

The Role of Semiotics in English Language Teaching In Rural Environment

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ABSTRACT: Any language carries with it the cords of culture. In teaching of English as a foreign language or as a second language, verbal icons play a vital role in bridging the gap between the native culture and the target culture.

Teaching of English in Haryana, especially, in its rural areas is definitely a challenge. It demands expertise in the pedagogy, classroom dynamics and cultural ethos. There is a need to address the challenges — Can semiotics help in teaching and learning of English as a foreign language? Can semiotic perspective help in teaching semantics, pragmatics and new vocabulary? Can semiotics help in presenting new contents to the students? Can different semiotic codes which are reflected in cultures and use of those codes can trigger the learning process? Can ELT experts teach non-verbal behaviours of the target culture? As a matter of fact, semiotics is a progressing and promising discipline which has its applications in many fields of study which addresses these challenges. Educational semiotics has started to attract attention of many scholars, ELT instructors and teachers all over the world. It is obvious that the consideration of semiotic approach in ELT has promising results and may lead to long-term success in learning a foreign language especially in rural environment.

This paper tries to investigate how semiotics can accelerate learning and facilitate an effective teaching and learning environment. The paper also explicates how teachers of English should have a keen awareness of the semiotic approach. Throughout the paper, it is claimed that the consideration of the semiotic signs of the target culture in teaching a foreign language is crucial, since a language cannot be separated from its culture.

Keywords: Semiotics, English Language Teaching (ELT), Target Culture, Educational Semiotics.

I

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics has always been an area of interest for many scholars in various disciplines mainly because of its multi-disciplinary nature, and semiotic approach to any field of study is increasingly attracting growing attention of instructors and teachers all over the world. Semiotics is generally defined as the study of signs. It is the science of signs. Signs include words, gestures, images, sounds, and objects. Semiotics, also called semiotic studies or semiology, is the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification and communication. The application of semiotic theories to education has recently gained significant importance and led to the emergence of a new field of study called educational semiotics. The present

paper applies and discusses the insights of semiotics by linking it to ELT. The consideration of semiotic approach in ELT has promising results and may lead to long-term success in learning English as a foreign language especially in rural environment with its pertinent techniques that are learner-centered. Teaching of English as a Foreign language in the place like Haryana especially in its rural areas always demands expertise in the pedagogy for many reasons: socio-cultural, economic, psychological, philosophical, educational and pedagogic. Teaching of English in rural areas is definitely a challenge and learning of English serves a very limited purpose here, and the target learners have less opportunity to practice the target language outside the classrooms. In Haryana, students start studying English language from standard 6th in government schools and from L.K.G in private schools and in rural areas children has to study in government schools because they don't get a chance to study outside. In spite of studying English from 8-12 years at higher secondary level, in graduation and post-graduation, English language is still alien to them because of its phobia and substandard or incompetent teaching till higher secondary level. The contribution of semiotics to education- specifically to ELT- is discussed throughout the paper and the ways how semiotic approach to pedagogy leads to betterment in language learning process is handled comprehensively.

Culture plays a vital role in the study of semiotics. Generally speaking, we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs. But we cannot study signs in isolation. To study a single sign means studying an incomplete entity. Signs do not occur singly; they occur in groups. A group or set of signs is generally referred to as a code. Codes originate from the culture and society in general and are therefore dynamic systems that evolve over time. They are, thus, historically as well as socio-culturally situated. But we cannot study codes in isolation too. Just as the proper understanding of a single sign, a code is required, so the proper context for understanding a single code is a culture (a set of codes and rules for their use). No culture is made up of only a single isolated code, how complex it may be. Different culture shares different types of codes. Signs functions within the system of codes and codes functions within the system of cultures.

