

Cultural Content in EFL Listening and Speaking Textbooks for Chinese University Students

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Abstract

The aim of this article was to report the results of a textbooks analysis in an attempt to identify which type of culture and what kind of culture were introduced in Chinese EFL textbooks for the university level. Four teachers' manuals of EFL College English textbooks for Chinese non-English major students were investigated. The analysis revealed that more than half of the cultural content was unidentifiable. Among identified cultural content, the textbooks were dominated by target cultural content while international target culture and source cultural content contained a very small percentage. It was also found out that among the 19 cultural themes under Big "C" and little "c" culture, the predominant theme was little "c" of "values" and the absent themes were common little "c" themes (i.e. "food", "holidays", "hobbies and "body language"). Such lack of source information and imbalanced selection in NHCE of cultural themes might not be sufficient to develop Chinese non-English major students' ICC and thus might cause difficulties to students when they take part in intercultural communication. This study also makes suggestions on how culture can be represented in university level Chinese textbooks to promote students' ICC.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT), Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Cultural content, Big "C" culture, Little "c" culture

1. Introduction

The new status of English as an international language (EIL) or lingua franca requires scholars, language professionals, and practitioners to reconsider the important role of culture in English language class (Brown, 2000; Byrnes, 2010; Kramsch, 1993). This new role of English, however, requires a more complex approach than when English had the previous status of ESL/EFL. Hamiloğlu and Mendi (2010: 16) suggested that incorporating culture in English language class needs to emphasize “the social functions of a target language and make learners inter-culturally sensitive”. The ultimate goal of English language teaching (ELT) then has been shifted from communicative competence, which empowers learners to use English appropriately in terms of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics (Council of Europe, 2001 cited in Gu *et al*, 2012), to Intercultural Communicative Competence (hereafter ICC) which refers to “one’s awareness on others’ cultures as well as his /her own culture” (Hamiloğlu and Mendi 2010: 16). Consequently, the issue arises as to which type of culture and what kind of culture should be taught in the language classroom.

In China, ICC is considered one of the ultimate goals for preparing Chinese students to take part effectively in intercultural communication in the future; therefore the latest College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) stipulates that non-English-major students must possess ICC. However, the study conducted by Xiao and Petraki (2007) revealed that Chinese students’ ICC was at a fairly low level and that they encountered many difficulties interacting with students from other cultures. The researchers argued that such difficulties could be mainly attributed by the insufficient intercultural knowledge. Similarly, Wang (2007) found out in her survey that Chinese non-English major students from eight universities had a dissatisfactory level of ICC. There are several factors contributing to students’ success in language learning, one of which is textbooks.

Textbooks play an important role in ELT classroom. Teachers use textbooks for planning and giving lessons and students rely on them for linguistic content and models (Cunningsworth, 1995). Moreover, textbooks provide the core material for a course, serving as the basis for language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom (Tomlinson, 1998). Given that language and culture are intertwined, EFL textbooks invariably carry directly or indirectly a set of cultural values referred to in the literature as the “hidden curriculum” (Cunningsworth, 1995; Hinkel, 1999). The ‘hidden curriculum’, which is often stronger than the official curriculum will, after students are exposed at length to it, affect students’ cultural awareness, perceptions and knowledge (Cunningsworth, 1995).

In light of the significant influence of teaching materials on students’ cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and linguistic ability, and Chinese students’ poor intercultural knowledge, the researcher has a hypothesis that there might be some correlation between them; therefore, the aim of the current study was to examine which type of culture and what kind of culture were introduced in Chinese EFL textbooks for the university level. The hope was to provide valuable insight into current ELT from the standpoint of what cultural content should be imparted via the resource of textbooks with the aim of promoting Chinese students’ ICC. It is also expected to offer some advice for cultural teaching and learning in the EFL classroom.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Culture, Language and ELT*

Culture is a complex and broad concept to define. According to Hinkel (1999), it refers to areas of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviors, and activities. Brown (2000: 177) defines culture as “the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time”; while Brooks (1975: 20) refers to culture as “everything in human life and the best of everything in human life”.

