

A Study on Users' Attitudes on the Treatment of the Cultural Content in the College EFL Textbook

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Abstract

This paper investigates 286 non-English majors and 32 English teachers' attitudes on the treatment of the cultural content in textbooks by using Huhn's criteria. All of the participants are from the Tianjin Polytechnic University (TJPU). The aim of this thesis is to offer some valuable information and suggestions to the compilation of the fifth phase of college English textbooks and the implementation of the culture teaching. The results show that the student and teacher subjects' attitudes on the treatment of the cultural content in the chosen textbooks are basically reasonable and tend to be the same.

Key words: College English Textbooks; Textbook evaluation; The treatment of the cultural content

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that fostering learners' international communicative competence (henceforth ICC) is the terminative aim of foreign language education (henceforth FLE). In China, English is taught as a foreign language not a second 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 "teaching materials

can exert considerable influence over what teachers teach and how they do it" (Cunningsworth, 2002, p.7). On the other hand, because China's education is heavily under the influence of Confucianism and Daoism, students get into the habit of depending on textbooks (Zhang, 2007, p.262). Textbooks were not the only resources to learn English or cannot cover everything, but "textbook remains the major source of cultural content that occurs in a language classroom" (Eli HinKel, 2005).

The culture teaching and learning and the textbooks both are very important, so this research focuses on analyzing the treatment of the cultural content in the college FLT textbooks of non-English majors. The chosen textbooks in this study are the first four volumes of *College English (New Edition)*, compiled by Li, et.al, which were widely used in the Chinese colleges and universities, including TJPU.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of researchers at home and abroad provided the famous criteria and checklists to the evaluate the cultural content, such as Cunningsworth's view ; Andersen & Risager's view; Cortazzi & Jin's view; Byram's view in the foreign countries, while Cheng Xiaotang also put forward the outstanding systematic evaluation in China. However, all of them are not related with the treatment of the cultural content. Huhn (1978) put forward seven criteria to deal with the treatment of cultural content in textbooks (Huhn, 1978; Cited in Byram, 1989, p.73-74):

- Giving factually accurate and up-to-date information
- Avoiding (or relativizing) stereotypes by raising awareness
 - Presenting a realistic picture
 - Being free from (or questioning) ideological tendencies
 - Presenting phenomena in context rather than a isolated facts

- Explicitly relating historical material to contemporary society
- Making it clear how personalities are products of their age

That the culture transmitted through textbooks should avoid the influence from the ideology is emphasized by Huhn's theory. This evaluation checklist can make sure that the transmitted cultural content can reflect the target culture actually, and can judge whether the textbook is practical or not, so this paper chose Huhn's checklist on the treatment of cultural content in textbook as its criteria. In Huhn's criteria, the word "stereotype" means some fixed and out-of-date even unreal ideas or images about a society.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions

This thesis focuses on analyzing the treatment of cultural content in *CE (New)* from the external perspectives. The present study will be conducted as: the in-use comments on the treatment of cultural content in *CE (New)* from the perspective of the textbook users---students and teachers.

2.2 Research Design

Based on the research question mentioned above, this study will combine both a quantitative and a qualitative research methodology. The data were collected via the multiple-choice in questionnaires for the textbook users.

2.2.1 Subjects

The present study aims to ascertain the treatment of the cultural content in *CE (New)*. Therefore, it is natural that the textbook users---students and teachers, who are using and have used the *CE (New)*, should be the research subjects in this study. As to the research subjects of teacher and student subjects, they were chosen on a random basis to fill in the questionnaires.

At TJPU, 315 sophomores were chosen on a voluntary basis for the completion of the students' questionnaire. They come from different classes and major in eleven different specialties. The survey was conducted in June

2010, when they are at the end of their second academic year. That is to say, these students have used this set of textbook for nearly two years and already finished the first four volumes of *CE (New)*, so they have a general view about all of the four textbooks and have a fresh memory about the content of them.

Teachers are also the direct textbook users, who know about *CE (New)* more comprehensively and concretely, so teachers' opinions and comments on *CE (New)* are of great values. As for the teacher subjects, 35 *CE (New)* teachers at TJPU were invited to participate in the Teacher Questionnaire.

2.2.2 Instrument

(1) Questionnaire

Two questionnaires were used in this research: one is the questionnaire for students (hereinafter SQ) and the other is the questionnaire for teachers (hereinafter TQ). Subjects were asked to respond to each statement by ticking off one of the items in the questionnaires that corresponds to his or her opinion from strongly disagree (=1) to neutral (=3) to strongly agree (=5). All the subjects are not required to sign their names on the questionnaires in order to guarantee that they can choose the most suitable and real answers. In the SQ and TQ, the 7 questions are taken from Huhn's criteria (1978) for the treatment of cultural content in textbooks.

