

The Phenomenon of Aphasia of Chinese Culture in College English Teaching: Its Seriousness and Reasons

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Abstract

With more English culture taught in college English classes, an issue is being paid increasing attention to—students' lack of Chinese culture expressed in English. The data obtained in the investigation, the paper attempts to reveal how seriously non-English majors are incompetent in expressing Chinese culture in English, and discover the reasons why this phenomenon exists.

Key words: Cross-cultural communication; Chinese culture expressed in English; Language teaching

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INTRODUCTION

The term “aphasia”, is the name given to a collection of language disorders caused by damage to the brain (Wikipedia), referring to brain-generated defect in sounding words. Symptoms are associated with the location and extent of involved brain tissues. An afflicted person, for example, although able to move his mouth parts and utter words and ability to understand spoken words, may be totally unable to form words himself.

The term “aphasia of Chinese culture” in Chinese version was cited in the teaching field for the first time by Professor Cong (2000) in Nanjing University

in *Guangming Daily*. According to Professor Cong, this term means the phenomenon of students' lack of Chinese culture expressed in English in cross-cultural communication. After the advent of this article, more and more people are aware of this phenomenon. The term “aphasia of Chinese culture” is adopted to demonstrate students' inability to express Chinese culture in English. This is harmful to both students' overall development of communicative competence and the successful and equal cross-cultural communication.

Therefore, an investigation is done to find to what extent non-English majors are unable to express Chinese culture in English, further explore the reasons behind this phenomenon and offer solutions to deal with it.

1. MEHODOLOGY

1.1 Subjects

In this investigation, there are 150 non-English majors as the subjects who are selected from 3 universities in Shandong province, majoring in Electronics, News and Math respectively. All the subjects are sophomores, just finishing their 2-year college English study. They can represent a large number of non-English majors in China since they come from a provincial medical university, a provincial normal university Shandong Normal University and a university administered by Education Ministry, Shandong University.

1.2 Instrument

The investigation comprises one questionnaire and one test paper. The questionnaire is done to answer 3 questions: a) subjects' attitude toward the learning of Chinese culture expressed in English; b) whether the phenomenon of aphasia of Chinese culture exists; and c) reasons why the phenomenon exists. There are 2 parts in this investigation: multiple choices in the first part and 2 questions in the second part.

The test paper is designed to test how seriously non-English majors are unable to express Chinese culture in English. It includes the translation of 60 phrases and 6 sentences as well as 1 composition. In designing the test paper, culture is given a broad definition that culture should be composed of knowledge, belief, art, law, moral, customs and a complex total of competence and habits owned by the social members. "It does not really matter how it is defined as long as the definition is broad" (Seelye, 1974).

1.3 Data Collection

Before distributing the test paper and questionnaires to the student subjects, enough preparatory work has been done to guarantee the sincere and serious attitude toward this survey. The information about valid test paper and questionnaires is shown in Table 1, in which the valid number is neither very high nor very low, with 75.3% and 62.7%, respectively (Table 1).

Figure 1
Information About Valid Subjects

	Questionnaire	Test paper
Total number of subjects	150	150
Valid number of subjects	113	94
Percentage (%)	75.3	62.7

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

2.1 Subjects' Attitude Towards the Learning of Chinese Culture Expressed in English

In the first part of the questionnaire, there are 6 sentences: a) Non-English majors don't need to learn Chinese culture since they are learning English as their second language; b) It's necessary to spread Chinese culture in communicating with foreigners; c) It's always difficult for me to express Chinese culture in English; d) I don't have a deep understanding of Chinese culture; e) I hope to learn Chinese culture expressed in English to improve English learning; f) It's convenient for me to have access to the materials introducing Chinese culture in English. For each sentence, four choices are given: A stands for "strongly agree", B for "agree", C for "disagree" and D for "strongly disagree".

As for the first part of the questionnaire, Table 2 reveals all the results. In Table 2, from the results of item 1 and 2, it can be found that more than 44.42% of subjects agree and 45.13% of the subjects strongly agree that it is necessary to learn how to express Chinese culture in English. 63.71% of subjects agree and 33.62% of the subjects strongly agree that it is necessary to spread Chinese culture in cross-cultural communication. This shows that the subjects have strong sense of the equality of cross-cultural communication and that they support

the learning of Chinese culture expressed in English in English classes.

