinforcement of these ideas. Kress has demonstrated a shift that support text explanations to text that supports visual explanation, arguing that graphics hold more meaning and are central to the meaning of modern texts and meaning-making systems. The synergistic effects of text and images cannot be underestimated, argues Keddie. This argument is reinforced by Communications coach and BusinessWeek columnist, Carmine Gallo, who considers Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple Corporation, as “one of the world’s most extraordinary communicators”. He observes that Jobs relies on photos and images for his slides presentation and uses a technique based on the idea that “information is more effectively recalled when text and images are combined”. Advertisers understand how to reach youngsters and just about everyone far better than educators, asserts Riesland. Professional visual communicators wield power when communicating in the modern media image-centric environment. Words and images are inseparable. We read or hear words and think of images. We see images and think of words and when we combine words/texts with images, the whole learning experience may become more memorable and productive (Keddie).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this study centres around two research questions:

1. Can strategies from the advertising industry be used and applied to the academic field, particularly in reference to aesthetic in reading for ESL learners?
2. Can they be applied to text and images to help the ESL readers?

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The weaknesses of this study were:

1. The number of participants was small and therefore limiting in statistical validity.
2. Only ESL learners of one level were interviewed, therefore limiting an opportunity for comparisons.
3. Survey and responses focused on the reading habits of the respondents in English only and students were not asked about their interest and habits of reading in their native language which among numerous drawbacks limited the richness of their open-ended comments.
4. Only one type of course book was used for comparisons which again limited the richness of their open-ended comments.

METHODOLOGY

In answer to the research questions, a survey was administered to 16 international (from countries like Korea, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Indonesia amongst others) pre-university students [6 females and 10 males]. All respondents were ESL learners aged 17 to 20 in Level 3 [pre-intermediate IELTS equivalent] of The Intensive English Programme at Sunway University. [The Intensive English programme is a home-grown programme of Sunway University, endorsed by the University of Lancaster, England.] The respondents were interviewed individually with a guided questionnaire and each interview lasted about 20 minutes.

SURVEY CONTENT

The survey focused on the following areas:

1. Student’s attitude towards reading in English.
2. Student’s hobbies and preference of reading materials.
3. Student’s attitude towards the two different formats in the coursework reading materials.

THE READING MATERIALS

RESULTS

The survey revealed a variety of responses. As with any initial surveys, some questions and responses ended up to be of no significance. Therefore only the results of significance will be included. Students found “reading especially book text boring” and more than half of the respondents disliked, if not hated reading text-centric materials. Some of the respondents do read, but only online and mainly in their native language, mainly e-magazines for females and computer-related articles and websites for the males. Most of the respondents resoundingly expressed that text without images “makes me sleepy”, “I hate to read thick books”, “pictures is fun”, “with pictures, it is easy to get meaning from the text”. Most ESL learners, when interviewed, confessed to reading online mostly in their native language and in English only for school assignments and projects. Most respondents felt that text, when well laid-out with colourful images is “much better for reading” and is strongly preferred. A respondent said well laid-out text looked more interesting, still another felt that the text is “easier to read with pictures”, “pictures help to make understanding the text easier”. Others commented that, “it is easier to memorise and understand”, “colours attract me to the text” and “pictures are important for remembering facts”.

ANALYSIS

Some random observations were students preferred the newer, improved 2007 version of the reading course book. There were many attractive pictures in colour with captions under the pictures. Certain words were highlighted in colour to indicate the importance of these words. Students were drawn and attracted to the general layout of the pages and these well laid-designed pages triggered many positive emotions. This put the readers in a mood conducive to learning, by improving comprehension and better recall of information. And, conversely, text without any images or dull, unattractive and poorly laid-out text, as found in the older 2002 version of the course book, does nothing to help reading and instead puts the readers in a stressful mood hindering learning as there is a struggle for the ESL learner to ‘get into’ the text, and to make sense of the information. Lines or sentences that are too close together and words or fonts that are too small and layout that is not interesting, result in comments like “I don’t want to read it” and “it’s difficult to read”. This finding indicates to a certain extent that text-centric layouts triggered negative emotions.

What can be learnt from this and how can it be applied to the reading context?