II

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Semiotics

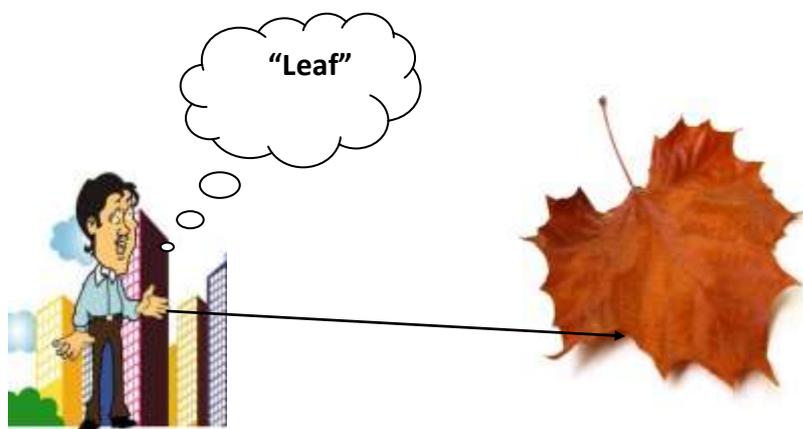
Semiotics is the study of signs. The term, which was spelled semeiotics, derives from the Greek (*Semeiotikos*), which means “observant of signs”. It was first used in English by Henry Stubbes in a very precise sense to denote the branch of medical science relating to the interpretation of signs. It has its roots in antiquity. The English word “sign” is derived from Latin word *signum*. The term “semiotics” was introduced into the English language by John Locke as a synonym for “doctrine of signs”. This was in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who is particularly referred to as the father of modern linguistics is considered as the founder of semiotics. He laid out the general principles of semiotics in his collection of writings entitled *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Apart from Saussure, other key figures in the development of modern semiotics are Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles William Morris, Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Yuri Lotman, Algirdas Greimas, Julia Kristeva, Jakob von Uexkiill, Valentin Voloshinov, Louis Hjelmslev, and Thomas Sebeok among others.

The most basic definition of semiotics is the ‘study of signs’. Beyond this definition, there is considerable variation among leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves. According to Leeds and Hurwitz, semiotics has been specifically described as “the study of communication i.e. the way sign functions in the mind of an interpreter to convey specific meaning in a given situation” (1). This definition sees semiotics as an approach which focuses on the communication phenomenon as a whole. This includes verbal (language in speech and writing) and non-verbal communication (anything that stands for something else).

Tobin in *Semiotics and Linguistics* sees semiotics as “a general philosophical theory dealing with the production of signs and symbols as part of code systems which are used to communicate information” (6), shifting the focus from individual signs to their combination in code systems. In the same vein, Wales sees semiotics as the “analysis of signs and sign systems and their meanings specifically those involved with communication between human in different societies and culture” (416).

The Concept of Sign

The most important feature in a semiotic study is the sign. A sign is an entity which signifies another entity. It is a physical marker which carries some information. The information it gives is direct, brief and precise. We make meanings through our creation and interpretation of signs. Our entire culture is made up of signs which are of special significance or meaning in our culture. Whether something is a sign depends on a sentient entity ascribing to it with meaning.



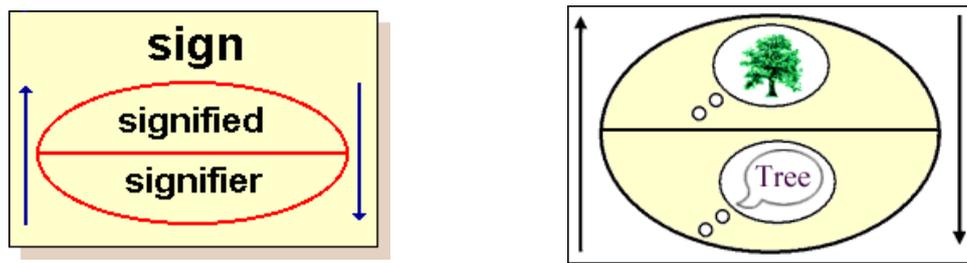
<<http://publibuc.org/children/homework-help-fun/fall-leaf-identification/>>

According to Chandler we are surely homo significans-meaning makers (13). Indeed, according to Peirce, “we think only in signs” (302). A sign become sign only when we invest them with meaning. “Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign,” declares Peirce (172).

