A Study on the Evaluation of Culture Contents in Intensive Reading Textbooks for English Majors

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ABSTRACT. *Language teaching materials and culture are closely related to each other. This study constructs a corpus of 1 to 4 volumes of Contemporary College English for English majors. The corpus online retrieval software "Cncorpus" is used to summarize the word frequency table and subject word list in order to investigate the characteristics of teaching materials in the selection and presentation of social and cultural knowledge. This paper discusses the possible influence of cultural phenomena on the construction of learner's cultural system and the potential of language learning significance, and probes into the influence of Contemporary College English on the teaching and cross-cultural communication of English majors in China. It is found that the most prominent problems are the dominance of British and American culture, the lack of attention to local Chinese culture, and the distortion and imbalance in the culture of indistinct nationality. The study has certain significance and value for guiding teachers to teach, students to carry out cross-cultural communication, the editor to improve the compilation of teaching materials and the education department to formulate the policy of reasonable evaluation of teaching materials.*

1. Introduction

Language teaching materials are an important carrier for the dissemination of national civilization, history and culture. With the deepening of globalization, cultural exchanges between countries in the world are becoming unprecedentedly frequent. Therefore, the design of college textbooks for English majors should be culturally oriented.

The college English textbooks contain many elements, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, culture contents and so forth. Among these language elements, culture contents are mainly represented by the meaning of words in the context. Therefore, this paper will build a corpus of *Contemporary College English*, an English textbook for English majors, using macro-frequency-driven and micro-context co-occurrence, through the use of word frequency table and subject word list to evaluate the cultural contents. This paper discusses the possible influence of cultural phenomena on the construction of learners' language and cultural system, language system and the potential of language learning significance, and probes into the influence of *Contemporary College English* teaching materials on the teaching and cultural dissemination of college English majors in China.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the imbalance and distortion in the selection and presentation of social cultural knowledge by investigating the cultural content of Contemporary College English. It also tries to explore the significance of cultural content setting in teaching materials to professors, students, textbook writers, editors and administrative departments, so as to make English teaching materials better serve China's "soft power" and the construction of intercultural competence.

2. Literature Review

It was not until the end of the 19th century that people realized the importance of culture in foreign language teaching. The development of bilingual cultural education in the United States encourages Americans to understand the cultural background of themselves and others. Since the 1950s, professional organizations have been supporting and encouraging cultural education in foreign language teaching, compiling textbooks and incorporating culture contents into the curriculum. In the 1970s, language teachers began to realize that language is deeply rooted in culture and cannot be separated from culture. Starting from the 20th century, foreign language

teaching in the United States regarded international communication as a means of understanding the universality of interpersonal relationships and local culture.

In fact, scholars from non-English-speaking countries in the world are also aware of the importance of language textbooks in cultural communication. However, English textbooks in most countries, almost without exception, exist the problem of cultural allocation. Scholars from some eastern Asian countries have carried out extensive research on this issue.

China has the largest number of English learners in the world, and the English learning resources are mainly textbooks used in classroom teaching environment at present. Many scholars in China have done textual analysis and research on the content of Chinese culture in the current English textbooks.

Li C, Li A (2003) argue that the formation of Chinese cultural aphasia is closely related to Chinese culture in College English textbooks. They compared the culture contents in three sets of influential college English textbooks and found that they contained very little content about Chinese culture. This kind of practice is prominent in British and American culture. It is suggested that college English textbooks should be added to Chinese culture.

After that, some scholars have selected more abundant teaching materials to carry on statistical analysis to the cultural content in teaching materials. Liu (2013) examined the compilation of 51 textbook themes. The results show that there are problems that can't be ignored in the cultural choice and allocation of 10 sets of textbooks. The most prominent of English textbook is the strength of American and British culture and the lack of sufficient attention to Chinese culture. This is not only conducive to the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence, but also undermining China to enhance its cultural soft power.

