

A Content Analysis of the Cultural Content in the EFL Textbooks

UNE ANALYSE DE CONTENU DU CONTENU CULTUREL DANS LES MANUELS EN ANGLAIS

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Abstract: Intercultural communicative competence has been widely accepted as the aim of EFL teaching. In order to obtain this competence, Culture teaching must be implemented in the college English teaching. Textbooks have played a very important role in the course of teaching and learning. Textbooks introduce students the cultures of different countries and regions, thus making it convenient for students to exert a relatively remarkable influence on the fostering of students' cultural awareness and competence of intercultural communication. This paper focuses on the content analysis of the cultural content in *College English (New)* (henceforth, CE (New)).

Key Words: *College English (New)*; content analysis; textbook evaluation

Résumé: La compétence de communication interculturelle a été largement acceptée comme le but de l'enseignement de l'anglais. Afin d'obtenir cette compétence, l'enseignement culturel doit être appliqué dans l'enseignement de l'anglais dans les collèges. Les manuels ont joué un rôle très important dans le cadre de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage. Les manuels initient les étudiants aux cultures de différents pays et régions et exercent une influence relativement remarquable sur la sensibilisation culturelle et les compétences de communication interculturelle des élèves. Le présent article se concentre sur l'analyse du contenu des contenus culturels dans les manuel de l'anglais aux collèges (Nouveau) (dèsormais, on utilise AC (nouveau) pour désigner l'anglais de collège).

Mots-clés: anglais de collège (nouveau); analyse du contenu; évaluation des manuels scolaires

1. INTRODUCTION

The necessity of integrating culture teaching in FLE has been long recognized by scholars and educators, but what kinds of cultural information should be taught is still a confusing problem. In China, English is taught as a foreign language, so the most of English teaching and learning happen in class, which means teaching materials play an important role in English teaching and learning. Cunningsworth stated that

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“teaching materials can exert considerable influence over what teachers teach and how they do it” (Cunningsworth, 2002, P7). And on the other hand, with China’s education heavily under the influence of Confucianism and Daoism, students get into the habit of depending on textbooks (Zhang, 2007, P262).

A conclusion can be drawn like this: the cultural content in English as foreign language (henceforth EFL) textbooks is one of the best resources for introducing culture knowledge to learners in China, and the cultural content in EFL textbooks is and will be the critical element even the determining element for culture teaching for a long time in China. The majority of English learners are non-English majors in China, so this paper focuses on analyzing the cultural content in textbooks of non-English majors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Textbook is very important for both teachers and students so that it is called “Keben” in Chinese, which means the basis of a course. Although it cannot cover everything, it remains the major source for the teaching content. Textbook is the effective instrument for the educational practice and it can reflect values and senses for individuals and nations (Eli Hinkel, 2005, P135). Systematic and comprehensive textbook may facilitate the culture input considerably, while a rigid textbook may leave no room for culture teaching, so the evaluation of textbooks are essential in FLE.

Among all the thorough lists of criteria for textbook evaluation, Byram’s checklist focuses on cultural content outstandingly. Byram asserted that although cultural learning and teaching has been viewed as an integral part of language education, the great majority of cases were “the more acquisition of information about a foreign country, without the psychological demands of integrated language learning” (Byram, 1989, P2). This point of view was confirmed in Kramersch’s survey that showed in many language classes culture was frequently reduced to “the four Fs”, which means “foods, fairs, folklores and statistic facts” (Kramersch, 1993, P218). Kramersch also stressed that the impact of culture on language learning, teaching and using was far more complex than “the four Fs” and language teaching needed to link “the teaching of culture to that culture” (Kramersch, 1993, P236). In other words, both Byram and Kramersch agreed that culture not only functioned as a background or a support for FLE, but also should be valued in its own way and linked to the interpersonal understanding.

