Technical University English-major Students' Attitudes towards Using American Political Cartoons in a Speech Class

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore technical university English-major students' attitudes and perceptions towards incorporation of American political cartoons in a speech class.　The instructor as researcher in this study required the participants to form a small group to interpret the American political cartoons selected by the researcher. The students were required to do an oral presentation with a power point file to show their interpretation of the American political cartoons. The results of the study indicated that the participants believed that the incorporation of American political cartoons were helpful for the following areas: providing authentic American culture (89%), helping students to develop creative thinking (83%), helping students to develop critical thinking (80%), and helping students to relax in class (67%). Possible reading difficulties encountered by the subjects to understand American political cartoons and teaching implications were also presented in the study.

Key words: American political cartoons, English speech class

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I. Introduction

Many English teachers think that one of the most difficult aspects of teaching English is to make it interesting for their students in the classrooms. English teachers have been searching continually for different ways to make their classrooms more interesting and productive for their students. When English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students are engaged in activities which they find interesting, that's when they learn best in classrooms.

In recent years, EFL teachers have been turning to popular media as a means to engage their students in classrooms. English teachers have made great use of popular media, particularly "authentic material", as an aid in their language classrooms. English TV programs, movies, and popular songs are regularly used in EFL classrooms to expose students to the "authentic input" of the English language. These popular media resources tend to be more effective teaching tools than those commercially prepared materials because they present a much more natural use of the target language. One form of authentic material that has been explored over the past few years is cartoons (Davis, 1990). Cartoons have had a widespread popularity, but cartoons have been underutilized teaching materials in language classrooms.

"Comic strips communicate using two major media—words and images—a somewhat arbitrary separation because comic strips' expressive potential lies in skillfully employing words and images together" (Liu, 2004, p. 229). Comics contain a variety of visual and linguistic elements and codes that appeal to students with different learning styles (Bangs, 1988; Davis, 1990; Kossack & Hoffman, 1987). Cartoons and comic strips offer a look into American life and thought, American preoccupations, and some of American characteristics in concentrated form. The efficient use of these materials would not only bring a cheerful atmosphere to the classroom, but it would also offer the students an inside look into foreign life and thought, the foreigners' cultural awareness, their idiosyncrasies and some of their characteristics (Elkins & Bruggemann, 1971).

Political cartoons have provided a visual means by which cartoonists could express their opinions. The main purpose of political cartoon is to offer an opinion or point of view about some issue or problem which can be used to engage or persuade readers in a discussion about an important event, issue, or individual. Political cartoons are an excellent classroom tool to build students' critical thinking skills, to generate lively classroom discussions (Dougherty, 2002).

Thus, the current study intended to investigate technical university English-major students' overall attitudes and perceptions towards using political cartoons as supplementary materials in a speech class. The research questions were as follows:

(1) What were technical university English-major students' overall attitudes towards the helpfulness of using political cartoons in a speech class?

(2) What were possible reading difficulties encountered by the technical university English-major students?

(3) In what ways can small group discussion help EFL students to understand political cartoons?

II. Literature Review

Definition of cartoons and political cartoons

Bloom (1979) pointed out that "a cartoon by nature is usually a one frame caricature and is used to present a particular idea" (p.1). The idea may be politically or socially in nature and usually has an element of humor attached to it. The cartoon may be captioned or uncaptioned. Bloom (1979) conducted a

qualitative study on the use of cartoons and comic strips to teach English as a second language. The language skills she taught included: structure, reading, vocabulary development, listening comprehension, culture, and writing. Bloom thought using cartoons and comic strips to teach was not only highly effective but also quite entertaining to her students. She also found that one-frame cartoons were appropriate for cultural lessons and dialogue writing because the students could use their imagination to guess what the characters were saying.

Neville (1989) used cartoons in first year university French language programs in oral and written courses. Neville suggested using different kinds of cartoons for different language exercises. For example, some of Bretecher's cartoons contained no words—what she called "silent cartoons". These kinds of cartoons are very useful as a "warming-up" exercise at the start of class because they are short (p. 133). They can also get students' attention quickly and help them settle down to learn.

Goldstein (1986) conducted a study using cartoons and comics in vocabulary instruction. He asked his students to keep notes, journals, or vocabulary cards for the new vocabulary they learned from the comic and cartoons; then, he found his students made progress in standardized test scores.

Political cartoons have provided a visual means by which cartoonists could express their opinions. Political cartoons have been used to engage or persuade readers in a discussion about an important event, issue, or individual. The main purpose of political cartoons is to offer an opinion or point of view about some issue or problem in the news. Political cartoons are an excellent classroom tool to build students' critical thinking skills, to generate lively classroom discussions (Dougherty, 2002).