Some scholars have supplemented the study of English textbooks from the perspective of textbook analysis and extended the study of English textbooks to the level of teaching materials for English majors. Based on the Cunningsworth(2002)evaluation framework, Hu (2017) conducted an overall impression evaluation and in-depth evaluation of *Contemporary College English* (second edition). First of all, this paper analyzes the basic task division of each volume, and then analyzes the structure and content setting of each unit. It is found that on the whole, this series of teaching materials go step by step and pay attention to the rationality of students' knowledge structure as well as the all-round development of various language skills, the cultivation of students' thinking ability and innovative ability, which is basically in line with the syllabus for English majors in colleges and universities. However, the textbook also needs to be improved in some places, such as the application of genre articles and articles close to the reality of college students' life, lack of the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication competence.

3. Research Design

3.1 Materials

This study takes *Contemporary College English* (second Edition) (1-4 volumes) as the research materials to explore the phenomenon of the imbalance culture in teaching materials for English majors. The editor-in-chief is Yang Limin published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. *Contemporary College English* is consisted of 6 volumes (Book1 to Book6). Generally speaking, Book1 to Book4 are used for the Comprehensive English Course and Book5 to Book6 are used in the Advanced English Course. This paper mainly examines Book1 to Book4 (second edition). Every volume contains 16 units, except from unit 7 and unit 14 which are Inter-lesson exercise without texts. In each unit, there are 2 texts: Text A and Text B usually share the same themes. This paper only selects Text A. In this case, there are total 56 texts investigated in this study.

3.2 Instruments

The corpus online retrieval software "Cncorpus" is used to summarize the word frequency table and keywords list. Then the linguistic phenomenon is judged by extracting and observing its presentation frequency and context concordance. This method can deal with a large number of texts and discourse analysis, obtains a lot of evidence and will discover previously unknown phenomena, and explore the implied theories or ideas clearly through the form of language (He 2009).

3.3 Procedures

This study is divided into three stages. First of all, the title of each article is checked. In this process, some titles can directly display the theme, such as *Economic Growth Is a Path to Perdition, Not Prosperity*. Secondly, the word frequency table and subject word table of each text are generated. The word frequency table can show the main content of the text to a certain extent. For example, some high frequency words of *Your College Years* are: college (17), young (15), parents (9), knowledge (10), life (7), values (6). Although some words appear frequently, they do not necessarily have the real keyness, such as article "the". It is the key to observe whether the high frequency of a word is common or individual. Therefore, this study only selects some meaningful keywords to make the table for research and discussion. The function of the keyword tables can link prominence linguistic form, frequency and theme obtained from the corpus to the original research proposition to the greatest extent. In the step of investigating the subject words, this study adopts the self-built *Contemporary College English* (Second Edition) (1-4 volumes) corpus. Taking the keyword retrieval statistics of Your College Years in the first unit of Book3 as an example, results are shown in table 1.

Table 1 Keywords Retrieval Statistical Table of Your College Years (Key Excerpts)

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness
college	17	0.9023
young	15	0.7962
students	13	0.69
parent	9	0.4777
knowledge	7	0.3715
life	7	0.3715
way	7	0.3715
world	7	0.3715
identity	6	0.3185
values	6	0.3185
adults	5	0.2654
independence	5	0.2654
changes	4	0.2123
growth	4	0.2123
relationship	4	0.2123
beliefs	3	0.1592
country	3	0.1592
dependence	3	0.1592
different	3	0.1592
environment	3	0.1592
experience	3	0.1592
learn	3	0.1592
American	2	0.1062
culture	2	0.1062

From the text title *Your College Years*, it is hard to determine the origin of the culture. The researcher will look at the list of keywords. "College" is the most frequently used keyword, and also the word that makes up the title of the text. Therefore, it shows the most prominent relevance to the theme "college life". The third-most frequent word "student" shows that college students are the main target group of this text. During this process, it is easy to see that the theme students' college life is a worldwide experience for college students all over the world. In view of this situation, there are some keywords that can also explain the general topic of human, such as the sixth to the tenth keywords "knowledge", "life", "way", "world", "identity" and "value". Although these words' frequencies are low, their themes are significant. This is because the values and ways of receiving knowledge are closely related to the content of college students' life around the world, which means that they are closely related to the topic. Similarly, the twelfth "independence" to the twenty-second "learn" is also about the qualities or experiences of these college students.