Information, thoughts and feelings are conveyed by language in a language community or culture (Brown, 2000). Therefore, for humans, language is the most important means of communication (Wilkins, 1978; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Fantini (1995) pointed out the symbiotic relationship between language and culture since language affects and reflects culture and vice-versa. Echoing Fantini, Brown (2000: 177) wrote “a language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” In other words, language is regarded as a means by which people communicate to and interact with others, which in turn is responsible for cultural development.

In light of the inseparable relationship between language and culture, more and more scholars and educators have emphasized the significant role of culture in language teaching and learning. For instance, McKay (2002) noted that the integration of cultural components into language teaching can heighten the motivation language class. Nault (2006) called for scholars, language educators and practitioners to reconsider the status quo of cultures and their representation for the development of English as an International Language (EIL). He advised that English educators must be aware of other target culture than only British and American culture. Additionally, ELT specialists should select and design teaching curricular using international source materials.

2.2 *Sources of Culture*

Regarding culture-related teaching materials and textbooks in English classroom, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) provide a novel look at the sources of cultural information. They classified the sources of cultural information into source culture (learner’s own culture), target culture (any English-speaking countries where English is spoken as a first language), and international target culture (English-speaking or non-speaking English counties around the world where English is not used as a first language).

The reason for introducing source cultural content in ELT textbooks is to cultivate learners’ knowledge of their own culture. Students will have a chance to learn about topics and vocabularies which are related to their native background in English so that they can interact with people from different cultural backgrounds McKay (2000). Target cultural knowledge has long been a main component in the ELT classroom. The rationale for integrating target culture into English classroom lies in firstly that learning a target culture will enhance student motivation and develop their attitudes toward language learning (McKay, 2002). Secondly the author’s consideration of using target culture in the classroom makes it possible for users from

different societies to make best use of the same materials in both EFL and ESL contexts. As well, since it is difficult for native English speaking ELT textbook writers to source cultural data other than from their own culture, they should look to the target culture for that information (Alptekin, 1993).

However, due to a paradigm shift from ESL/EFL to EIL, cultures other than the target ones should receive equal attention in ELT textbooks (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). McKay (2000) proposed the three benefits of international target culture in materials: firstly they show the pragmatics when non-native English speakers communicate with the target culture, they should be able to use their own notions of what is appropriate, secondly it shows the way English can be used effectively in the international environment, and finally, for English to truly be the “lingua franca” of today, there must be a choice for non-native English speakers to reflect cultural norms of culture other than native-English-speaking cultures.

2.3 Themes of Culture

Culture can be in general divided into two types: Big “C” culture and little “c” culture (Lee 2009; Peterson, 2004). Lee (2009: 78) refers to Big “C” culture as “the culture which represents a set of facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals and customs of a target speech society.” For Peterson (2004), the culture relating to grand themes, is classified under Big “C” culture which includes the following themes such as geography, architecture, classical music, literature, political issues, society’s norms, legal foundation, core values, history, and cognitive processes.

Regarding little “c” culture, it involves the routine aspects of life and encompasses everything as a total way of life. For Lee (2009: 78) this type of culture is “the invisible and deeper sense of a target culture” including attitudes or beliefs and assumptions. Peterson (2004) defines little “c” culture as the culture focusing on common or minor themes. It includes themes such as opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes, gestures, body posture, use of space, clothing styles, food, hobbies, popular music, and popular issues, and certain knowledge (trivia, facts).