Byram (1993) examined the cultural content in textbooks that should include a focus on eight areas as shown in the following list:

Criteria for textbook evaluation (focus on cultural content)

- a) Social identity and social group (social class, regional identity, ethnic minorities)
 - b) Social interaction (differing levels of formality; as outsider and insider)
 - c) Belief and behavior (moral, religious beliefs; daily routines)
 - d) Social and political institutions (state institutions, health care, law and order, social security, local government)
 - e) Socialization and the life cycle (families, schools, employment, rites of passage)
 - f) National history (historical and contemporary events seen as markers of national identity)
 - g) National geography (geographical factors seen as being significant by members)
 - h) Stereotypes and national identity (what is “typical” symbol of national stereotypes)
- (Byram, 1993, P5-P10)

Byram’s criterion is more comprehensive and practical. It covers almost every aspect of the culture from the spirit to the material infrastructure. So the author chooses Byram’s checklist as the basic theory to collect, analyze and evaluate the data of the cultural content in the chosen textbooks.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions

This paper focuses on analyzing the cultural content in CE (New) from the internal perspectives. To make the general research problems more specific and easily handled, this study attempts to answer the following sub-questions: (1). What kinds of cultural content have been compiled in the college EFL textbooks? (2).

What are the features of the cultural content? (3). What are the advantages and disadvantages of the cultural content?

3.2 Research Design

Based on the research questions mentioned above, this study will combine both a quantitative and a qualitative research methodology.

3.2.1 Subject--- *College English (New Edition)*

CE (New) is edited by Li et al. and published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2001, is a widely-used series of college English textbooks, which is now being used in Tianjin Polytechnic University (henceforth TJPU). This paper mainly analyzes the first four student volumes of the Integrated Course of CE (New). Each volume is composed of eight units, and each unit having a theme around which two texts are arranged. Each unit consists of four parts: (1). Pre-reading Task: some readings are presented, which are relevant to the unit theme. After listening to a passage recording, students are required to answer or discuss several questions. The purpose of this part is to arouse students' interest and motivation for further study in this unit. (2). Text A: is made up of a theme-related passage, the word list, exercises and footnotes are added to the text. In most colleges and universities in China, this part is the main part of the whole unit for teachers to interpret the course and students to study. (3). Text B: is designed for students' after-class reading, and composed of a theme-related passage, world list and exercises. (4). Theme-related language learning Tasks: this part includes different forms of language learning tasks, such as, group discussion; writing strategy, essay writing, follow-up work.

The content analysis of CE (New)'s Integrated Course (students' book) focuses on the four parts: (1). evaluation of preface of the textbook; (2). evaluation of texts, including Text A, Text B and the footnotes; (3). evaluation of pre-reading; (4). evaluation of exercises.

3.2.2 Instrument

The data of the cultural content in CE (New) was collected by two ways: one is the theme of the whole unit; including the gist of the pre-reading, text A and text B. the other is the cultural information in details embodied in the pre-reading, text A, text B, footnotes and exercises. Besides, the Microsoft Excel was utilized to make Tables to show the concrete information.

4. EVALUATION ON CULTURAL CONTENT IN *COLLEGE ENGLISH (NEW EDITION)*

4.1 Preface

The preface illustrates the compiling principles and the framework of the whole book, so it is a good place to start the investigation. An examination of the preface of CE (New) reveals some depressing results as far as cultural studies are concerned. Culture is not taken into consideration at all. The skill-oriented nature of the textbooks is clearly stated in the preface part, "...via the teacher's 'careful presentation', the learner's 'repeated practices' and all-dimension practices in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, it is expected that learners will pay a relatively solid English language foundation and strong application ability" (Li, 2002, P ii). One of the widely acknowledged goals of FLE---to foster learners' ICC and cultural awareness is never stated in the preface.

After a general survey of all the contents, a conclusion can be drawn that despite the fact that textbooks writers and editors did not take culture into account, while the interwoven relationship between language and culture means the cultural content cannot be isolated from the whole texts and the texts on the whole can still serve our purpose of the present study.

4.2 Text A and Text B (including footnotes)

Texts are the core of this series of textbooks, which play a significant role in the investigation of cultural content input in textbooks. CE (New) has 4 textbooks, 32 units, and 64 texts (including 32 main texts and 32 after-class reading materials) in total. The author analyses the cultural content from two aspects: one is the gist of the text A and text B; the other is the details of the cultural content in the texts and footnotes. Byram's criteria were used in the analysis and discussion in this part. Some details of the cultural content in this part will be repeated in the data collection and analysis process. The first reason is themselves appear in the texts many times. The second reason is that all of the repeated cultural details are very important or famous items in the foreign cultures.