Among the top ten thematic words, there are no obvious words with national attributes. These words are basically neutral, but they are closely related to the theme of the article. By looking at words other than the top ten, such as American, it can be found that the text is talking about college life from the life of American college

students as well as the impact of college life on the world outlook, outlook on life, and values of college students who have just completed the transformation from a minor dependent on their parents to a more independent adult. If the theme of the text is still uncertain, the co-occurrence function of context will be used to carry out a more detailed contextual analysis.

Finally, the linguistic and cultural theory of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 2007) is used to explain the characteristics and cultural phenomena of textbooks. This paper discusses the possible influence of cultural phenomena on the construction of learners' language and cultural system, language system and the meaning potential of language learning. It also discusses the influence of college English textbooks on the teaching and cultural dissemination of English majors in China.

5. Results and Discussion

After searching, analyzing and classifying the corpus discourses of *Contemporary College English*, the details of the specific cultural selection and allocation of this set of textbooks are shown in table 2.

Table 2 Culture Configuration of Contemporary College English Books

Culture Type		Frequency (n=56)	Proportion
From Inner Circle Countries	British, America	42	75%
	Canada, Australia, New Zealand	1	1.8%
From Outer Circle Countries		1	1.8%
From Expanding Circle Countries	China	1	1.8%
	Other Countries	5	8.9%
Cultural Comparison		1	1.8%
Common Culture		2	3.6%
Culture of Indistinct Nationality		3	5.4%

5.1 The Dominance of the British and American Culture

From volume 1 to volume 4, the majority of articles reflect the culture of British and America. The data in table 4-1 shows that there is a common phenomenon that this kind of text accounts for 75% of the corpus. However, the texts of culture of Canada, Australia and New Zealand accounts for only 1%, although they are also the culture of the inner circle countries like America and British. The overall proportion of culture of in the outer circle is also the lowest, only 1%, it can be said that it is tiny. As for culture of the expanding circle countries, this kind of culture texts accounts for about 10.7% of the whole corpus. Among them, Chinese texts accounts for about 1.8%, and texts of other countries involve a wide range of countries, including France, Iceland, Holland, Russia, Greece, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, Finland and other countries. The relevant texts account for about 8.9%.

5.2 The Gap of the Localization of Chinese Culture

There are few texts analyzing Chinese culture in *Contemporary College English*. In fact, the information related to Chinese culture distributed as an explanation or example of a phenomenon when discussing other countries. For example, the American author mentioned the Chinese tea culture and the hard-working quality of the Chinese people. However, as a culture of expanding circle culture, Chinese culture only accounts for about 1.8% of the texts.

It should be noted that the citations of Chinese culture in the text are too rigid and outdated, such as the text from unit 8 Book3 titled *Economic Growth Is a Path to Perdition, Not Prosperity*. From the author's point of view, if the high-GDP countries including some developed capitalism countries continue develop their economy at the expense of the precious environment, the developing countries like China and other countries will become desert. Meanwhile, the growth of those high-GDP countries will be an excuse for continued inequality between rich and poor countries. The author classified China as a poor and backward country that had to accept pollution and garbage from developed capitalism countries. The author failed to take into account that China would also

have the second largest GDP in today's world. China will take measures to solve the garbage and pollution problems, which is the legacy of the development of capitalist countries.

5.3 Comparison of Culture and Culture of Indistinct Nationality

Racial problems are serious social problem in many countries. This is why racial problems remain a frequently discussed topic in China's foreign language teaching and culture teaching. The depiction and discussion about racial cultures should not only concentrate on the conflicts between the white and the black. In fact, both conflict and harmony exist between different races against the background of globalization. Consequently, racial problems should not be simply presented and equaled as the difference in skin color. It is argued that the texts should guide students to explore the roots, development of and solutions to racial problems.

In *Contemporary College English*, there are two articles directly involving racial problem and one autobiography of Mandela in its social background. *Say Yes*, unit 5 in Book2, depicts the universality of racial problem in the quarrels of a white couple and *A Drink in the Passage*, unit 4 in Book5, exposes the darkness of the Apartheid system in South Africa and expresses the difficulty in communication between white and black people. Though tackled from different angles and offering no clear solutions, these two articles, to a certain extent, explore the roots of racial problems and enable students to reflect deeply on the solutions to the problem. Therefore, the representation of racial problems reflected in the selection of *Contemporary College English* texts shows that the compilers intentionally include this crucial part of culture though the number of articles selected is limited. What should be emphasized is that more presentation of racial conflicts and more materials on races supplied will trigger extensive and deeper thinking of students.

