

VISUALITY AND COMMUNICATION IN MILITARY ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at discussing the rationale for implementing posters in teaching and learning a foreign language in general, and in the military educational environment in particular. It proposes a flexible and practical approach of the discourse analysis, suitable for young learners as well as a reflection on its importance from a pedagogical perspective. The targets of this research are military students with A2 to B2 levels of English. In the context of visual narratives, posters can become effective and motivating tools able to adapt to any level, from beginner to advanced, and learners acquire military language by reading and listening to documents aimed at native speakers. It is believed that this approach will inspire new research paths on how visual materials can contribute to creating a pleasant and interactive educational environment in the military language classroom.*

Key words: poster, military, analysis, communication

1. Introduction

Traditionally, any document is a source of evidence or information, and posters have always been a means to express people's ideas, fashions and aspirations. Often broadly defined as a simple piece of printed paper designed to be attached to a wall or vertical surface [1], the poster has proved to be more than that; it has represented all political ideologies, industrial developments or major events in the world, covering rigorously all the subjects of our societies: cinema, politics, theatre, art, travel, industry. Posters contain a variety of elements, linguistic and semiotic, current cultural references, various figures of speech or humorous interpretation of proverbs to draw people's attention to different issues. Thus, their role as advertising tools is plural-dimensional. They are meant not only to attract attention,

but they also try to build a whole system of ideology. Indeed, by sending subliminal messages to the unconscious part of people's brains, posters fill a need for expression [2], they have the power to modify, or even create from scratch, a body of values and aspirations.

The Army has used a large variety of adverts, adapted to different social, political and military contexts. Thus, military posters open a window to society, they mirror military organizations' "intellectual and practical activities" [3], showing how political, military or business leaders of the world have influenced their evolution over times. Starting with WWI, passing through WWII and the Cold War, up to nowadays, posters, these expressions of "genuine graphic art" [4], have kept appealing and retaining the public's attention also due to their great variety. There are recruiting

posters which appeal either to young people's patriotism, by using a series of techniques in order to persuade them to participate in the war effort, or to their emotions, sense of adventure, or desire to protect family and friends. There are also civilian-orientated posters, focused on the civilian-military interrelationship [5], trying to attract women, too, campaigning to collect funds to finance the war, etc. Others send negative messages about the enemy in an attempt to inspire citizens' fear and hate. Nowadays military posters are anchored in reality, and the language they use is quite appropriate to young audiences: trendy, entertaining and motivating. They have the merit of enabling young people to achieve more, or think differently about the things that they may be learning or doing [6]. From a pedagogical point of view, posters represent extraordinary sources of information, both linguistically and culturally. Military or non-military classrooms can be more interactive and communicative if motivational or inspirational posters are appropriately used. Our approach of the subject of posters in a military English class aims to expand the possibilities of analysis not only from a communicative point of view, but also from a linguistic and semiotic perspective. The purpose is to stimulate students' awareness of the language and their critical thinking through the analysis of the advertising discourse, teaching them to discover the message hidden behind the language components. The paper begins with a brief overview of the context of posters. Then, it presents the way posters can be used within a military vocabulary class and gives some practical recommendations for the implementation of posters for assessment. Finally, it brings into discussion the advantages of such an approach in teaching and learning military English, and the added value of the posters.

2. The context

Posters create an environment that stimulates communication and discussion [7]. Posters have been used across a range of disciplines including mathematics [8], psychology [9], chemistry [10] etc. It has been noticed that posters promote a very positive attitude in students, and learners who undertake posters as a component of their assessment have a greater retention in the areas of their poster topic [11].

In their informative function, posters combine text and images into a 'composite text' [12]. It is what Cook [13] calls linguistic and non-linguistic or situational context. The linguistic context refers to the text or the slogan of the poster characterized by phonetics, lexical and morphology, semantics and pragmatics. The linguistic or textual message of the posters addresses readers, directly aiming to remain in their minds [14]. It is more effective when used in synchrony with the so-called non-linguistic or situational context represented by other forms of communication, such as images, icons, colors and/or sound. Thus, posters combine two main semiotic systems: text (lexical) and images (visual) which can have multiple meanings.

2.1. The linguistic context

The linguistic context may be personalized by the use of vocabulary. Military posters, like all the other types of print advertising, are written in different linguistic forms i.e.:

- informative: *You get 12 matches, a knife, some twine, and 3 days to enjoy yourself;*
- provocative: *Some of our Best Men Are Women;*
- interrogative: *When was the last time you got promoted?;*
- imperative: *Join now. Go later. Up to four months later. Your future, your decision ... Choose Army,* [15] etc.

It is easy to notice from these examples the use of personal pronouns or the imperative form of the verbs, meant to urge people in taking action (buy, enlist, participate in events, etc.). The headlines, slogans or

short statements act like a hook [16], meant to draw the readers' attention and provoke their curiosity.