After the author make a rough examination of the whole textbooks, two features can be gotten:

The first is the theme-centered arrangement of the texts. Each unit, composed of one main text and one supplementary after-class reading material, is devoted to the discussion of a theme of interest in contemporary society, such as friendship, Romance, employment, terrorism, nature, environment, etc. This is a good way to introduce culture to students and can arouse students' curiosity about the foreign cultures.

The second is that the contents in the texts are diversified, covering a wide range of culture. The contents take in language, interpersonal relationships, psychology, social science, literature, sports, science etc., and include various aspects of the target culture. It is a good way to attract students to do some further learning.

From the concrete data, the following tables can be obtained to show the specific situation of the cultural content in the CE (New).

4.2.1 The time of the texts

Some information can be obtained from Table 4-1: This series of textbooks were published in 2002, but the time of the passages that were mainly excerpted from some books, magazines and newspaper is nearly recent. As the data shown, the number of the texts from 2000 to 2002 is 13, which makes up 20.31%; while the number of those from 1990 to 1999 is 43, which makes up 67.19%. There are only one text was written before 1979 in the whole series. Most of the texts were written in recent years can reflect the contemporary lives, concerns and achievements of the target cultures. All of these data show that this series of textbooks are up-to-date authentic materials can give students up-to-date information. The only inadequacy is that compared with today's changeable situation, this series of textbooks were published in 2002, so the next edition should be revised or recompiled in the recent time.

Table 4-1: The time of the texts

Years	Texts	Percentage
Before 1979	1	1.56%
1980-1989	7	10.94%
1990-1999	43	67.19%
2000-2002	13	20.31%
Total	64	100%

Table 4-2: The writers' nationality

Nationality	Quantity	Percentage
American	57	89.06%
English	4	6.25%
Australian	1	1.56%
Chinese	1	1.56%
Unknown	1	1.56%
Total	64	100%

4.2.2 Writers' nationality

As the information shown in Table 4-2, the situation of the author of the 64 texts is that: the number of American writers is 57, which makes up 89.06%; the number of English writers is 4, which makes up 6.25%; while there are two writers from Australia and China respectively, another writer, who the author can't find whose nationality. This situation shows that in this series of textbooks, the proportion of American writers' works is so high, and the number of other nations' writers is so small, which make learners be forced to absorb the American culture and cannot guarantee the learner's cultural input is intercultural.

4.2.3 The gist and details of texts

From the whole range, the gist and details covers all kinds of cultural content in textbooks the gist provide the whole image from each areas mentioned by Byram, while the details provide concrete information to

students to grasp its cultural connotation with each words. The data from the textbooks were listed in the following table:

Table 4-3: The general situation of the cultural content in whole texts

Byram's criteria	gist	percentage	details	percentage
1= Social identity and social group	4	6.25%	49	16.84%
2= Social interaction	4	6.25%	10	3.44%
3=Belief and behavior	26	40.63%	31	10.65%
4=Social and political institutions	0	0%	34	11.68%
5=Socialization and the life phrase	22	34.38%	62	21.31%
6=National history	2	3.13%	37	12.71%
7=National geography	4	6.25%	67	23.02%
8=Stereo types and national identity	2	3.13%	1	0.34%
Total	64	100%	291	100%

About the gist or theme of the texts, 26 texts focus on “belief and behavior”, while 22 texts focus on “socialization and the life phrase”. Both of them are the most useful cultural areas in direct communication, because communications always use them (means culture with small “C”) in daily life. The other six areas in Byram’s criteria are also mentioned, except “social and political institutions”. The “social identity and social group”; the “social interaction” and the “national geography” have 4 texts in the books respectively and each of them makes up 6.25%. And both the “national history” and the “stereotypes and national identity” have 2 texts in the books respectively, so each of them makes up 3.13%. These information show that the editors put more emphasize on the culture with small “c”, and the each area of culture, as divided by Byram, remains unbalanced.