Wintergerst and Mcveigh (2010) maintained that students possessing both big “C” and little “c” culture can effectively take part in intercultural settings. While the domain of big “C” culture (e.g. arts, history, geography, education, business, etc.) is for the highly educated, little “c” cultural knowledge is essential for intercultural communication because it affects ways of thinking, behaving and using a language. The socio-cultural values, norms, beliefs and assumptions entailed in small “c” culture assists members of a particular culture to use “appropriate and polite” language within the target society. However, it can also possibly result in, as Lee (2009) put it “pragmatic failure” when attempting to communicate with other cultural groups. Therefore, if EFL learners know about small “c” culture in the target culture, they will better comprehend how those in that culture communicate with each other.

Corresponding with the concepts of big “C” and little “c” culture, many cultural frameworks regarding specific aspects of cultural learning in EFL classroom were proposed in relevant research. Chen (2004), for example, carried out a survey to examine Chinese students’ attitudes towards cultural themes in EFL classroom. In his study, Chen proposed a cultural framework

on the model conceptualized by Lessard-Clouston (1996). Chen's framework includes seven themes under Big "C" (music, social norms, education, economy, politics, history and geography and nine themes under little "c" (daily routine, lifestyle, holiday, food, gesture, weather, greeting, customs and values). Based on Paige *et al.* (1999)'s model of cultural-specific aspect of culture learning, Lee (2009) designed a set of concrete themes for examination of how culture was taught in Korean EFL textbooks. Lee's framework consisted of 22 themes for Big "C" for example arts, agriculture, education, sports, and politics and 26 themes for little "c" such as freedom, materialism, informality, fairness, and competition. Compared to the previous cultural framework of Chen (2004), Lee (2009)'s framework is more comprehensive and detailed to present the material from intercultural, sociological, ethnographic and sociolinguistic perspectives. However, Lee (2009)'s framework is too tedious which does not apply to the current textbook analysis very well. Having considered the respective merits and weakness of both cultural frameworks above, the researcher used only 19 cultural themes (12 themes for Big "C" and 7 themes for little "c" culture) as the cultural framework of current study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Materials

The materials analyzed in this study were a series of Chinese College English textbooks. With the permission of Education Ministry in China, several series of College English books were compiled by local publishers only for Chinese non-English-major students in College English programs. Examples are *New Horizon College English*, *21st Century College English*, and *Experiencing English*. The College English program is taught over two years or four semesters. For the first year, Listening and Speaking 1-2 and Reading and Writing 1-2 are used; and for the second year Listening and Speaking 3-4 and Reading and Writing 3-4 are used. For the current study, eight books (four students' books and four teachers' manuals) of *Listening and Speaking 1-4 (Second Edition) of New Horizon College English* (hereafter NHCE) published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press were selected for the study because, among all the series, they are widely used in Chinese colleges and universities. Also, the latest College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) have given top priority to the students' ability of listening and speaking and ICC.

NHCE contains a total of 40 units. In the students' books, each unit is made up of four components: (1) Focus: showing the main ideas and key points of each unit. (2) Words aids: explaining the meanings of new words. (3) Activities: containing activities for listening and speaking. (4) Exercises: providing questions for listening and speaking activities. In the teacher's manual, each unit consists of five parts: (1) Audio Scripts: providing listening scripts for listening activity. (2) Notes for Teachers: providing teachers further information and explanation about language points and activities. (3) Culture Notes: introducing cultural information and expressions about a certain situation. (4) Key to answer: providing the answer to exercises for listening and speaking activities. (5) Key for reference: providing extra information and explanation for the answer.

Based on the aforementioned description of the students' books and the teacher's manuals, the students' books of NHCE were used only as a reference while all five components in the teachers' manuals formed the core materials for the analysis. This is because the students' books were not as informative as the teachers.