Political cartoons have been very useful teaching materials for both history and journalism classes.

Heitzmann (1998) proposed that political cartoons could be used to motivate the students and teach history. They are also an excellent source of current events and news about government and politics. Steinbrink and Bliss (1988) proposed that political cartoons might not only be used to teach history but also to teach thinking skills. De Fren (1988) also pointed out using political cartoons could help students develop their thinking and writing skills as well as understand concepts about current political, social, and economic issues (p. 221). Political cartoons have never been used in any language teaching classes before. The current study is the first study that incorporates political cartoons into language teaching class.

III. Methodology

Teaching Context

The Speech and Debate class was taught by the researcher as instructor during fall semester, 2008 at the department of Applied Foreign Languages at a national science/technology university. The departmental policy requires the whole class divided into two sections for "Oral Training I & II", "English Composition I & II", and "Speech and Debate" classes. The Speech and Debate class was divided into two sections: one on Mondays and the other on Wednesdays. The students in the Speech and Debate class were required to form a four-member small group. There were 6 small groups in each section. The students were required to work together in the small group to interpret American political cartoons selected by the instructor from the website-Cartoons for the Classrooms: http://nieonline.com/denver/cftc.cfm. The students were required to do an oral presentation with a power point file to show their interpretation of the American political cartoons.

The small group presentations lasted for 6 weeks.

The minimum length of time for each presentation was 20 minutes. The average length of their presentations was between 20- 25 minutes. Three small groups did their presentations with three different political cartoons selected by the instructor each week. The other three small groups in the same section employed the same three political cartoons for the following week to bring possible different interpretation of the same political cartoons. In other words, three different political cartoons were employed for two weeks in a row.

The total number of political cartoons selected for the Speech and Debate class was nine. The main themes elicited from these political cartoons included: (1) Campaign and Gas Pain, (2) Celebrating the 19th amendment, (3) Barry Bonds and Steroid, (4) A Racist Tirade Spotlights-the N word, (5) Al Gore Heats Up a Debate, (6) Taking Swipes at the Auto Industry, (7) Drawing English into the Spotlight, (8) China, Tibet, and the Olympics, and (9) The Bush-Clinton Years: Political Dynasties.

Subjects

Subjects of this study were English-major senior students from the Department of Applied Foreign Languages at a national science/technology university. The total number of the participants were 50 students, including 41 females and 9 males.

Instrument

A questionnaire was designed and developed by the researcher to investigate the overall attitudes towards the experience of using American editorial cartoons in the Speech and Debate class. The items in the questionnaire included three categories: (1) students' overall attitudes toward the experience of using American editorial cartoons in the Speech and Debate class, (2) possible difficulties for EFL students to understand American editorial cartoons, and (3) students' perceptions of benefits in terms of using American editorial cartoons in the class. The survey was distributed to the subjects right after they finished their final presentation. The subjects had 30 minutes to fill out their surveys.

The data collected from this survey were analyzed via SPSS statistical program to provide the descriptive statistics of means, frequencies and percentages. In addition, the five-point Likert Scale was used to code responses from the questionnaire items; that is, a response of "Strongly agree" was coded as 5 points, " Agree" as 4 points, "Not sure" as 3 points, "Disagree" as 2 points, and " Strongly disagree" as 1 point. The Cronbach alpha value of the survey designed by the researcher was 0.88 for this study.

IV. Results

As shown in Table 1, the results of the study indicated that the overall attitudes of the subjects were positive about using editorial cartoons in the Speech and Debate class. The majority of the subjects (with 89%) believed that editorial cartoons could provide them authentic American culture. 83% of the subjects expressed that editorial cartoons can help them develop creative thinking. 81% of the subjects showed that editorial cartoons can help them develop critical thinking. Fisher & Scriven (1997) define critical thinking as "Skilled, active, interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information, and argumentation." According to Taylor (1988), creative thinking is a mental process involving the discovery of new ideas or concepts, or new associations of the existing ideas or concepts.

Table 1 Subjects' attitudes toward helpfulness for using editorial cartoons in class

	SA+A	N	D+SD	Mean	SD
1. I believe that American cartoons can provide authentic American culture.	89%	9%	2%	4.24	0.71
2. I believe that American cartoon can help students relax in class.	67%	26%	7%	3.80	0.83
3. I believe that American cartoon can help me develop creative thinking.	83%	13%	2%	4.11	0.71
4. I believe that American cartoon can help me develop critical thinking.	81%	15%	4%	4.11	0.82

Possible reading difficulties encountered by the subjects were shown in Table 2. The main themes of the American political cartoons could be very difficult for the subjects to understand, so only 24% of the subjects indicated that the main themes were easy for them to understand. The meanings represented by pictures were also difficult for the subjects to understand, only 26% of the subjects felt that they were easy. Humors and dialogues in the American cartoons were also difficult for the subjects to understand, so only 30% and 31% of the subjects felt that they were not easy for them to understand.