(2) Software

In this study, SPSS (16.00) was used to analyze the data from questionnaires. The method of descriptive statistic in SPSS was used to calculate the mean, median, modes, standard deviation and range of each item. The method of Chi-Square Tests was used to analyze whether difference exists between teachers' and students' opinions. Besides, the Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Visio were utilized to make tables to show the concrete information of each item.

3. GENERAL OPINIONS ON CULTURAL CONTENT IN *CE (NEW)*

Textbook Users' General Opinions on Cultural Content in *CE (New)* (Items 20-25 in SQ and Items 15-20 in TQ; $p>0.05$)

Table 4-1
Questionnaire Results on The Cultural Content in Textbooks

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 20	57.20	79.00	14	3.744	77.00	19	83	91	79	14
TQ 15	6.40	6.00	0	5.167	14.00	0	6	8	14	4
SQ 21	57.20	27.00	10	5.996	141.00	10	27	83	151	15
TQ 16	6.40	4.00	4	8.324	21.00	0	4	4	21	3
SQ 22	57.20	48.00	9	4.896	120.00	9	48	81	129	19
TQ 17	6.40	5.00	5	7.334	19.00	0	3	5	19	5
SQ 23	57.20	48.00	4	5.607	125.00	4	13	36	129	104
TQ 18	6.40	5.00	2	7.127	16.00	0	2	2	16	12
SQ 24	57.20	34.00	4	5.322	122.00	4	21	34	126	101
TQ 19	6.40	2.00	2	7.021	15.00	0	2	2	13	15
SQ 25	57.20	44.00	4	5.528	126.00	4	17	44	130	91
TQ 29	6.40	2.00	0	7.635	17.00	0	1	2	17	12

The results of Chi-Square Tests of these six items are larger than 0.05, so there is no statistical significance between students' and teachers' opinions on this aspect. It means both students' and teachers' opinions about the cultural content in the textbooks tend to be the same.

On Item 20 in SQ (= Item 15 in TQ), 32.52% (93) of students and 56.25% (18) of teachers consider the passages in the textbooks are useful to understand the cultures of English-speaking countries. Compared with the most positive choices of teachers, there are 31.82% (91) of students who could not identify a clear relationship between the function of cultural content in the textbooks and their understanding of the cultures of English-speaking countries, which shows no difference with the result of Item 10 in SQ: the majority of students (73.08%) think their foreign cultures are accumulated through watching English movies rather than through other ways.

On Item 21 in SQ (= Item 16 in TQ) and Item 22 in SQ (= Item 17 in TQ), around 55% of students and 75% of teachers deem that the passages in the textbooks are easy to understand and the background information in the textbooks gives them a great help in comprehending the texts and the cultures of foreign countries.

On Item 23 in SQ (= Item 18 in TQ) and Item 25 in SQ (= Item 20 in TQ), the overwhelming majority (around 85%) of students and teachers think that more cultural contents and more background information of different cultures should be included in the textbooks, and combination of language and culture should be taken into consideration.

Table 4-1
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's First Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 26	57.20	55.00	8	4.012	94.00	29	92	102	55	8
TQ 21	6.40	7.00	11	4.774	10.00	1	7	11	11	2

From the result of the Chi-Square Tests: $p=0.149>0.05$ (see the Appendix for details), the values of SD are close to each other, which means there is no statistical significance between students' and teachers' views on the whole sense. However, after a closer analysis of its proportion and the data in Table 5-1, a subtle difference still exists. 22.03% (63) of students and 40.63% (13) of teachers consider the information of the cultural content in textbooks is factually accurate and up-to-date. Although the editors seem to have selected these passages in

Table 4-2
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's Second Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 27	57.20	63.00	7	4.783	119.00	17	63	126	73	7
TQ 22	6.40	8.00	1	4.219	10.00	1	8	11	9	3

On Item 27 in SQ (= Item 22 in TQ), 27.97% (80) of students and 37.5% (12) of teachers do not think the cultural content in this series of textbooks can serve this

On Item 24 in SQ (= Item 19 in TQ), 79.37% (227) of students and 87.5% (28) of teachers take the assenting view on the statement that "from the perspective of cultivating learners' ICC, more passages about foreigner's daily life and the strategies of how to communicate with foreigners should be included in the textbook".

As is evident, although the students have a lower degree of satisfaction on the cultural content in CE (New) than teachers, both of them think the cultural content that has been presented in textbooks is easy but useful for learners to understand the cultures of the English-speaking countries. In addition, they argue that some passages about foreigner's daily life and how to communicate with each other should be included in textbooks. The above discussions will lead to a conclusion that the majority of subjects realize the usefulness and importance of the cultural content in the textbooks, and hope to add more culture knowledge to the textbooks. Since the students are filled with enthusiasm in cultures learning, the culture teaching should be regarded as an integral part of language teaching in the specific teaching process, and more cultural knowledge should be compiled in the college English textbook in the fifth edition.