3.2 Analysis

In this study, the cultural content in NHCE was analyzed from two perspectives. Based on Cortazzi and Jin (1999)'s framework regarding cultural content for English materials and textbooks, the first perspective concentrated on the representation of sources of culture (target, international target, and source culture) in the textbooks. However, there was a slight problem with adapting Cortazzi and Jin (1999)'s framework in the actual analysis because some cultural content in the textbooks referring to Big "C" and little "c" culture had no reference to any specific countries. For this reason, the researcher proposed a new category which was "unidentified sources of culture" to cover all cultural content found in the textbooks. The second perspective is concerned with the two notions of culture i.e. Big "C" and little "c" culture. For this, 19 themes was designed for examining specific aspects of culture under the Big "C" and little "c" culture, which based on Chen (2004) and Lee (2009) 's concepts on the cultural themes under Big "C" and little "c". The 19 themes referring to the Big "C" and little "c" culture are as follow:

1. **Big "C" culture (12 themes):** Politic, Economy, History, Geography, Literature/Art, Social norms, Education, Architecture, Sports, Music, Movie, and Science.
2. **Little "c" culture category (7 themes):** Food, Holiday, lifestyles, Customs, Values, Hobbies and Gestures/ body language.

Table 1 delineates the information about numbers of units of analysis on culture-related content in the four sections (Audio scripts, Notes for teachers, Cultural notes and Key for reference).

Table 1. Numbers of units of analysis on culture-related content/total units

Book	Audio Scripts	Note for Teachers	Cultural Notes	Key for Reference
Book 1	38/50	12/30	10/10	N/A
Book 2	38/50	7/40	N/A	N/A
Book 3	56/60	0/30	10/10	20/20
Book 4	48/60	13/30	N/A	10/10
Total	180/220	32/130	20/20	30/30
Grand total	262/400			

Note: N/A= Not presented in the textbooks

In total, the textbooks contained 400 units. These 400 units were analyzed for cultural content in terms of target, international target, and source culture as well as Big "C" and little "c". Some units had no reference to a particular cultural aspect, therefore they were not analyzed. As a result, there were only 262 units of analysis containing certain cultural elements. All 262 units were further categorized as target, international target, source culture as well as unidentified source of culture. They were then subcategorized into Big "C" or little "c" culture.

For distinguishing the themes under Big “C” and little “c” culture”, each section of cultural content was coded with the corresponding cultural theme. In this regard, the dictionary (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 6th Edition) was consulted for reference to identify the definitions of cultural themes. To illustrate, the unit of analysis about the history of American slavery was classified as Big “C” under target culture because the history of American slavery belongs to the Big “C” domain and obviously indicated its origin. By contrast, the cultural messages about online course, for instance, was classified as Big “C” under the unidentified sources of culture because it did not connect with any specific country.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Sources of Culture

It can be seen from Table 1 that more than half of the units (262 out of 400) contained cultural content. This preliminary analysis was further examined to find out about the sources of culture found in NHCE, which is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of culture-related content in NHCE

Book	Target culture		International target culture		Source culture		Unidentified sources of culture	
	Big “C”	little “c”	Big “C”	little “c”	Big “C”	little “c”	Big “C”	little “c”
Book 1	14	15	0	0	0	0	13	18
Book 2	8	17	1	3	0	2	2	15
Book 3	20	4	3	1	2	1	16	45
Book 4	13	4	1	1	1	0	9	43
Total	55	40	5	5	3	3	40	121
	95		10		6		161	
Total percentage	20.2%	14.7%	1.85%	1.85%	1.1%	1.1%	14.7%	44.5%
	34.9%		3.7%		2.2%		59.2%	

Table 2 shows two main sources of culture i.e. those which were identifiable (target, international target, and source culture) and those unidentifiable. It was found that the unidentified source of culture accounted for the largest proportion (59.2%) of the total while the source culture represented the lowest percentage of cultural content (2.2%). Under the identified cultural content, target culture occupied the largest percentage (34.9%), and the international target culture only represented 3.7% of all cultural sources. Interestingly, Book 1 contained only target cultural content and unidentified sources of culture. In short, the content of NHCE teachers’ manuals was mainly related to target culture and unidentified sources of culture.