Sign here is defined as everything that, on the grounds of previously established social connections, can be taken as standing for something else. There are two dominant models of what constitutes a sign. Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure proposed one and the other is by the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce.

The Saussurean Model

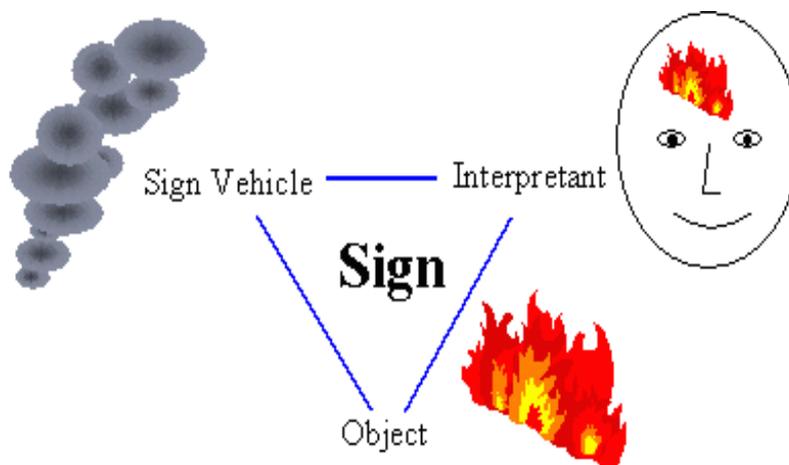
Saussure presents a dyadic or two part model of a sign. It consists of a signifier – the form which the sign takes and the signified – the concept the sign represents. According to him, “the sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier and the signified”, this relationship he calls signification (67). For him a sign must have both a signifier and a signified within a particular context. He argues that “a sign is more than the sum of its parts Its value is determined by the relationship between the sign and other signs within the system as a whole” (112-113).



<<http://visualmemory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>>

The Peircean Model

Peirce offers a triadic or three-part model of the sign often popularly referred to as the semiotic triangle. It defines the sign as consisting of the *representamen* (the form which the sign takes, similar to Saussure's signifier), the *interpretant* (not an interpreter but the sense made of the sign; signified), the *object* (to which the sign refers, does not feature directly in Saussure's model). The interaction between the 'representamen', the 'object' and the 'interpretant' is referred to by Peirce as 'Semiosis' (483).



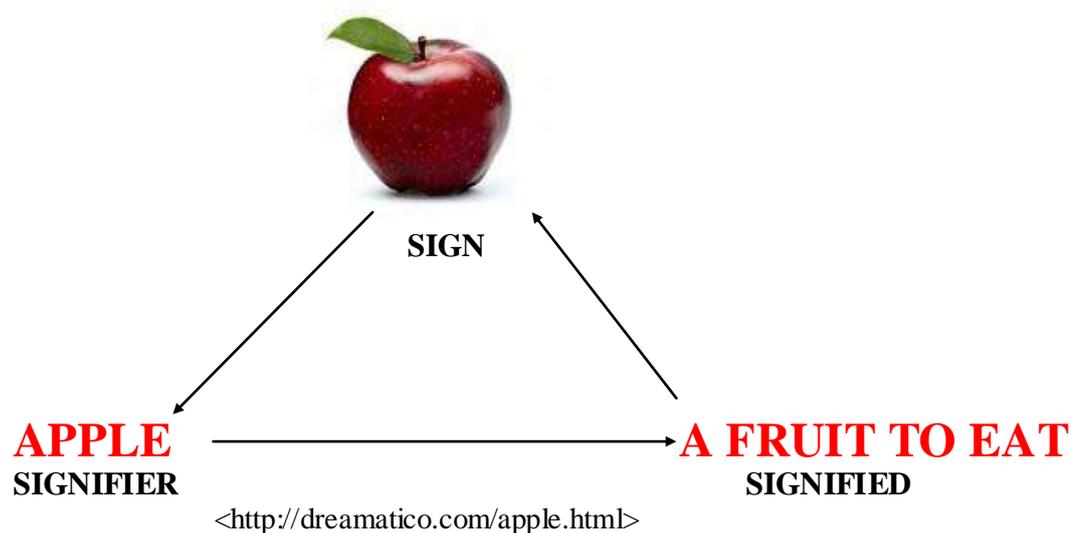
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III EDUCATIONAL SEMIOTICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)