Descriptive words are frequently used to emphasize the qualities of products and to present them as being unique. Thus, adjectives play a very important role in describing products. With their help we can identify the advertisers' opinion about what they say [17]. When advertisers want to be objective, they mention the facts and avoid the adjectives that turn the statement from factual to descriptive. In the process of describing there is a wide choice of adjectives meant to reveal emotional implication related to the claims posters make. As the language of advertising is manipulative, often trying to present a product far beyond its qualities, two figurative devices are frequently employed: simile and metaphor. These are two of the best known figures of speech and are often mentioned together as examples of rhetorical figures. Thus, simile is a word or a phrase that compares things that may appear unconnected, using like, then, as if or as. We may also find comparative constructions used when comparing two things or two situations: as...as, so...as.

Verbs are usually very simple, most of the time consisting of one word, at present forms or simple imperatives. As a matter of fact, the main characteristic of the sentence structure itself is simplicity. Nevertheless, sentences are also clever and sometimes amusing, incomplete, with no linking words, yet grammatically correct, since advertisers cannot afford to damage the image of their product. The simplicity is due to the fact that advertisers want their messages to be understood as fast and as clearly as possible. It also happens that some modern recruitment military posters use reverse psychology and a thought-provoking approach by means of imperative negative sentences. (Figure 1). This is meant to encourage young people and to influence them to become interested in the Army and take the opportunity to consider

how much the Army offers them and whether it is the right career for them.

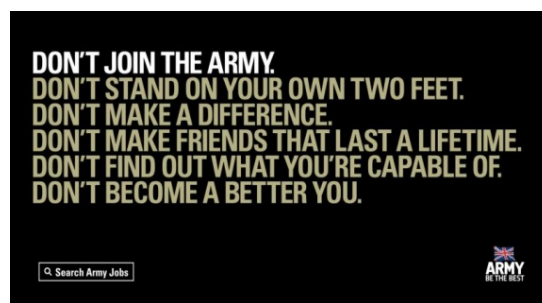


Figure 1. British recruitment poster

The choice of words is essential. Every word has an etymology, a denotative meaning and different connotations, translation equivalents, personal associations, metaphorical uses, etc.

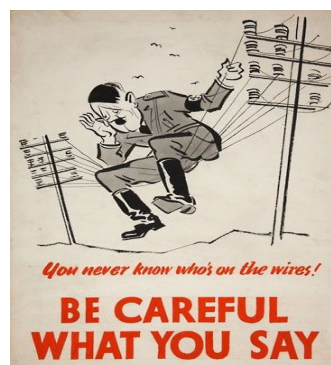


Figure 2 WWII poster

Generally speaking, the denotative meaning is basically the dictionary meaning, which almost anyone can understand, while connotation is the subjective meaning people add to words. Connotations, just like metaphors, give life to posters. As an example, this poster (Figure 2) from the Second World War was sending the civilians of the Allied Powers the clear message that Hitler's Germany had means of listening into their communications. Posters also play with polysemous words – words that have multiple meanings, like heart, which can refer to the heart of a man, heart of a town, country, region, etc. Advertisers are also constantly looking for novel words. There are many different ways to create new words such as by affixation, compounding, conversion, shortening and

blending, words known as neologisms. Another process of forming neologisms is shortening by clipping, acronyms, and initialisms. Military posters often contain acronyms and initialisms. An acronym is a word formed with the initials of two or more words and it is read like an ordinary word, for example NATO is the acronym for North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Initialisms, which are abbreviations with alphabetical reading, are more common: HQ (Headquarters), TDY (Temporary Duty Assignment), ACU (Army Combat Uniform), etc.

2.2. The non-linguistic or situational context

Images, or visual resources, that accompany the text are vital to the advertising poster. Long before we can read the text we can 'read' images. Roche [18], referring to the reading of both words and pictures, mentions the idea of simplicity and the 'tantalizing gap' to be filled by the reader's imagination. Maagero and Østbye [19] suggest that these gaps in the iconotext encourage readers to dialogue and debate. Moebius [20] notes that people read 'images and text together, as the mutual complementary story of a consciousness, and between text and image, we may experience a sort of semic slippage, where word and image seem to send conflicting, perhaps, contradictory messages.' According to Ambrose and Harris [21], "images are powerful communication devices because people can extract many different values from them" due to their connotative meanings.

These characteristics convert posters into successful teaching-learning tools within a foreign language class, as they reflect both cultural and social values, and manage to create new attitudes. They also help students improve and enrich their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and become aware of the mobility of the language as well as of its ability to adapt to new trends in accordance with the evolution of society. In comparing army posters over

time, for example, one can notice not only the changing messages of the ads, but also the changing production values, advertising conventions, and technological possibilities. Therefore, the use of posters in the military classroom helps at developing students' skills in describing and interpreting different army contexts, and each element has its contribution to the understanding of the whole message.

3. Methodology

3.1. Analyzing a military poster using the jigsaw strategy

We hereafter propose an example of a flexible and practical approach of a military poster with military students having a B1 level of English.