4.2 Themes of Culture

The 262 units of analysis were further analyzed for two cultural themes under Big “C” and little “c”. As some units of analysis contained more than one theme, the total occurrences were 272. Figure 1 shows the frequency of occurrences of 19 cultural themes found in NHCE. (“geography”, “food”, “holidays”, “science” and “history”)

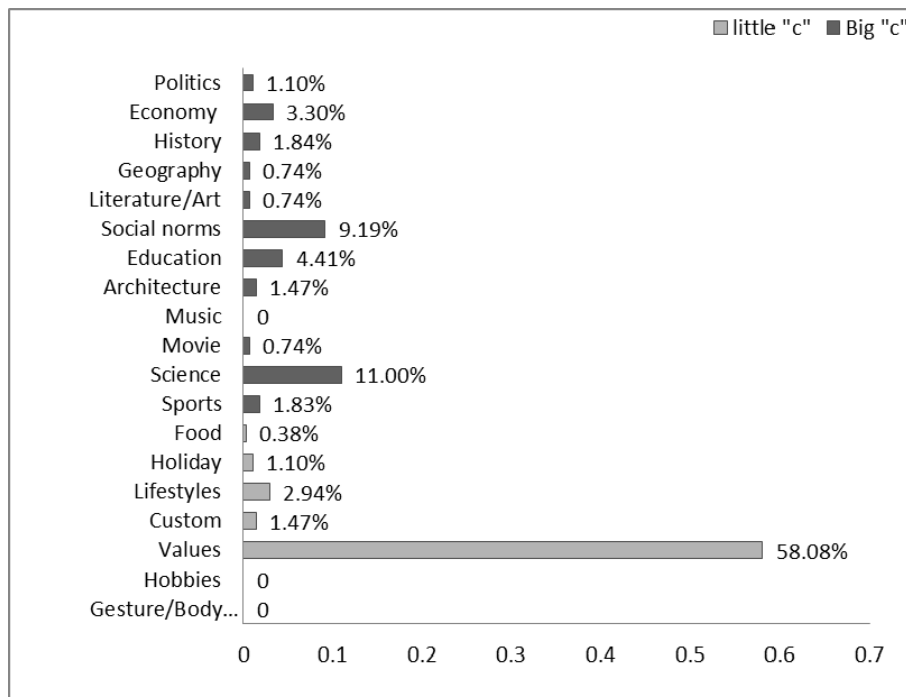


Figure 1. Frequency of cultural themes in NHCE

As revealed in Figure 1, of the 19 cultural themes, the top three most frequent themes in NHCE were one theme under little “c” and two themes under Big “C” culture. More specifically, more than half (58.08%) of the total themes was the little “c” theme of “values”, followed by the Big “C” theme of “science” (11.00%) and the Big “C” theme of “social norms” (9.19%). Surprisingly, there was the absence of the popular little “c” culture under “hobbies”, “gestures/body language” and under the Big “C” theme of “music”. Apparently, “values” in the little “c” domain overwhelmingly dominated the cultural content. “Values” included issues such as attitudes to lifestyle (for example an American person talking about what is important in life), and social prejudice (people’s differing attitudes towards discrimination based on race and against blue-collar workers).

To conclude, regarding the sources of culture, unidentified sources of culture and target culture were the primary focus in NHCE, while source culture and international target culture were ignored, although not completely. For types of culture, among the 19 themes, the little “c” culture of “values” dominated other cultural themes.

The reason that almost 60% of cultural content was unidentifiable is probably because the textbook authors’ main purpose was to introduce cultural information in order to enhance students’ listening and speaking abilities rather than developing their intercultural skills in an international context. However, more than half of the total units of analysis were related to the target culture. This finding is in agreement with the investigation conducted by Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2012) who examined seven studies analyzing 61 EFL textbooks used in China (Wu, 2010; Jiang, 2010; Xiao, 2010; Yuen, 2011), Japan (Matsuda, 2002; Yamanaka, 2006) and Korean (Lee, 2009). It was found that all the 61 analyzed EFL textbooks heavily emphasized the cultures of English-speaking countries or the target culture.