Table 2
Results of the 1st Part of the Questionnaire for Student Subjects

Item	A(strongly agree)		B(agree)		C(disagree)		D(strongly disagree)	
	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P
1	2	1.76%	10	8.84%	50	44.24%	51	45.13%
2	38	33.62%	72	63.71%	2	1.76%	1	0.8%
3	22	19.46%	81	71.68%	7	6.19%	3	2.65%
4	1	0.8%	58	51.32%	45	39.82%	9	7.96%
5	29	25.66%	63	55.75%	18	15.92%	3	2.65%
6	2	1.78%	19	16.81%	86	76.1%	6	5.3%

Note. N stands for the number of student subjects who have given this choice and P for the percentage of those subjects to all of the subjects.

2.2 The Existence of the Aphasia of Chinese Culture

From the data in Table 2, it can be found that as to item 3 in the first part of the questionnaire, there are 19.46% of subjects agreeing and 71.68% of the subjects strongly agreeing that it is difficult for them to express Chinese culture in English.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the first question is given as to the subjects' comment on their performance in expressing Chinese culture in English, four choices are given: very bad(A), just-so-so(B), good(C) and excellent(D). The results of this question are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Results of the 1st Question in the 2nd Part of the Questionnaire

	Bad(A)	Just-so-so(B)	Good(C)	Excellent(D)
Number of subjects	54	52	6	5.3
Percentage	47.8%	46%	1%	0.9%

From Table 3, the conclusion can be drawn that so few students are confident in expressing Chinese culture in English and that 47.8% of the subject think their performance is so inferior.

Figure 1 shows the subjects' performance in the test paper, which includes the translation of 60 phrases and 6 sentences as well as 1 composition. The subjects are required to translate into English Chinese phrases and sentences which contain so much Chinese culture and 1 English writing related to Chinese culture needs to be finished.

From the data in Figure 1, it can be found that most of the subjects get no more than 10 marks with the total marks being 60. This clearly proves that the subjects are really so deficient in expressing Chinese culture in English. In Table 4, it can be inferred that most of

students' scores are obtained from the first part, that is, phrase translation, with the next two parts nearly or totally

blank. This further proves that subjects' severe lack of the ability to express Chinese culture in English.