It is a collage representing a nowadays British army recruitment advertisement that shows various jobs within the army (Figure 3). The collage can very well be adapted to the jigsaw strategy. For a one-class jigsaw activity, there are some steps to be taken. First, the collage is cut into six separate parts and distributed to six groups consisting of four to six students.

Each group is assigned learning tasks specific to posters analysis: critically analyze and introspect on one part of the poster by filling in a table with the following headings:

1. Main topic of their fragment of poster;
2. Detailed description (setting, colors and shape, characters, etc.);
3. Explanation with hypothesis based on questions like: Who are the characters? How are they dressed and equipped? What are they doing?;
4. Analysis: the job suggested, atmosphere, message conveyed. The students are also given some useful expressions to remind and /or improve vocabulary, such as: *the poster depicts ...; if we take a closer/deeper look at ...; what strikes the viewer ...* etc.



Figure 3 Army jobs explained

Students accomplish the task by taking notes. Then, each group shares the results of their analysis with the other groups. This way, they all get a complete image of the original poster and they are able to express opinions and discuss the topic. They all sit in a semicircle, configuration which increases the concentration and encourages everyone's participation. The different elements of the poster are taken collectively in a more orderly manner, in several areas: identification of the document (type, author, date, etc.), description (general details), explanation, and analysis of the overall message. This involves communication, active participation, interaction, critical thinking and teamwork. The teacher offers language solutions, including grammar explanations if necessary. He may also help the students through questions if they do not push the analysis far enough or are confused by some elements of the poster.

3.2. Making military posters in student groups – a different type of assignment

Once the teacher feels that students are comfortable with the concepts, they can make their own posters. It is widely agreed that posters have the power to actively involve students in class, being visually appealing and conveying a concise and efficient message. Creating a poster is a far more interesting way of teaching and learning new words than simply writing them.

Previous to the creation activity, students should be reminded that posters should be simple, clear, brief and professional. In this respect space is crucial in a poster; consequently they should avoid unnecessary text or visual materials, in order for the reader to easily assimilate their ideas. Also, according to what readers will see first, the most important information should be placed in the center of the poster, then on top left and right and finish in the bottom right corner. The poster should be easily read from the distance, so big font sizes need to be employed to be effective. The title or the slogan chosen should be short and attract people's attention. The text, clear, legible and to the point, could be structured with the help of bullets or numbering, accompanied by effective pictures or graphics for impact, although they might not need graphics if words state a more powerful message. Thus, before making a poster, students should consider the main points: the most important or interesting aspect of their project, a clear message, the images that support the ideas of the poster and the type of information conveyed through the poster.

Following all the introductory activities to posters mentioned above, students will create their own posters. For the sake of convenience, A4 size paper will be used. Students may be asked to conduct a bit of research on their topic so that they understand it in some detail and devise a plan, outlining the key information to make their posters as accurate as possible. This activity requires students to combine their ideas, knowledge and critical thinking. They can be divided in pairs or in groups and can make posters on the same topic or on different topics. For instance, at a foreign language seminar on Army branches military students can be asked to design different posters specific for their branch in order to advertise and attract young people's interest in that particular branch. Students may receive a short list of words related to the topic that they can use

in conceiving catching slogans/ headlines and interesting brief texts. Once the students have created their posters, we can display them around the classroom and have a complete image of the army branches.

Presenting the posters in front of the class creates opportunities for discussion and gives the teacher the chance to assess students' knowledge. Students may be asked to study the other posters and write a comment on the back and afterwards they can vote for the most effective poster. We can even provide them a peer poster rubric. Assessment criteria can relate to features such as: content, structure, visual impact and presentation, and ultimately the combination of all these elements in conveying a clear and meaningful message.

4. Conclusions

This activity is possible with both low-level and advanced students. It enables them to speak without fear using the lexical, grammatical and phonological structures related to the topic of the lesson, and the preparatory work allows them not to feel deprived when speaking. It gives them the opportunity to describe, read between lines, and express personal opinions or debate on different aspects of a military topic. The

starting support is easy to understand because the text of the poster is short, or nonexistent. The preparation and the individual debriefing enable differentiated instruction. The assessment is formative, which is also rewarding for students because, beyond the rating, the individual correction does not stigmatize mistakes, but pushes the student to progress. Poster analysis can be a good introduction to new language structures, or it can serve to fix the newly-acquired knowledge and open the path to new debates. At the end of the activity, students demonstrate their understanding of using visual and textual techniques to convey messages by creating their own military poster.

The aim of this article was to examine to what extent the use of posters in a military language class can be helpful and effective in the military English classroom. Posters save time and money, and also facilitate team work and a better understanding of concepts. Students learn by doing, their retention and recall being facilitated by the visual representation of key elements and the action of making and presenting their poster. Therefore, posters can have quite a positive effect and actively engage students in teaching and learning process.

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