

A Literature Review on Studies of Cultural Contents in English Textbooks for Chinese Senior High School from 2003 to 2018

Yingying Shen

Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

Email: shenyinying199512@163.com

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Abstract

Since the trial implementation of the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* in 2003, which lists cultural awareness as one of the five vital objectives in English instruction, studies on cultural contents in English textbooks have increased greatly. The release of the five key competencies which includes cultural awareness in the 2017 edition of curriculum standards led to another surge of textbook research on cultural contents. This study reviews studies of cultural contents in English textbooks for Chinese senior high school from 2003 to 2018 and finds that the studies mainly focus on the compilation and selection of cultural contents in English textbooks. The generalized deficiencies of previous studies like leaky classification framework and loose statistical analysis can offer some enlightenment to future researchers.

Keywords

English Textbooks, Chinese Senior High School, Cultural Contents, Literature Review

1. Introduction

There is a consensus in academia that language and culture are inseparable, just as Shu Dingfang and Zhuang Zhixiang [1] summarized: 1) Language is part of culture; 2) Language is the carrier of culture; 3) Culture is the base of language. However, culture teaching was not taken seriously enough in English instruction until 2003, when the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (experimental draft) officially stated that the cultivation of cultural awareness should be one of the five vital objectives, which established culture teaching's

significant status in English instruction. The 2017 edition of English Curriculum Standards listed cultural awareness as one of the five key competencies, which reinforced the significance of culture teaching.

With the increasing emphasis on the culture teaching and cultivation of cultural awareness, many researchers made forays into the cultural contents in English textbooks, since textbooks are the most significant medium of language and culture input in EFL classroom teaching and exert considerable influence on what learners learn and how they do it as well as what instructors teach and how they do it.

This paper devotes to reviewing the studies of cultural contents in English textbooks for Chinese senior high school from 2003 to 2018 and offering some enlightenment for future researchers. The cultural contents in this paper refer to the progress, methods, and results that are constructed during all the social practice of mankind, which may include thought, clothing, food, music, history, geography, religion, art, values, lifestyle, non-verbal communication, festivals, etc. More detailed classification of cultural contents will be further discussed in 3.1. The English textbooks here are constrained to English textbooks currently adopted in Chinese senior high school, e.g. *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press, *Oxford English (Shanghai edition) Senior High School Textbook*, *Senior English for China* published by Beijing Normal University Press, etc.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Questions

- 1) What are the foci of the studies of cultural contents in English textbooks?
- 2) What are the deficiencies in the studies of cultural contents in English textbooks?

2.2. Method

Utilize fuzzy search for “cultural contents in high school English textbooks” in the database of CNKI; select all the articles from 2003 to 2018 for analysis; summarize some representative findings and viewpoints and point out some problems and deficiencies in these studies.

3. An Overview of Studies

The fuzzy search presented 165 studies. After manual selection, there are 63 studies closely related to the cultural contents in English textbooks for senior high school. Among these 63 studies, there is one doctoral dissertation, 29 master's theses, and 33 journal papers. The numbers of studies assume a growth tendency overall.

This review of studies covers the classification frameworks adopted in these studies and two major research aspects: the compilation and selection of cultural contents in English textbooks.

3.1. Classification of Cultural Contents in English Textbooks

In these searched studies of cultural contents in English textbooks, most of the researchers firstly allocated the cultural contents to different categories according to pre-set standards. Following are four frequently-adopted classification criteria:

Cortazzi & Jin [2] put forward three patterns of culture that should be presented in textbooks: Source culture (learner's own culture); Target culture; International culture (neither native culture nor target culture, but their variants). Adopting this mode of classification, some researchers divided culture contents in English textbooks into these three modules for further analysis, like Guo Chunyan [3]. Based on Cortazzi & Jin's classification, scholars like Luo Dimin [4], Wang Huijin [5] and Li Jingnan [6] added "contrast culture" in their theses to classify cultural contents in textbooks from a more comprehensive perspective. Some researchers considered that there are still certain cultural contents that lack clear-cut national background and cannot fall into aforementioned four groups, such as social problems and scientific knowledge, so they adopted a supplementary term "other culture" in their research, e.g. Wang Lingjuan [7] and Xi Yali [8].

Zhang Zhanyi [9] allocated cultural contents in English textbooks into two groups: knowledge culture and communication culture. Knowledge culture refers to the linguistic and non-linguistic cultural factors that do not directly affect the communicator's accurate transmission of information (*i.e.* politics, religion, law, art); communicative culture refers to the linguistic and non-linguistic cultural factors that are caused by different cultural backgrounds and affect the communicator's correct communication (*i.e.* greeting, appreciation, idiom, taboo). Wang Lingjuan [7] classified topics of each unit in *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press into knowledge culture and communication culture for analysis and discussion. Integrating the regional and functional perspectives of classification, Kang Zhipeng [10] divided cultural contents into knowledge culture of native language, communication culture of native language, knowledge culture of target language, communication culture of target language, international knowledge culture, and international communication culture.