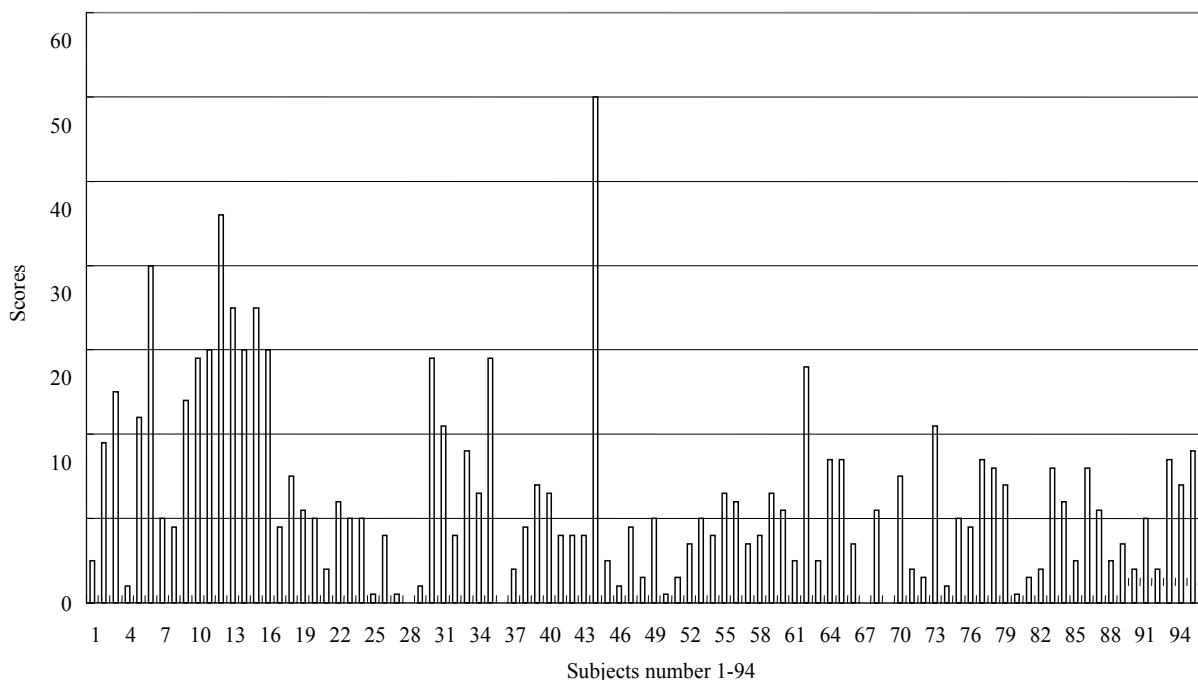


Figure 1
Student Subjects' Scores of the Whole Test Paper

Table 4
Statistical Analysis of the Subjects' Scores of Phrase Translation and the Whole Test Paper

	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Min	Max	Subjects' number	Total score
Phrase translation	10.66	10	10	7.76	0	40	94	60
The whole test paper	12.67	10	10	10.79	0	60	94	100

What's more, in Table 4, the average score for the whole test paper is 12.67, which reveals that how seriously the subjects are ignorant of Chinese culture expressed in English. Especially ancient Chinese translation and writing about the origin of Chinese traditional Mid-autumn Festival, that is, the second and the third parts of the test paper really confuse those subjects who are so disabled in expressing Chinese culture in English.

From Figure 1 and Table 4 it can be inferred that most of students' scores are obtained from the first part, that is, phrase translation, with the next two parts nearly or totally blank. This further proves that subjects' severe lack of the ability to express Chinese culture in English.

2.3 Reasons

2.3.1 Students' Mastery of Chinese Culture

Students' good mastery of the knowledge of Chinese culture is the prerequisite for their expressive ability in terms of Chinese culture in English since poor mastery of the knowledge of Chinese culture will definitely result in poor performance in expressing Chinese culture in

English.

From the results of sentence translation and writing of the test paper, students' mastery of the knowledge of Chinese culture is discovered to be far from satisfactory. In the sentence translation, there are six sentences which are selected from the classics of ancient China. Among 94 student subjects, only 17 have done the sentence translation and writing with relatively correct sentences which do make sense. Among the six sentences translation, item 1 is finished by 0.94% of the whole 17 subjects, item 2 0.76%, item 3 0.35%, item 4 0.47%, item 5 0.53% and item 6 0.47%. When interviewed why they keep some of sentence translation undone, student subjects were very disappointed and frustrated because they had to admit the fact that the sentence are only understood dimly and cannot be exemplified in plain language easily understood, even in Chinese. In addition, the origin of Mid-Autumn Festival in writing is translated only by eight students even whose performance cannot be considered excellent since the information about the origin is not conveyed in great and enough detail.

Undoubtedly, Chinese students should and need have a deep understanding of Chinese culture which is so rich and enjoys such a long history. However, in this investigation the truth has to be accepted that Chinese students severely lack the basic mastery of ABCs of Chinese culture, let alone express it in English and spread it.

2.3.2 Textbooks

Although there also exists newspaper, journals, radio, slides, TV programs, computer software and so on, yet the investigation (Shu, 2004) reveals and justifies that textbooks are still used as the main source helping improve students' level of English. However, there

is severe lack of information about Chinese culture expressed in English. That is revealed according to the survey below. In the survey, the analysis is made of 3 series of textbooks, which are very popular among most colleges and universities in China: *New College English* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Press in 2001, (represented by T1 in Table 5) *New College English* published by Beijing Foreign Language and Research Press in 2001 (represented by T2 in Table 5) and *21st Century College English* published by High Education Press and Fudan University Press in 2001 (represented by T3 in Table 5).

Table 5
The Information of Culture Contents in 3 Popular Textbooks

	Units containing foreign culture						Units containing Chinese culture					
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
Book 1	1	12.5%	5	41.7%	3	30%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Book 2	3	37.5%	5	41.7%	4	40%	1	12.5%	0	0%	0	0%
Book 3	3	37.5%	2	16.7%	3	30%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Book 4	6	75%	3	25%	3	30%	0	0%	0	0%	1	10%

Table 5 demonstrates the proportion of home culture (Chinese culture) and target culture (English culture) contained in the three series of college English textbooks to offer statistical and persuading proof of the responsibilities of the textbooks. From the data shown in Table 5, the sharp contrast may be easily found between the information about English culture and the information about Chinese culture contained in the textbooks. So much stress is laid on the learning of English culture and so little attention is paid to the learning of Chinese culture expressed in Chinese. With the contrast shown in Table 5, textbooks used by those students can never run away from being blamed for the aphasia of Chinese culture. It's never a driving force to inherit and spread Chinese culture.