About the details of the texts, the most two details are the “national geography” (67) and the “socialization and the life phrase” (62), which make up 23.02% and 21.31% respectively. The number of the “social and political institutions” is 34, which makes up 11.68% in total, which compensates the vacancy of this area in the gist of texts. The “stereo types and national identity” area is the last one, only 1 detail mention it. The situation of the other four areas of cultural content are: the “social identity and social group” makes up 16.84%; the “national history” makes up 12.71%; the “belief and behavior” makes up 10.65%; the “social interaction” makes up 3.44%. Because so many names of places and nations were mentioned in the passages, the area of the “national geography” constitutes a large proportion. Compared with the situation of the gist of the texts, the details of the texts keep comparative balance between the culture with a small “c” and the culture with a big “C”.

Although the percentage of each area of the cultural content in the chosen textbooks is different, the cultural content is diversified and covers a wide range with the importance on daily life and geography knowledge. The culture with small “c” is plentiful, while the culture with big “C” is insufficient to some extent.

4.3 Pre-reading

The pre-reading part in each unit is to arouse students’ interest and trigger their motivation for the further study, so it has closely relationship with the whole unit. In the whole 32 units, the main substance of the pre-reading is the same with the two texts in the same unit, except for unit 7 in Textbook 4, in which, the details of the pre-reading is about the “socialization and the life phrase”, while the gist of the texts is the “belief and behavior”. So there is no need repeating the gist of each pre-reading, but some details of the cultural content appear in the pre-reading should be paid attention to, as shown in the table 4-4.

From the Table 4-4, 13 details were mentioned about the “social identity and social groups” in the whole pre-reading parts, which makes up 72.22%. There are only one item of the “social interaction”, the “the belief and behavior”, the “social and political institutions”, the “socialization and the life phrase” and the “national geography” respectively, and each of them only makes up 5.56%. As stated in 3.2.1.1 in this thesis: some readings or other kinds of materials in the pre-reading part are presented in the form of song, short story, introduction of personages, short snatches of movies etc., so it is normal that the introduction of some famous persons, from pop singers to statesman and from scientist to president, is the important part in the pre-reading. The main purpose of arranging the pre-reading part is to trigger students’ interest and

motivation for further study and introduce the main meaning of this unit, but it also introduce some concrete cultural information to students as mentioned it.

Table 4-4: The details of cultural content in the pre-reading part

Cultural content	Details	Position	Numbers	Percentage
1=Social identity and social group	John Lennon	P2, Book1	13	72.22%
	Dionne Warwick	P32, Book1		
	Stephen Hawking	P62, Book1		
	Dr. Hertz	P90, Book1		
	Celia Dewon	P136, Book1		
	Michael Jackson	P166, Book1		
	Abraham Lincoln	P32, Book2		
	Abraham Lincoln	P38, Book3		
	Martin Luther King	P38, Book3		
	John F. Kennedy	P38, Book3		
	Bobby Kennedy	P38, Book3		
	Michael Jackson	P188, Book3		
	Onetta	P222, Book3		
2 = Social interaction	Thanksgiving	P156, Book3	1	5.56%
3=Belief and behavior	Paying back money	P32, Book2	1	5.56%
4=Social and political institutions	President	P32, Book2	1	5.56%
5=Socialization and the life phrase	The generation gap	P2, Book2	1	5.56%
7=National geography	Lake superior	P2, Book2	1	5.56%
Total			18	100%

4.4. Exercise

In any types of language teaching, presentation and practice often cannot be separated, so exercises are part of the core process in FLE. Exercises in CE (New) consist of three central parts: (1) comprehension (including contents questions, points for discussion and text organization); (2) Language Sense Enhancement (including Poem, well-known quotations and humorous story); (3) Language Focus (including vocabulary, structure and comprehension exercises). A more detailed inspection confirms that except for the “points for discussion” in the comprehension part and the “comprehension exercises” in the language Focus part, all of other exercises are designed mainly out of the consideration of learners’ language proficiency. They are little related to the cultural components input.