Allen and Valette [11] grouped culture into "Culture with a big C" and "culture with a small c". "Culture with a big C" refers to "the sum total of a people's achievement and contributions to civilization, such as art, literature, music, architecture, technological development, scientific discoveries and philosophy". People's life style is considered as "culture with a small c", including the way they make their living, how they manage their organization, how they communicate with their friends and families, how they show approval and disapproval as well as their behavior in different situations. Chen Jingyan & Yang Jie [12] found that texts on "Culture with a big C" (achievement culture) are more than the ones on "culture with a small c" (behavior culture) in *New Senior English for*

China published by People's Education Press. Wu Xiaowei [13] and Li Jingnan [6] both listed detailed items of "Culture with a big C" and "culture with a small c" on their analyzing frameworks for cultural contents.

The fourth kind of cultural classification of textbook is based on Byram's textbook evaluation theory. Gao Jinju [14] and Wang Huijin [5] evaluated the cultural contents in English textbooks under Byram's criteria. Byram listed eight categories: The first category is social identity and social groups. It refers to minority social groups, regional characteristics and social class. The second is social interaction which means social communication. The third category is belief and behavior. It includes ethics, religion, beliefs and daily behavior. The fourth category is the social and political institution including national institutions, health care, law, social security and local government. The fifth category is socialization and social life. It includes family, school, employment and ritual. The sixth category is the national history reflecting the contemporary historical events. The seventh category is the national geography which is mainly to describe the characteristics of terrain or geography. The eighth category is cultural stereotype and national identity. It refers to the typical national impression and fixed thinking (Wang Huijin).

3.2. Compilation of Cultural Contents in English Textbooks

Some studies focused on the compilation of cultural contents in English textbooks. Researchers found that there existed mainly two problems:

1) Lack of Systematic Compilation

Since the emphasis on linguistic knowledge learning and linguistic skills training dominated the English instruction in senior high school for a long time, the compilation of linguistic items in textbooks has been pretty mature and reasonable. However, the organization of cultural contents seems to be in disarray. Wu Xiaowei [13] wrote that though cultural contents in English textbooks cover a wide range of topics and subjects, but its distribution is inhomogeneous and relatively scattered, failing to follow the principle of gradual improvement. Yan Tingting [15] made an in-depth analysis of the Chinese culture contents in the *Oxford English (Shanghai edition) Senior High School Textbook* and found that the arrangement of the Chinese culture is disjointed and lacks of hierarchy. According to Yan's research, the textbook presents various aspects of Chinese culture, such as scenic spots, national representatives, modern science and technology, historical geography, education and culture, costume culture, political institutions, art culture, food culture, and other 12 cultural contents, but there is only one unit in the textbook which systematically introduces Chinese culture around the topic of tourism. Most of the Chinese cultural contents are scattered in different corners of the textbook and the Chinese cultural contents in the textbooks for different grades lack hierarchy, they therefore fail to follow the principle of gradual progress.

2) Lack of Varied Modes of Presentation

In regard of the presentation of cultural contents, some researchers found that they are presented in a plain way. Li Jingnan [6] designed a checklist to analyze the presentation of cultural contents in *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press and concluded that the cultural contents are mainly presented by words and pictures. Li suggested adding tables and charts to enrich the forms of presentation and strengthen the connection between the dispersed contents, which is conducive to inspiring students for further thinking, deepening students' memory, and promoting their cognitive capability. Li also suggested adding life-based tasks for culture presentation, in which students can acquire cultural knowledge through cooperation, communication, and inner information construction. Kang Zhipeng [10] and Wu Xiaowei [13] held similar views with Li, they expressed their hope that textbooks should construct a well-organized presentation system for cultural contents, which contains multiple ways of presentation like words, notes, pictures, exercises, and supporting resources, etc.

3.3. Selection of Cultural Contents in English Textbooks

Most of the searched studies focused on the selection of cultural contents in English textbooks, which can be divided into two groups.

The first group of studies were committed to analyzing whether the selection of cultural contents in English textbooks comply with *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School*. Liu Chenxia [16] found that the cultural contents in *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press basically complied with the requirements of Level 8 of cultural awareness in the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2003 experimental draft). Xi Yali's research [8] aimed to investigate whether the set of textbooks of *New Standard English* published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press meet the requirements of intercultural awareness cultivation in *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2003 experimental draft). Xi found that most of the cultural items required in the curriculum standards are presented well in the textbooks, but some topics are still absent or deficient. Taking the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2017 edition) as the criterion Qian Xuan [17] quantified the pictures and texts with cultural contents in *Advance with English* and categorized the cultural contents in the target textbooks. Qian came to the conclusion that the contents of Chinese culture covered in *Advance with English* cannot meet the relevant requirements of the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2017 edition) in quantity, topic, and teaching activity arrangement.

The second group of studies focused on the comparison of the cultural contents selection between different versions of English textbooks. Zhang Yazhi [18] compared *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press with *Senior English for China* published by Beijing Normal University Press in terms of the selection of source culture, target culture, and international culture.