Table 2 Subjects' reading difficulties related to content of American cartoons

	SA+A	N	D+SD	Mean	SD
5. I feel that vocabulary was easy to understand in American cartoon.	52%	26%	22%	3.33	0.85
6. I feel that dialogues were easy to understand in American cartoon.	31%	22%	46%	2.87	0.92
7. I feel that humors were easy to understand in American cartoon.	30%	15%	54%	2.78	1.01
8. I feel that main themes were easy to understand in American cartoon.	24%	24%	52%	2.72	0.83
9. I feel that meanings represented by pictures were easy to understand in American cartoon.	26%	24%	50%	2.78	0.96
10. I feel that characters were easy to identify in American cartoon.	37%	39%	24%	3.22	0.92

According to the study results, small group discussion seemed to be a very helpful in-class activity for the subjects to understand the content of American cartoons. The majority of the subjects (more than 90%) indicated that small group discussion were helpful for them to understand the main themes (with 98%), the meanings represented by the pictures (with 96%), the humor (with 94%)

and the main characters in American cartoons (with

94%).

Table 3 Subjects' understanding of American cartoons through small group discussion

	SA+A	N	D+SD	Mean	SD
11. I feel that it's easier for me to understand the humor in American cartoon through small group discussion.	94%	6%	0%	4.30	0.59

	SA+A	N	D+SD	Mean	SD
12. I feel that it's easier for me to understand the main themes in American cartoon through small group discussion.	98%	2%	0%	4.35	0.53
13. I feel that it's easier for me to understand the meanings represented in American cartoon through small group discussion.	96%	4%	0%	4.28	0.54
14. I feel that it's easier for me to understand the main characters in American cartoon through small group discussion.	94%	6%	0%	4.28	0.58
15. I feel that it's easier for me to understand the irony in American cartoon through small group discussion.	85%	11%	4%	4.16	0.71

V. Conclusions and Implications

The results of the study indicated that the participants believed that the incorporation of American political cartoons were helpful for the following areas: providing authentic American culture (89%), helping students to develop creative thinking (83%), helping students to develop critical thinking (80%), and helping students to relax in class (67%).

For many of the technical university students, it was their first time to read American political cartoons. It could be very difficult for them to understand the content of political cartoons. If teachers want to use political cartoons effectively in the classroom, students have to understand how to interpret those cartoons. Students are often asked to view a cartoon and explain what is being depicted when they really do not know how to proceed. English teachers should identify various elements that cartoonists often incorporate into their work. These elements are concept, symbolism, exaggeration and distortion, stereotypes, caricature, humor and irony, and captions. Once they have been taught and explained to the students, they will be in a better position to interpret a political cartoon.

The possible reading difficulties encountered by the subjects were the main themes (76%), the meanings represented by the pictures (74%), and the humor (70%).

English teachers need to spend more time explaining these areas of content for their students for the first few weeks of the class. EFL students seemed to expect more explanation from their English teachers because they rely on their teachers.

Small group discussion seemed to be a very helpful classroom activity for the subjects to understand the content of editorial cartoons. EFL teachers should take advantage of cooperative learning to lead their students to communicate interactively, learn mutually and improve efficiently. EFL teachers promote their students to discuss in groups and produce imaginative ideas in the process. EFL students get to establish good interpersonal relationships, support one another and make progress in learning English as a whole in a cooperative classroom.

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科技大學應用外語系學生對於英文演講課使用美國政治漫畫態度調查

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摘　要

　　本文旨在探討科技大學應外系學生，對於演講課中，使用美國政治漫畫的態度與觀點之意見調查。受測對象為一所國立科技大學應外系四年級學生本文的研究者兼教師規定參與的學生組成小組來解釋由研究者所選擇的美國政治漫畫。受測的學生必須使用 Power Point 作成簡報，並以英語口頭報告的方式來呈現他們對於這些美國政治漫畫的詮釋。研究結果顯示，受測學生認為將美國政治漫畫編入課程在下列方面是對他們助益的：提供真實美國文化(89%)，幫助學生發展創意思考(83%)，幫助學生發展批判性思考(80%)和幫助學生上課放輕鬆(67%)。受測學生遭遇到的閱讀困難，針對美國政治漫畫編入英文演講課程中的教學建議及學生可能遭遇無法瞭解漫畫的閱讀困難處，在文中亦有相關討論。

關鍵字：美國政治漫畫、英語演講課。

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