

Designing for the ESL Learner: A Reader-Response Approach

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Abstract

Reader-response theory is a linguistic school of thought where concern for the audience is foregrounded, specifically the processes in which meaning is made through one's experience with a literary work. This conceptual paper is attached to a work-in-progress study and calls for a review in how imagery is currently utilised in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning resources; questioning its success as a visual aid and as an agent of cultural transition.

This paper will present the application of reader-response as a model for improved audience integration in the graphic design of ESL learning resources. The development of an analytical approach when designing text/graphic adjuncts may be beneficial in supporting an ESL student's comprehension and motivation to learn.

1. Introduction

The interrelation of text and graphics has long been successful in providing complementary sources of information. Not only does the appropriate pairing of text and imagery aid in the reader's comprehension of a text by expanding one's cognitive strategies, but 'graphics can also help reduce potential misunderstandings by supporting the intended interpretation amongst multiple possibilities.' [1]

Though this is largely accepted, it is also acknowledged that imagery, as with other forms of meaning making (e.g. writing and speech) are socially and culturally shaped. The concern here is that what may be significant in the creator's environment may not resonate in the environment of recontextualisation. This is particularly true of ESL learners, whose ethnicity and cultural background both enable and constrain their literary understanding.

This paper will discuss how incorporating the theories of reader-response in the design of ESL learning resources may improve the user functionality for the audience. In addition, the paper will examine how ESL students, particularly ethnic migrants, rely on their cultural background when interpreting visual messages; further considering how their cultural value systems may inform the design of new materials.

2. In context

2.1 The design problem

ESL education, referred here in the context of English-speaking countries, caters to a diverse group of learners; both in demographic variances such as age, gender and ethnicity, and as Ilona Leki suggests, each ESL learner, brings with them 'their diverse personal, cultural and educational histories.' [2] Though they all share a desire to learn English their requirements are as varied as their backgrounds; so although the content covered in ESL coursework has been thoroughly researched for its value, it can be argued whether these materials truly reflect the students, their needs and the complexity of learning English in everyday contexts.

The designer and for that matter the author(s) of ESL learning resources, are usually members of an English speaking society and the cultural institutions therein, therefore the design gestalt, be that the visual configuration of signs and symbols and the subconscious relationships between these, may not be culturally appropriate for ESL students.

Addressing this from the viewpoint of visual communication, this paper asks how an audience from a different cultural background(s) decodes meaning if they are not familiar with the sign systems and visual techniques used by the designer? Furthermore, how does this affect their learning experience and what can designers do to address this?

Jorge Frascara suggests a careful study of the audience is required, 'particularly when attempting to generate changes in audience attitude and behavior.' [3] 'Multiple disciplines are needed to solve the design problem [... as] each discipline would bring a unique understanding of the issues at hand and individual approaches to solve them.' [4] Design practitioners therefore need to draw on empathetic methods, those that connect them with the audience, in order to create an inclusive design process.

2.2 Theories of reader-response

The various incarnations of reader-response theory: textual, cultural, experiential, social and psychological; share a 'concern for how readers

make meaning from their experience with the text.’[5] This project cites the textual and cultural theories of response as a means to analyse one’s experience with visual communication.

Cultural theories of response are concerned with the cultural values of the reader, for example their personal understanding of language, gender, authority and social boundaries. ‘Theorists interested in how readers’ attitudes shape their response draw on a range of different disciplinary perspectives: post-structuralist, feminist, anthropological, historical and Marxist;’[5] and assume that readers (the audience) ‘respond according to ‘subject positions’ acquired by cultural institutions.’[5] Introducing this theory to the study of semiotics as a vehicle in meaning making removes the assumed stability of the relationship between the signifier and signified, subsequently allowing us to question how they are culturally represented and perceived.

Authors concerned with the textual theories of response share an interest in how ‘the readers’ knowledge of language and text/genre conventions influence their response.’[5] As Richard Beach argues, ‘textual theorists posit that text conventions are “constitutive” rather than “regulative,” [and] readers’ acquire a tacit, “knowing-how” knowledge of these conventions from years of reading.’[5] Audiences draw on their prior knowledge of a convention in making meaning. Therefore the audience’s knowledge of perceiving and visualising a text, along with their prior experience with such formats, needs to be addressed.

The textual and cultural theories of reader-response when applied to visual communication will form pathways currently not explored in the relationship between the design practitioner and the audience. In developing an empathetic dialogue with the audience and by critically analysing the design gestalt in place, the design practitioner may be better equipped to identify the cultural milieu as well as their own judgments and cultural values embedded within the artifact. In this sense reader-response can assist graphic designers in ensuring greater user-fit design outcomes.