Culture plays a very important role in learning environments and this is related to the idea of using semiotics in education. A particular culture is interwoven with the social signs and

social codes (which is the concern of semiotics), educational settings are inevitably shaped by these cultural elements. When the awareness of these social codes and social signs are heightened in the learning environment, it would have promising results. The case is more important in foreign language learning especially in rural environment due to the fact that a foreign language is the product of a foreign culture and accordingly subject to different social codes and social signs, which the students and teachers should be aware of. This may also be inferred from Eco's words (as cited in Piper, 1992) in claiming that language cannot be understood independently from its interplay with other cultural codes, including those which carry social understanding. A semiotic perspective can effectively help in presenting new content to the students when the teaching of specific language and linguistic skills is considered.

- **Semantics:** Semantics is the study of meaning in language. It is that level of linguistic analysis where meaning is analyzed. It is the most abstract level of linguistic analysis as we cannot observe meaning as we can observe and record sounds. According to G. Leech, semantics concerns itself with 'giving a systematic account of the nature of meaning'. While exploring semiotic perspective, we come to know that neither meaning is 'contained' in the word nor it is 'transmitted' to us, but we have to create it through our interpretations of signs. Sign is the perfect combination of the signifier and the signified. Therefore, semantics and semiotics are interconnected. For example, while teaching meaning, if the word is followed by the picture, the result will be the long term coding of that item. To illustrate, a word apple can be accompanied by the picture showing apple with meaning.



- **Pragmatics:** Semiotics can play a vital role in understanding pragmatics. Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning. It is the study of language usage and studies language not in isolation but in its socio-cultural context. Pragmatics studies how the transmission of meaning depends not only on the linguistic knowledge (e.g. grammar, lexicon etc.) of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved and inferred intent of the speaker. In this respect, pragmatics explains how language users are able to overcome apparent ambiguity, since meaning relies on the manner, place, time etc.

of an utterance and if context is reinforced with relevant pictures, signs, icons, symbols etc., the result will be the long term coding of the context and meaning of the target language. For example, if a facilitator wants to tell about the system of 'Apartheid' in South Africa, he/she has to talk about the background of South Africa during colonial rule. 'Apartheid' had always been a device for separating and dividing the people of South Africa in order to facilitate the domination and exploitation of the majority (the blacks) by the minority (the whites). It literally means "apartness" or "separation", and especially in the South African context it means racial discrimination. If this context is reinforced with relevant pictures of "apartheid", the result will be more fruitful.



<http://www.southafrica-travel.net/history/eh_apart1.htm>

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apartheid_Museum_Entrance,_Johannesburg.JPG>

- **Teaching new vocabulary:** It is a fact that teaching vocabulary is a significant factor in language teaching. Since words play an important role in expressing our feelings, emotions, and ideas to others during the act of communication, foreign language teachers should attribute importance to teaching vocabulary in their classes. It is evident that communication is a mutual relationship between the speaker / writer and the hearer / reader. The hearer / reader should comprehend what he hears or reads in the target language. Unless he has sufficient knowledge of vocabulary, he cannot decode the message sent by the speaker or writer. It follows from this that vocabulary is of great importance for real communication to take place. For example, while teaching new vocabulary, if new words are reinforced with relevant pictures, the result will be the long term coding of this target language item. To illustrate, a no-smoking sign, no-parking sign, no-drinking sign or no-spitting sign can be accompanied by the sentences written on the board or the utterances of native speakers or the teachers.



<<http://properties.danols.com/no-smoking-sign/>>

<<http://www.smartdraw.com/examples/view/no+parking+sign+with+symbol/>>



<<http://agoalamonth.com/2012/02/02/february-goal-no-drinking/>>

<<http://www.mysafetysign.com/no-spitting-signs>>

Also words from the target language like Carpenter, Barber and Blacksmith etc. can also be accompanied by relevant pictures. This also helps with the long-term coding of the words, as each sign will signal not only the related vocabulary, but also the contextual clues. The meaningful contextualization in this way will surely contribute positively to the learning process.