In a word, textbooks play a role in students' disability of expressing Chinese culture in English. Nevertheless, there are still other reasons for this phenomenon.

2.3.3 Curriculum

In China, curriculum design is usually conducted by the Ministry of Education, leaving so little freedom to teachers and students. Although college English is usually required to be taught in every university, yet it is schools that have the rights to determine what kind of textbooks they may adopt in teaching and to offer optional courses related to English to fulfill their respective and particular educational objectives. Nearly every university has lessons of college English. What does differ among those universities lies in their optional courses. In order to test whether there are abundant optional courses concerning Chinese culture expressed in English, a comparison (Table 6 is made among the three universities: Shandong University, Shandong Normal University and Shandong University of Chinese Traditional Medicine.

Table 6
Optional Courses Concerning Chinese Culture Offered by the Three Universities

Universities	Optional courses concerning Chinese culture
Shandong University	Kongfu Studies; the Philosophy in arts; Chinese Folk Songs; the Art of War; Calligraphy; Customs of Periods Before Qin Dynasty; Lishu: and so on
Shandong Normal University	Modern poetry; Calligraphy; the History of Chinese Customs; Cultural Elites in Modern China; the Summary of Chinese culture; the Heroes and Their Spirit in Chinese history; Qigong and Kongfu; Tourism in the Customs of Nationalities; and so on
Shandong University of Chinese Traditional Medicine	Taiji; the Philosophy of Ancient China; Chinese in the College; the Poems of Tang and Song Dynasty; Opera Enjoyment; Traditional Culture of China

From the several tables, they are demonstrated that there are optional courses concerning the development

of both students' linguistic competence and Chinese culture learning. Yet nearly all the courses are taught in

Chinese which do not do any good to students' mastery of sufficient practical knowledge about Chinese culture in English. There are not enough English optional courses related to Chinese culture.

Since students have not enough input of Chinese culture expressed in English, they cannot output it even though they have some understanding of Chinese culture.

2.3.4 Testing

At present, for college students, there are many tests, such as CET-4 and CET-6, PETS, TOFEL and GRE and so on, among which CET-4 and CET-6 are considered as the most important and popular tests, which are participated in by more than 10 million students. Since passing CET-4 is regarded as a prerequisite to obtain the diplomat in many universities, students and teachers concentrate their attention and energy on the preparation for the test. If something is wrong with the test, teaching and learning will be led to a quite different direction which is perhaps far from the one prescribed in the syllabus.

Since the beginning of CET-4 and CET-6, they have been reformed several times. Now the two tests still involve listening, reading, writing and translation among which listening is most emphasized, accounting for 30% of the whole test. It is obvious that the trend demonstrates the emphasis from reading and comprehension to listen and speaking, the two important language skills in students' communicative competence. Although the reforms accord with the present situation and mean to enhance and improve English teaching, yet there is still lack of testing students' socio-cultural competence in expressing Chinese culture in English. There is no clear proof showing that Chinese culture in English is paid more attention to than before and that Chinese culture is considered in terms of conserving Chinese culture and guaranteeing the equal cultural communication with other countries. A definite result is that both students and teachers lay emphasis on whatever can help pass the two tests. The tests are so important in students' hunting for their future career that they sacrifice the function of English as a tool of equal communication (including cultural exchanges) with foreigners to the function of English as a tool of the future career. Therefore, testing, especially CET-4 and CET-6, although reformed, cannot avoid being blamed for students' poor ability in expressing Chinese culture in English.

2.3.5 Syllabus

In China, English teaching syllabus plays a predominant role in textbooks writing, curriculum design, testing and assessment, exerting great influence on every aspect of teaching and learning. At present, college English teaching syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education has experienced three significant development changes, the Syllabus of College English Teaching in 1985, the Revised Syllabus of College English Teaching in 1999

and the Requirements of College English Teaching in 2004.