2.3 The ESL student

An ESL student’s attitude to learning English is dependent on their reasons for being in the host country. Ilona Leki defines this in the distinction made between permanent-students (or ethnic migrants) and international students, suggesting that ‘permanent residents are most likely to want to integrate into [...their new] culture’ [2] but they may be ‘suffering from anomie, that is confusion about which culture they belong to, that of their families or that of their new peers.’ [2]

This is also reflected in a student’s motivation to learn English. Robert C. Gardner and William E.

Lambert define this motivation as either instrumental or integrative. [6] Instrumental motivation refers to the desire to learn a new language in order to accomplish a goal, whereas integrative motivation refers to the desire to assimilate into a new culture. A student’s motivation influences the way they respond to a new culture. Those with an instrumental motivation ‘may be less invested emotionally in their experiences with a new culture,’ [2] than that of their integrative counterparts, and less likely to be intimidated by the cultural adjustments asked of them as their stay is only temporary.

We know today that when ESL students study English, they often rely on the learning strategies employed in their native language, but as Constant Leung and Kimberley Safford suggest, a students’ lack of English is often associated ‘with low cognitive need and a lack of any background learning.’ [7] Adult students are often given or seek out infant books to learn how to read. This suggests there is a gap in learning resources made available to new arrivals, those that acknowledge their previous schooling and cognitive abilities.

3. The approach

So how can a design research model informed by reader-response theory assist in the learning experience of ESL students, particularly ethnic migrants/permanent residents who are more prone to cultural shock.

The answer can be found in the overlap between linguistic theory and cultural studies, prompting further exploration in the tension between what is being represented and what is being communicated.

Culture, as Stuart Hall states, is about ‘shared meanings.’[8] Language, be that verbal, written or visual, is the privileged medium in which we make sense of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. As Leki, claims ‘too often ESL speakers and writers accept the judgments of teachers as truth, unaware of the social and political realities that reinforce [this] labeling.’[2] Could this be because they do not yet share a similar conceptual view of the world to our own?

Graphic aids created in collaboration with and understanding of the audience may smooth this transition, allowing ESL students to feel comfortable in adopting new cultural ways of thinking, as well as assisting them in forming connections between their native culture and that of their new home.

Therefore, the project will not only consider the cultural positions shared by ethnic migrants, but it will also acknowledge the learning strategies employed by participants in their native countries as well as their perception of the current text/imagery models employed in an ESL classroom. The idea is to not just explore the sign systems represented in ESL learning materials, but to question what is being

communicated – whether it has any relevance to their cultural identity.

3.1 Factors to address

The challenge in developing an analytical approach to design informed by reader-response theory concerns the methods used in its transition from a linguistic theory to visual communication practice. What's more, how can this design methodology be integrated with various cultural groups, all of whom English is not a constant. To do so, adopting the following factors modified from those listed by Beach and Marshall [9] will be addressed when working with ESL students:

- Student attributes, that is their needs, interests, abilities and knowledge;
- The attributes of the designer/author and the impact this may have on the design of ESL learning material;
- The requirements of an ESL program, be that the content, goals and milestones to be covered;
- Implementing response strategies and activities, promoting student engagement;
- Acknowledging the cultural aspect in how the social climate both in and outside the classroom weighs on a student's motivation to learn; and
- To establish connections between the classroom and a student's daily life, promoting continued independent learning.

The objective is to not only develop a range of graphic aids to be used as a source of complimentary information to current ESL material, but to evaluate how access points are created within text/graphic combinations.

3.2 Questions to address

In considering the diverse cultural interpretations of the audience the project will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How can textual and cultural theories of response inform graphic design practice?
- What research methods can be utilised by the designer to obtain appropriate audience feedback throughout the design process; and how can this feedback be integrated into the design outcome?
- What visual elements best contribute to the audience's meaning-making process?
- What exactly is the relationship between the semiotic design of learning resources and their role in facilitating learning?
- How can audience participation improve intercultural communication design outcomes?

4. Summary and implications

The project will design and implement a research approach tailored to visual communication. The key objective is to create a design process built on the notion of fostering creative dialogue, whereby questions are continually raised and addressed, allowing the designer/audience relationship to flourish.

The investigation aims to (a) contribute to empirical understandings of audience response, through the integration of social science and design theory; and (b) build on our current knowledge of language and sign-systems as vehicles for meaning making.

As this paper has argued, devising qualitative feedback vehicles adhering to a reader-response ethos will allow graphic designers to be better equipped in recognising the design gestalt in place. In doing so, it is anticipated that the design brief will change in order to identify with ESL students, considering how they think and feel when interacting with a design artifact.

5. References

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