Additionally, *Contemporary College English* tries to make them as close to students' life as possible, which benefits students in a familiar place to trigger their interest in learning the texts. Take *The Boy and the Bank Officer* as an example. It is a story happened in a bank, but the plot is related to school life, and one of the characters is a middle school student. Another aspect that worth mentioning is that disastrous scenes and scenes where people aid the injured are included, such as *The Man in the Water* and *You Have to Get Me Out of Here*. This can enrich students their social experiences. Meanwhile, this will cause students to reflect on the common aspects that exist both in native culture and target cultures.

5.4 Discussion

Halliday (2007) argues when learners are exposed to texts containing other cultural backgrounds, the constructed single meaning potential can't provide meaningful choices for learners, which inevitably leads to strange and misunderstanding of language and culture. If learners are exposed to English variants in other countries, the latent meaning system they construct will not effectively serve meaning interpretation and text generation. At the same time, if they pay too much attention to a particular cultural system, they will formulate the ideology and values conveyed by these judges (Adamson 2004; Nozaki et al. 2005). The textualization of college English teaching materials in the study exists in the phenomenon of cultural imbalance. These teaching materials promote the naturalization of the United States and Britain, and fail the textualization of the same English-speaking countries as the inner circle of the English language. On the other hand, Chinese culture contents in English textbooks are not drawn enough attention given the textbooks were compiled by Chinese English teachers and are particularly used in China. The current study supports the major findings of previous study. Yuen (2011) also analyzes two sets of English textbooks for junior middle schools in Hong Kong and finds that there is an obvious cultural imbalance in the textbooks. Combined with the findings of this study, it can be drawn there are problems that can't be ignored in the culture content of English textbooks, the most prominent of which is the strength of American and British culture and the lack of due attention to Chinese culture.

Furthermore, it should be argued that no teaching materials will meet all the evaluation standards (Tomlinson 2012). The emergence of cultural imbalance in language teaching materials can't be completely solved and technical support and training assessment can further improve the quality of language teaching materials. *Contemporary College English* in general can be considered a set of excellent textbooks with great potential for cultural teaching and for the combination of language and Culture teaching. In real classroom instruction settings, teachers should improve the imbalance of culture contents by complementing relevant materials. Meanwhile, the relevant English language retrieval software should also be actively applied to the evaluation process.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the cultural imbalance in the existing English textbooks by investigating the cultural contents of *Contemporary College English*. This paper builds a corpus of *Contemporary College English*, and classifies the texts of textbooks with reference to the English classification (Kachru 1992). The text is classified by using the word frequency table and the subject thesaurus to show the characteristics of the cultural content in the textbooks for English majors. Finally, the linguistic and cultural theory of systemic functional linguistics in intercultural communication (Halliday 2007) is used to explain the characteristics and cultural phenomena of textbook discourse. This paper discusses the possible influence of cultural phenomena on the construction of learners' language and cultural system, language system and the potential of language learning significance, and probes into the influence of *Contemporary College English* on the teaching and cultural communication of college English majors in China.

As far as the cultural types contained in *Contemporary College English* are concerned, the study finds that British and American culture is dominant, while Chinese culture is ignored. The content of common culture and cultural contrast is limited. The arrangement of social and cultural knowledge presents a certain degree of imbalance and distortion. As for the cultural orientation of the textbook and its influence on students' language learning and international communication, the cultural content in the textbook almost mainly chooses to convey the characteristics of British and American culture rather than comparing it with native or other national cultures. Although it is helpful for students to better understand English culture, it has limitations and may not be able to help students to understand cultural diversity. The lack of cultural diversity of English teaching materials undermines English major students to cultivate their cross-cultural communicative competence. If teaching materials lacks the content of the similarities and differences between different culture, students may not be able to develop cultural sensitivity. Students can better improve their understanding of cultural differences and cross-cultural communication by comparing the use of English in different cultural environments and different English styles.

Acknowledgement

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