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# Using Bumper Stickers to Teach American Values: An Ethnographic Approach

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Ethnography, the holistic study of a natural community, is becoming more and more popular as a technique in ESL research. However, its usefulness as an ESL teaching tool is often being overlooked. Since one begins by collecting data and inductively building a theory, ethnography is particularly suited for use by ESL students in studying American culture.

This paper focuses on a student document analysis, a micro-ethnography of American drivers, investigating the cultural values found in slogans on bumper stickers. Bumper stickers are cultural artifacts, and as such, they may yield information about the culture which produced them. Moreover, bumper stickers tell something about the value system of the individuals who choose to display them. Each of the slogans presented was seen on a vehicle. That indicates that some person felt that the bumper sticker expressed something which was important enough to him or her to attach it to his or her car. Below is a description of how students may carry out a study investigating these values.

## A Class Exercise

A few days prior to the planned classroom exercise, the teacher asks students to note down all the bumper stickers they see and to write each one on a separate 3 by 5 inch index card.

Before the designated activity day, the teacher collects the cards from the students. This enables the teacher to proofread for any spelling or grammatical mistakes the students may have made while copying the slogans or to eliminate any vulgar slogans he or she may believe inappropriate for classroom discussion. Of course, vulgarity may also be an aspect of American culture, and the teacher may choose to include *all* slogans the students present.

On the day of the exercise, the teacher asks the students to move into small groups. He or she then gives each group a number of cards. The students work together examining the slogans and grouping them into different categories. Lastly, each group shares its classification with the class, giving examples of slogans included in each category.

## Examples

This technique was demonstrated at a recent ESL conference. The procedure was described to the participants (ESL professionals), who were asked to gather in small groups. Each group was given a number of cards containing slogans from bumper stickers. Following are some of the categories, with an example from each, which each group decided on.

Politics

George Bush for President

Religion

Jesus is my Rock and my name is on the Roll.

Advertisements

Ford Trucks. 20 years in the lead

Social

ERA Yes

Laws

Buckle up. In Florida it's the law.

Place or Personal Values

My child is an outstanding citizen at Belle Vue Middle School.

Sports

FAMU Baseball

Humor

This is not an abandoned car.

Group Affiliation

Don't Mess with Texas.

Opinion

Electricians do it 'til it Hz!

Music

Z103

Americana

So many pedestrians, so little time.

Community Pride

Panama City Beach

Environmental

Save the Manatee

Pride and Loyalty

I Love Delta Delta Delta

Public Awareness

School's Open. Drive Carefully.

Of course, these are not the only possible categories. Some overlap. Different

groups classified similar slogans differently. For example, one group believed *I Love Allah* indicated group affiliation while another group said *Jesus Loves You* expressed one's religion.

A linguistically and culturally heterogeneous group of ESL students at the Florida State University Center for Intensive English Studies categorized slogans similarly. Their categories include politics, clubs, advice, advertisements, sports, personal feelings for places or things, family, humor, and criticism.

**Follow-up Activities**

After categorizing bumper sticker slogans, students may participate in a variety of follow-up activities. Some of these take place immediately following the exercise in the classroom; others have to be researched in the community. Some possibilities are listed below:

Students may discuss whether or not a certain value would be expressed publicly in their home cultures.

They may look at the range of opinion Americans have regarding one particular issue, for example, gun control.

Students may ask American drivers why they have chosen to place a certain sticker on their car.

They may go to places where groups of people holding relatively homogeneous values gather, e.g. a church. They may then compare the bumper stickers seen in one location (a Southern Baptist church) to those seen elsewhere (a Unitarian church).

By participating in these activities, students may gain a deeper insight into the beliefs, values, and customs of the American people.

**About the Author**

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