Some cultural explorations in the “points for discussion” in the comprehension part are probably made for teachers and students. Questions such as “what’s your idea of friendship” (P39, Book1); “What do you think causes the generation gap?”(P77, Book2), and “what do you think of the prospects of human cloning” (P266, Book3) are examples to explore culture by helping learners to discuss these questions together, which only have a close relationship with the texts. This kind of discussion only makes up less than 5% of the total exercises. Other parts in the exercise cannot encourage any cultural exploration.

The “comprehension exercises” in the language focus part also involves in cultural content, especially on some cultural details, such as: the mixed marriage (P243, Book1); Rockefeller family (P48, Book2); Federal express (P115, Book2); Noah’s Ark (P223, Book2) and the Alps (P21, ook4). Although some cultural details are mentioned in this part, the main function of this part is to enhance learners’ language competence, especially, the grammar knowledge and the reading ability.

The “Language Sense Enhancement” mainly contains some poems, quotations and humorous stories of the target culture, most of which do implicitly carry with some cultural messages, but as the results of the questionnaires shown, most students just regard the exercises part as some boring linguistic exercises and pay little attention to it.

On the whole, exercises in CE (New) are obsessed with linguistic practice, while the cultural content is not the important aspect in the general design and the organization of it. The investigation of this part is rather discouraging. The questionnaire later on confirms this situation even reveals more discouraging results about this part.

4.5 Advantages and Disadvantages of CE (New)

From the above analyses, it is concluded that CE (New) has some advantages also has some disadvantages. The advantages of the CE (New) are:

1st. It includes a variety of topics. According to an investigation carried out by Zheng and Wei (1997), the six most popular topics among college English learners are: social customs, contemporary society, bibliography of famous people, novel except, culture differences, technology and science (Zheng & Wei, 1997, P32). All the six topics are included in CE (New) and other topics, such as human subjectivity and international hot issues are also discussed.

2nd. A realistic picture of the target community group (esp. America) is provided, and no society in the textbooks is depicted as problem-free. The second problems, for example, the social security, the loss of trust between human beings, and the over-fast pace of human life are introduced. Most of these social problems are universal, which can make students to get a vivid, through and profound picture of a society.

3rd. It includes a large number of literary works such as novel excerpts, poems and prose. Stern said: "understanding of literary works presupposes an understanding of the culture" (Stern, 1992, P229). The message carried by the literature works becomes what Cunningsworth called "hidden curriculum" and will be more memorable and valuable than the explicitly stated cultural details.

4th. The explanations of some confused content, in the form of footnote, either social events, slangs, myth, or history, etc. are detailed, which facilitate students to have a better understanding of the passages.

5th. The writers' attitudes are expressed in the passages, directly or indirectly. In the texts, the writers express their worries, disappointments and critics of some problems and phenomena which will trigger the students to think deeply and critically.

The CE (New) also has the following disadvantages:

1st. More than half of the passages reflect the target culture, particularly American culture (89.06% writers are American), but other English Speaking communities are seldom involved.

2nd. Some aspects of international culture are introduced, but only in a limited way.

3rd. It is rare that texts focusing on introducing Chinese culture or aiming at teaching students how to express Chinese culture in English.

4th. Comparisons and contrasts between different cultures are rarely found except in the unit 4 in Book 4, which introduced the multi-cultural aspects in America, and the different education methods in China and America (unit 1 in Book 2).

5th. Exercises mainly aim at linguistic objectives and fail to incorporate linguistic knowledge with cultural knowledge.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, all of the analyses reveal that the cultural content input has not received the due attention in designing and organizing the CE (New). However, since language and culture are intricately related to each other, the texts do cover cultural information implicitly and a sum of culture details can also found in the pre-reading, texts, footnotes and exercises. Due to the advantages and disadvantages of the CE (New), some changes should be made in the fifth phase of the textbook compilation, such as, more passages should reflect the culture of other English Speaking communities; international cultures should be included; the content of the Chinese culture should be increased; the comparisons and contrasts between different cultures should be added; and the cultural knowledge in the part of exercise in EFL textbooks should be addressed.

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