In the Syllabus of College English Teaching in 1999, teaching objective is to train students' high competence of reading and certain competence of listening, speaking, writing and translation for them to conduct communication in English. It is written that college English teaching should help students develop their linguistic competence, master the means of learning languages and strengthen their quality of culture acquaintance so as to be adjusted to the needs of economic and social development. Although culture acquaintance is emphasized and concerned for, yet it mainly refers to the western culture acquaintance since the syllabus in 1999 also says that college English teaching should help students deepen their understanding of the world, select and learn from western cultures. Chinese culture was not given a proper and clear position in the syllabus in 1999. In the Requirements of College English Teaching issued in 2004, teaching objective is to train students' comprehensive competence of using English, especially their listening and speaking abilities so as to satisfy their needs of communication in their future career in an oral or written way. As to the speaking ability in the common requirements in the syllabus, it says that students should be able to communicate with foreigners in English to discuss some daily-life topics and to make small talks concerning a familiar topic with the use of some basic strategies of making dialogues. Although successful communication necessitates students' competence of expressing Chinese culture in English, yet there is still no clear statement showing Chinese culture in English holds a suitable and easily-recognized position. Therefore, lack of suitable and easily-recognized position of Chinese culture expressed in English may result in lack of attention to and emphasis on the teaching of Chinese culture in English in college English teaching, hence students' poor performance in expressing Chinese culture in English.

2.3.6 Information Sources

Students' ability of expressing Chinese culture in English can also be affected by the information sources of Chinese culture expressed in English. The information sources may determine to what extent teachers penetrate and analyze teaching contents and to what extent students can improve their communicative competence in equal cross-cultural communication. The more Chinese cultural information there is, the more possible and beneficial it is for teachers and students to enhance and improve students' ability of expressing Chinese culture in English.

With the deeper exchange with foreign countries, there are many possible sources from which students and teachers obtain the knowledge and information related to the target culture, for example, dictionary, newspaper, journal, radio and TV programs and so on. What forms a sharp contrast is that the questionnaires reveal students

find it difficult to get enough cultural information related to improving students' ability of expressing Chinese culture in English. In the questionnaire, item 6 reads that it is convenient for me to obtain the materials of introducing Chinese culture in English. According to Table 2, 2 students (1.78%) chose A (totally agree), 19 (16.81%) chose B (agree), 86 (76.1%) chose C (disagree) and 6 (5.3%) chose D (totally disagree) with the standard deviation 0.5323, apparently demonstrating that their viewpoints are very concentrated on this item. There is a lack of information sources students may resort to when they want to improve their ability of expressing Chinese culture in English. It should be admitted that students have the desire to improve their ability of expressing Chinese culture in English, as is shown in the result for item 5 in the questionnaire in Table 2.

Why there is so sharp contrast in the information sources of English culture and Chinese culture may lie in two aspects: one is that these cultural information sources are so scattered and the information in them covers such a small percentage that it is a hard job for teachers to arrange them systematically and a waste of time for them to sort out a little information used in the classroom from so-scattered cultural information sources; and the other is that there are often several English versions for the same Chinese term, resulting in the difficulty of making choices between them, hence at a loss as to distinguishing which is more standard and suitable to offer to students.

Consequently, in culture teaching, the lack of systematic, classified and unified arrangement of English versions of Chinese culture also shares the responsibilities for students' aphasia of Chinese culture in their English learning.

CONCLUSION

From the investigation, it can be found that college student deems that it is important for them to express

Chinese culture in English, which is beneficial to cross-cultural communication and English learning. Meanwhile, students are surprisingly incompetent in expressing Chinese culture in English. It is really high time to deal with this serious aphasia of Chinese culture in language teaching and cross-cultural communication.

Since the reasons for this aphasia of Chinese culture are manifold, its solutions are never easy. To deal with it, students need to have a better understanding and mastery of Chinese culture, which is a prerequisite for enhancing students' expressiveness of Chinese culture in English. Besides, in designing textbook, curriculum, syllabus and testing, more emphasis needs to be laid on Chinese culture expressed in English. Of course, more and easier access to materials related to Chinese culture in English is equally important in helping students to express Chinese culture in English better.

It is far from easy to deal with this aphasia of Chinese culture in English learning. However, it is worthwhile because in the teaching of English as the second language, Chinese culture expressed in English and English cultures are equally important in terms of cross-cultural communication.

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