CARPENTER



BARBER



BLACKSMITH

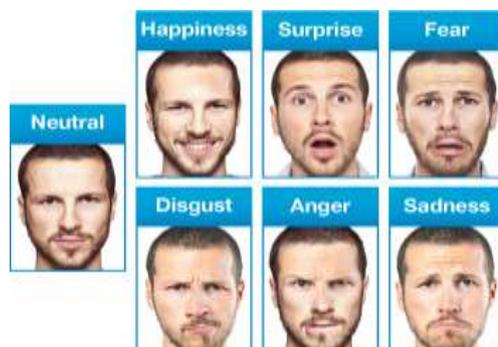
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Presentations of the signs of the target culture play a vital role. If the teacher uses previously presented genuine pictures to trigger students' memory before speaking and writing activities, more concepts will be activated in students' mind. In this line of thinking, fruitful results in written or oral mode can be gathered due to the activation of associated structures and concepts. The case is not only applicable for the use of pictures, but also presentation or demonstration of **non-verbal behaviours** of the target culture.

- **Facial expressions:** Non-verbal behaviours of the target culture can also trigger learning process. To illustrate, a facilitator can make use of various facial expressions of the target culture in order to tell about various emotions to the learners. In some cultures like Indian culture, emotions are openly reflected in facial expressions while in others people demonstrate less facial expressions.



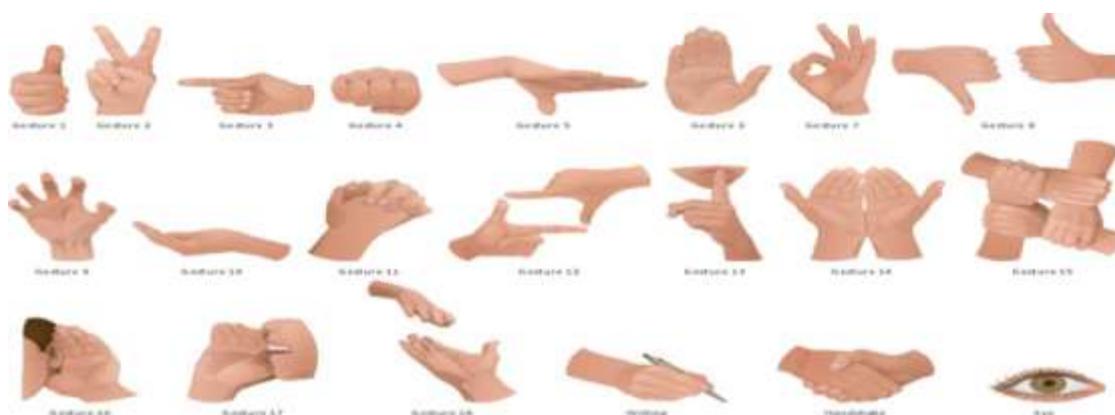
<<http://www.omron.com/ecb/products/mobile/okao07.html>>

Peirce offers the typology for signs which has broadly characterized signs into three forms: the symbolic sign, the iconic sign and the indexical sign.

- **The Symbolic Sign-** form of the sign that is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional such that the relationship between the signifier and the signified that constitutes the sign has to be learnt in relation to the context of its usage. In this sense all words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are symbols.
- **The Iconic Sign-** form of the sign which represents its object mainly by its similarity. A sign is an icon in so far as it is like that thing and is used as a sign of it. For Peirce “ icons include every diagram even though there be no sensuous resemblance between it and its object, but only an analogy between the relation of the parts of each” (279). For example portrait or cartoon of a person etc.
- **The Indexical Sign-** form of the sign that ‘indicates’ something. In this mode signifier is directly connected in some way to the signified but the signifier is not arbitrary. The index is connected to the object ‘as a matter of fact’. For example footprints or photograph etc.