4. SURVEY OF THE TREATMENT OF CULTURAL CONTENT

(1) Whether to give factually accurate and up-to-date information (Item 1; $p=0.149>0.05$).

order to present snapshots of one or more aspects of the English-speaking societies in rather recent time, students and teachers are still not satisfied with these texts in this aspect and the students present more vehement idea about this question. Even some students admit that they do not want to use the CE (New) any more in the open-ended questions. This phenomenon shows that the renewing of the textbooks is necessary and urgent.

(2) Whether to avoid (or relate) stereotype by raising awareness. (Item 2; $p=0.230>0.05$).

purpose adequately, which means the chosen cultural content cannot avoid stereotype by raising learners' awareness. As the details showed before, most of these

texts are about the daily life of the foreigners, so it is unavoidable to show some traditions or the stereotype of its culture. One reason of the disappointment is that most of the chosen passages just reflect some old ideas or images of the society, for example, the mother's responsibility is only to take care of children in the Unit 7 Book 1, and the American dream in the Unit 4 Book 1. However, things and people's ideas will change and improve as time goes by, including the forms of the mother's responsibility and the American dream. The other reason of the disappointment is some traditional

festivals, such as the Thanksgiving and the Christmas Day, which are mentioned so many times in the textbooks, so students and teachers find that it is not novel or interesting to learn them. However, the author of this study thinks that it is inevitable for the passages to cover the most common things and behaviors influenced by mode of thought that is relatively stable in one nation. Given that, the culture with a big "C" cannot be cancelled at all, but some changes are needed.

(3) Whether to present a realistic picture (Item 3; $p=0.369>0.05$).

Table 5-3
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's Third Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 28	57.20	42.00	10	5.196	117.00	12	42	127	95	10
TQ 23	6.40	4.00	2	5.594	13.00	2	4	9	15	2

Analyzing the cultural content by theme is probably the most appropriate means of analyzing the cultural content in textbooks. This series of textbooks are divided into different units owing to the different topics such as love, health, romance, education, animals, and environment. And the writers of all the passages are foreigners, which can guarantee the authenticity of the passages to some extent.

However, the data from the Table 5-3 do not support the author's analysis in Chapter 4. Only 36.71% (105) of students and 53.13% (17) of teachers who deem that the cultural content in the textbooks presents a realistic

picture, while a lot of subjects give "neutral" answers, which means a large number of students and teachers do not know whether the cultural content in the textbooks present a realistic picture or not. A student states his opinion about this issue in the open-ended question: "the passages should reflect the western culture more authentically and should not add any official view to it". This is another aspect that should be paid attention to in the compiling the fifth edition textbooks.

(4) Whether to be free from (or questioning) ideological tendencies (Item 4; $p=0.001<0.050$).

Table 5-4
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's Fourth Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 29	57.20	29.00	7	5.997	130.00	8	29	137	105	7
TQ 24	6.40	5.00	2	5.128	12.00	2	2	9	14	5

This criterion does not seem to fit well to the development situation in the today's whole world. However, it was put forward by Huhn in 1978, so it is reasonable for this criterion's appearance. The political influences on education still cannot be ignored. Education is an efficient way to propagate a certain world view, no matter through textbooks as well as by other means. Simply ignoring politics is always a potential choice for textbook editors in China, but ideology is not the most important difference between any two countries in present society. In this series of textbooks, no passages refer to the ideological differences. The textural materials show the good merits of English-speaking societies and also reflect some social problems that really do exist.

As shown in Table 5-4, 39.16% (112) of students and 59.38% (19) of teachers think that the cultural content is free from ideological tendencies. The result of the Chi-Square Tests: $p=0.001<0.05$ means a statistical significance exists between students and teachers' opinions. More students cannot give a definite decision on this question, and the proportion reaches up to 48%. Therefore, teachers should help students to realize that the authenticable reflection or description of the foreign societies is a good way to understand the foreign culture. The culture is learnt with the aim to know of other peoples, to understand and communicate with them.

(5) Whether to present phenomena in context rather than isolated facts. (Item5: $p=0.077>0.05$)

Table 5-5
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's Fifth Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	Sd	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 30	57.20	69.00	9	4.002	85.00	21	69	94	93	9
TQ 25	6.40	4.00	4	6.066	16.00	4	8	4	16	0

35.66% (102) of students and 50% (16) of teachers deem that the textbooks present phenomena in context

rather than isolated facts. The chosen passages present the topic of each unit most through the accumulation

of details. Although the whole cultural content can be considered to be comprehensiveness, it fails to present culture in a coherent way. Moreover, the editors did not give the sources of the chosen materials clearly so that the users can only guess the source of some passages. On

the whole, the cultural content in this series of textbooks is not presented in context but in isolated facts, which should be improved in the following edition.