Text and images must make a relevant connection between target audience (the reader) and information and ideas (the reading) in a manner that is conducive in order to persuade or to draw the reader into the text. Browne (2007) opines that there is a need for “mnemonic devices” to entice or draw the target audience in to your ad or, in our case, in to the reading text. They include:

1. An attention-grabbing headline that causes the reader to stop and notice the ad/text.
2. An opening statement or sub-heading that strikes deeply at the reader’s interest and draws him into the ad copy/the reading text.
3. Lots of “white space” in the ad copy so the reader doesn’t feel confined or cramped, for ease on the eyes for scanning/skimming the reading text.
4. Possibly a story or images that allows the prospect to see himself using and benefiting happily from the results of the product (like becoming rich, slim, more sexy, the life of the party in the ad/a picture with captions that encapsulates the main idea in the text, putting the ESL reader in a mood to read on.

5. Incorporation of a “wow” or “ah-ha” moment – that point when the reader finally “sees the light” of why purchasing makes so much sense for the ad consumer, or for the ESL reader, an image that triggers memory with information from prior knowledge and past experience.

The advertising industry knows that it is important to stimulate and to engage readers visually with attractive colourful visuals and chunks of text arranged in a structured manner. A single image can be used to define a grammatical structure, a sentence, or even a whole newspaper article (Keddie) and reinforce the much-quoted saying “a picture paints a thousand words”.

CONCLUSION

The small-scale survey, even with its limitations, confirms that text and images help facilitate reading, and the findings have a great deal of practical significance because:

- Including images in reading text seems to increase a reader’s comprehension and retention of information, just as attractive and well-laid out advertisements show, and “well-organised texts reduce extraneous cognitive load because less effort is needed for the integration of related idea units and less effort is devoted to search for and maintain related information” assert McCrudden et al (2004).

- Readers prefer texts that include images, as many effective advertisements testify and as McCrudden et al., citing Turner and Engle concur, pointing out that “learning from text can be difficult because of a reader’s limited processing capacity”.

It is observed that three things can be learned from the advertising industry: firstly, the text must speak to and engage the reader; and secondly, the power of images cannot be underestimated; thirdly, text and image must be synergistic, complementary, interesting, clean and uncluttered, just like a good advertisement, to make it easy for the reader to comprehend and retain information. It has to be non-threatening and induce a pleasant experience and good mood. Balan (1989) stresses that the layout of a page, which serves as an advanced organiser, is the first thing the reader notices, and effective page layout also aids the reader with information retrieval.

As demonstrated by this exploratory study, firstly, images in text are important to and have affective impact on the ESL reader as they help understanding of the text and are preferred to text without any colourful and meaningful pictures that attract attention. Secondly, strategies from the advertising industry to a certain extent, can be used and applied to text and images to help the ESL readers. Aanstoos (2003) postulates “that many educators argue that an image-rich curriculum can reach more students and teach them more quickly than traditional text-based verbal and written instructions ever could”. Given this strong reader preference, there is a cognitive benefit which would warrant use of images as they create an affective difference to the ESL reader. An image may stir up curiosity, activate prior knowledge to motivate an ESL learner to read and when he is given access to an image that complements the text, his comprehension of the text may be reinforced. Finally, an image that accompanied the text may be used at later dates to refresh, revisit and revise the text that was studied. Such is the power of images as
evidenced in most literatures pertaining to advertising. Teachers have the responsibility of reshaping with boldness and wisdom, the means that are most suitable for better recall and retention of information. They have the option of assimilating the essence of the advertising strategy and transposing and applying it to the reading context. The author hopes that this exploratory study will stimulate further inquiry into how best to define and develop communication competence through the application of aesthetics in reading. To choose to ignore the importance and contribution of images in text will not only be to the disadvantage of educators but, more importantly, to the disadvantage of the ESL learner. If the choice is to help and not to hinder learning, we need to define and develop aesthetics in communication competence through applying what we have learned in advertising strategies. The same kind of strategies and mnemonic devices that brought about dramatic response and recall in advertisements can be adapted to yield comparable benefits with respect to information contained in the reading text for the ESL learners.

REFERENCES