One basic principle of educational semiotics is that the teacher should have a heightened awareness of these signs and develop materials and strategies for the teaching environment. When the learning materials are visualized with respect to the relations among signs, the results may become more promising in that more senses are triggered in the learning process and learning also emerges at sub-conscious level. Particular attention should be given to iconicity when learning is considered. Considering an icon, the close relation between the signifier and signified helps students understand the content better. According to Danesi (as cited in Ponzio, 2002) in *Sebeok’s Semiotics and Education*, “all types of learning in human development, as results in childhood, are a modelling process which may be described as a flow from iconicity to cultural symbolism”(301). There seems to be no reason to neglect this natural learning flow when we consider the fact that in all types of learning (also in native language acquisition), icons play a vital role which may be a positive contribution if foreign language learning is considered.

- **Gestures:** In ELT classes, the teacher’s use of imitative gestures or pictures in relation to target culture would obviously help students bridge the gap between their native culture and the target culture; therefore between the native language and foreign language. When these icons (the cultural signs of the foreign language) are combined with the presented content and the target language skill to be improved, this will obviously speed up the foreign language awareness of the student both at conscious and sub-conscious levels. To illustrate, if the foreign language teacher uses an imitative gesture of a famous American figure or if he/she uses a symbolic picture of the target society while teaching a particular point, the students’ attention on the foreign language content and its culture will be heightened. For example, in most English speaking countries, a “thumbs- up” gesture most commonly means “OK”. In Greece it more frequently means ‘get stuffed’, while in Indonesia it signals ‘good job’ or ‘delicious’ in reference to food. In some countries people use a lot of gestures along with their speech, in others people use it sparingly. In English, Scandinavians, Indians, Australians and Germans, for example, are low level communicators in terms of gestures while in Italy and many South Americans countries gesturing is an integral part of verbal expression. Americans, however, only use gestures to emphasize particular points. The English have an even more subdued ‘gesture language’ using only very small gestures.



<<http://visual.ly/design-elements-gestures>>

Particular attention to signs of the society is not solely adequate in educational semiotics, since comprehension of a sign is dependent upon the context of a particular code. Cunningham in *Semiotics Aspects of Pedagogy* asserts that teachers should construct materials which will heighten their students’ awareness of the cultural context and the cultural codes of the society. These semiotic codes are namely;

- **Social codes** (verbal language, behavioural codes etc.)
- **Textual codes** (scientific codes, mass-media codes etc.), and
- **Interpretative codes** (perceptual codes and ideological codes).

Semiotic codes: Each sign is meaningful in a particular code or sub-code. Educational semiotics is in great extent interested in the way how different semiotic codes are reflected in cultures and the ways in teaching these or using them in presenting a content. For example,

different colours have different meanings when they are presented in different cultures. In English culture, white colour is worn by the bride on her wedding day but in Indian culture white colour is worn by the widow. Accordingly, ELT practitioners should look for the ways to adapt the semiotic codes of the target culture combined with semiotic signs in the curriculum. So, consideration of non-linguistic messages in teaching English is obviously a beneficial trend, which is also stressed by Curry in his article "Media Literacy for English Language Learners" as "although the focus of English language instruction generally points learners to language and less to images and sounds..., it is important to consider how non-linguistic messages produce cultural meanings" (30).

IV

CONCLUSION

Throughout the paper, the contributions of semiotic approach to education and specifically to ELT were discussed. Therefore, it may be concluded that this neglected tool in English language education should be considered by teachers in order to develop the proficiency level of language learners by making them get acquainted with the semiotic signs and codes of the target culture. It is an important point that the teachers should be able to integrate the semiotic signs and codes to their teaching strategies. The target language is shaped by the target culture itself, so transference of the cultural elements to language environment may have the impact of modifying the linguistic message positively. Teachers' consideration of kinesics, proxemics, iconicity and cultural codes and signs within a semiotic perspective will obviously be very effective in this process. Attempts to use the signs should be built upon a conscious ground in order to reach foreign language learning and teaching goals, which accept the target culture as an indispensable part of the target language.

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