(6) Whether to explicitly relate historical material to contemporary society (Item 6; $p=0.137>0.05$)

Table 5-6
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's Sixth Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 31	57.20	62.00	7	4.492	100.00	16	62	94	107	7
TQ 26	6.40	4.00	2	6.107	15.00	3	4	6	17	2

Compared with the negative opinions from 27.27% (78) of student, 39.86% (114) of the students thought that the textbooks explicitly relate historical material to the contemporary society. The situation of teacher's replies is that 21.88% (7) of them gave the answer in the negative, while 59.38% (19) of them agreed with the statement. Because this series of textbooks were published in 2002,

it seems that the passages lack to reflect the current issues with historical material. However, some problems mentioned in the passages are still hot topics at present time, such as the social crime, protection of plants and animals and environment.

(7) Whether to make it clear how personalities are products of their age (Item 7, $p=0.519>0.05$)

Table 5-7
Questionnaire Results on Huhn's Seventh Criterion

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
SQ 32	57.20	43.00	11	4.955	104.00	13	43	104	115	11
TQ 27	6.40	4.00	2	5.319	13.00	3	4	8	15	2

On this issue, 44.06% (126) of students and 53.13% (17) of teachers admitted that the cultural content in the textbooks make clear of how personalities are products of their age. In the passages, the personalities are closely related the age in which the characters live. For example, in "writing for myself" (unit 1, Book1), the hero's characteristic is the products of their age to seek freedom is the characteristics of American; in "A Fable of the Lazy Teenager" (unit 8, Book 1), Kevin's personality is also the product of his Age in which the laziness and the incompetence of teenagers is a big problem for American nowadays, etc. All of these proved that the statement is tenable.

After discussing the treatment of the cultural content in the chosen textbooks by Huhn's criteria, some conclusions can be obtained:

(a). No big statistical significance exists between the students and teachers' opinions, except on the question of the ideological influence. The reason may be the different experiences of work and life make the understandings of ideological are different.

(b). Compared with students, teachers showed more positive attitudes to the treatment of the cultural content.

(c). There are a large number of subjects, including students and teachers, could not make a definite answer in this aspect: the proportion of students' choice of "neutral" reaches up to 33%—48%, and the proportion of teachers' choice also reaches up to 13%—34%.

(d). Although the neutral answers make up a high proportion, the definite attitudes of the treatment of the cultural content achieved the superiority.

The basic satisfactions of the textbooks from the

students and teachers are not the aim of the textbooks editors, so improvements are still needed.

5. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Due to the data and analyses of the subjects' attitudes on the treatment of the cultural content in *CE (New)*, some necessary changes must be made in textbooks.

First, more universal and practical cultural components should be included in a systematic way, and the proportion of interpersonal and conventional culture should be increased. And the culture teaching should be conducted from the superficial level to the deep level gradually, and each culture phenomenon should be explained thoroughly with its deep reason to avoid learners' confused or wrong understandings. Moreover, special attention should be given to some cultural factors regarded as the cause of intercultural communication failure in social and individual contact.

Second, the style of texts should be more varied and plentiful. In order to meet the need of the students' requirements and the current social development, more practical writings should be added in the textbooks, so the students' requirements could be meted and their ICC will be greatly strengthened by familiarizing with them.

Third, the proportion of the international cultures and the contrasts among different cultures should be increased. The learners' cultural awareness can be enhanced through contrasting similarities and differences among the native culture, the target culture, and the international cultures. This part is a deficiency in *CE (New)*.

Fourth, the notes should contain more cultural messages, as well as the implying philosophy and psychology. The explanations and paraphrases to some difficult words, phrases and idioms only on the surface are not sufficient. The cultural components will be illustrated in a detailed way and help students to understand the texts.

Fifth, a special column of exercises aiming to improve students' cultural competence both in oral and written forms should be added in textbooks. In oral practice, students could be involved in group discussion and role-playing. In written practice, exercises could be designed in the form of multiple choice, true-false statement or question-and-answer.

Sixth, the theme-related websites should be provided for learners to find more culture knowledge by themselves. The content may be well beyond that contained in one unit and the sharing of the information is a great help for students to hold a broader view of some culture phenomena.

Seventh, although the research scope of the present study is delimited to the target culture, Chinese culture should not be ignored. How to introduce and express one's native culture in other languages is an important goal of the language education. Furthermore, the Chinese culture is the root of the Chinese people. However, results in the research show that Chinese culture is mostly ignored in the first four volumes of *CE (New)*, which is

no good for developing students' all-round capability. And some comparisons between the native culture and the target culture should be included in textbooks for students to comprehend the cultures in an all-around way and more thoroughly.

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