It can be argued from the findings above that the low percentage of source and international target culture in NHCE might not be sufficient for the development of Chinese students' ability to mediate in intercultural settings, as stipulated by College English Curriculum Requirements (2007). For example, they learn the English names of Western festivals and the way of celebrating them, but they are not taught to talk about their own festivals in English. Thus, the students are equipped with cultural knowledge of mainly English-speaking countries.

According to the findings above, two striking findings are the predominance of little “c” cultural theme of “values” and the absence of common little “c” themes (i.e. “food”, “holidays”, “hobbies and “body language”). Based on Cunningsworth’s (1995) notion of the “hidden curriculum”, it can be implied from the predominance of “values” that NHCE was designed to instill moral values to shape the character of students rather than helping develop the students’ ICC. Although there was little information regarding the origin of the examples of “values”, it is worth mentioning that those topics of values reflected in the textbooks were often closely related to Chinese Confucian ethics and teaching. For example, the section on giving and sacrifice and putting others’ needs before one’s own reflected Confucianism which believes that one should give up his or her life, if necessary, for the moral values of *ren* (referring to a duty of a humaneness for other people) and *yi* (referring to the moral righteousness to do good thing).

The deficiency of the other common little “c” themes might be one reason why Chinese students have a low competence of intercultural interaction. In fact, little “c” culture plays a more significant role in daily communication across cultural lines than Big “C” culture because students need to have the ability to communicate about their daily way of life in order to be successful in intercultural communication (Wintergerst & Mcveigh, 2010).

5. Conclusion

This present study evaluated 4 teachers’ manuals of EFL College English textbooks for Chinese non-English major students to investigate which culture and what kind of culture were presented in Chinese EFL College English textbooks. The analysis revealed that more than half of the cultural content was unidentifiable. Among identified cultural content, the textbooks were dominated by target cultural content while international target culture and source cultural content contained a very small percentage. It was also found out that among the 19 cultural themes under Big “C” and little “c” culture, the predominant theme was little “c” of “values” and the absent themes were common little “c” themes (i.e. “food”, “holidays”, “hobbies and “body language”). Such lack of source information and imbalanced selection in NHCE of cultural themes might not be sufficient to develop non-English major students’ ICC and thus might cause difficulties to students when they take part in intercultural communication.

6. Pedagogical Implications

On the basis of the research findings, the study suggests that changes to NHCE textbooks are required if ICC is the ultimate goal of ELT. In light of globalization and opportunities for Chinese students to travel, study, do business and work abroad, EFL textbooks in China should

pay more attention to enhancing students' international understanding. Therefore the materials should be designed to include not only target culture but also international target culture as well as source culture. Furthermore, in light of the imbalanced selection of cultural themes especially the little "c", it is suggested that the textbooks should involve a variety of materials related to little "c" cultural topics such as "food", "hobbies", "holidays" and "customs".

Besides, as maintained by Cunningsworth (1995), teacher's manuals are an effective supplementary source of information in classroom and they are indispensable for teaching due to the function of guiding the whole class. However, most of the notes in NHCE teachers' books only provide tips on how to carry out classroom activities or explain language points while cultural information is rarely mentioned. In light of this, it is advised that the teachers' books should include extensive cultural information as well as some meaningful advice to teachers on how to teach culture. Additionally, to raise students' awareness of the diversity of different world cultures, there should be a reference to the source of culture.

Finally, student's cultural knowledge and awareness can be developed in other ways than just through exposure to NHCE texts. For example, there could be in-class activities (e.g. video, dialogue, drama games, dance, songs, films and role plays), and out-of-class activities such as a direct contact to the target language society (Altay, 2005). These activities can motivate students to learn about various cultures in different countries and result in more effective ICC.

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