Zhu Jingwen [19] chose *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press and *Oxford English (Shanghai edition) Senior High School Textbook* as the object of her study. Zhu compared the contents of avoiding cultural barriers in two versions of the textbooks from perspectives of source culture contrast and scene creation. Zhu also compared the contents of cultivating the ability of cultural diffusion in these two versions of the textbooks from the aspects of vocabulary accumulation, language expression, and culture type. Ding Cheng [20] classified the cultural contents of three versions of textbooks—published by People's Education Press, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and Beijing Normal University Press—according to Byram's criteria and compared the quantity and distribution of different cultural contents in these textbooks.

Following are some representative findings on the selection of cultural contents in English textbooks:

1) Deficiency of Native Culture

Senior high school EFL learner are required to have a good command of linguistic knowledge, meanwhile acquire profound knowledge of culture in relation to native culture and target culture. However, people have been attaching great importance to target culture, and native culture has not been given adequate emphasis on.

Guo Chunyan's [3] research certified the phenomenon that native culture is fatigue in the textbooks of *Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press and such fatigue has a certain negative influence on communicative competence of EFL learners. Qian Xuan's [17] findings proved the deficiency of Chinese culture contents in *Advance with English* in terms of quantity, topic, and teaching arrangements.

Yan Tingting [15] affirmed the reasonable selection of native culture in *Oxford English (Shanghai Edition) of Senior High School* in the main and pointed out some aspects to be improved. Yan concluded that the textbook contains a certain amount of Chinese culture contents; the ways of the presentation of Chinese culture are diverse and flexible; and the materials reflect Chinese values concerning the views of nature, society, and ideology. As for the deficiencies, Yan contented that Chinese culture contents are lack of repetition and deep meaning and the textbook neglects typical traditional culture contents.

Through the analysis of the objectives, contents, implementation, and evaluation of the curriculum standards, He Lifan [21] found that the English textbook puts emphasis on target culture and makes light of source culture; values culture input and neglects culture output; and lacks cultural evaluation. Only by strengthening the Chinese culture as the mainstay of multicultural input and harmonious ecological Chinese cultural output, paying attention to the balance of various types of culture, and strengthening cross-cultural comparison and evaluation, can Chinese culture be better integrated into high school English textbooks.

2) Stuck on the Surface of Culture

To cultivate students' healthy and insightful cultural awareness, the English textbooks need to cover a wide range of cultural contents. Many researchers pointed out that the selection of cultural contents in English textbooks stuck on the surface of culture, lacking in-depth and thought-provoking contents of culture.

Xi Yali [8] found that most of the cultural items required in the curriculum standards, such as history, geography, arts, and literature, are presented well in the textbooks. However, some topics are still deficient in the textbooks, like political and economic situation, and religious traditions.

Li Jingnan's [6] research came to similar conclusions with Xi's, but in a more comprehensive way. Li found that the spiritual culture occupies the major part of cultural contents in five textbooks of *Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press, which includes knowledge culture such as history, geography, scientific and technological achievements, political philosophy; various artistic culture; behavioral culture such as customs, habits, lifestyles, language communication, non-language communication; and psychological culture such as values, ways of thinking, aesthetic taste, religious beliefs, and psychological state. From the aspect of spiritual culture, it is knowledge culture, behavioral culture, and psychological culture that account for a large proportion, while artistic culture is relatively scarce. In psychological culture, values are mainly studied, while thinking mode, aesthetic taste, religion, and psychological quality account for a relatively low proportion. Compared with material culture and spiritual culture, the introduction of institutional culture is seriously inadequate.

Pang Lu [22] also pointed out to add discourses about Chinese value system and institutional culture, which can help students understand and inherit the fine parts of Chinese culture. In addition, more western classical discourses which can inspire students to explore essence of western institutions and spirits need to be added.

Luo Dimin [4] and Chen Jingyan & Yang Jie [12] mentioned this problem in their papers, and they contended that the selection of cultural content in textbooks cannot stay on the surface of culture. Students need to learn from the essence of western cultural classics and deeply explore the essence of western culture in terms of values, so that they can improve their intercultural communication skills and eliminate communication barriers.

3) Sexism in Textbook

High school students are at the critical stage of forming individual emotions, wills, values, and ways of thinking. Since students are at such a rebellious age and eager for knowledge, the selection of cultural contents in English textbooks must watch its positive cultural guidance and avoid negative influence.

Researchers were keen on unveiling sexism in English textbooks. Geng Xin [23] conducted a comparatively comprehensive research on this topic. She investigated the hidden sexism in *Advance with English* by way of content analysis as well as linguistic analysis, and explored the relationship between sexism and

power distribution. The research findings showed that sexism is widespread and prevalent in this set of textbooks: 1) Females are generally underrepresented both as ordinary people and as outstanding people; 2) Females are far less visible than males in occupational roles and assigned with limited variety of occupations; 3) Masculine generic constructions are used extensively; 4) Females are often identified by their family relations while males' identity generally lies in their professional capacity; 5) Females have to rely on other's sympathy or compassion in order to win their reputation, while males are expected to get success by means of their own strength and ability.

Ma Xue [24] summarized the cultural contents in *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press that violate the principle of gender equality from four aspects—frequency of occurrence, occupation and family roles, temperament—which almost coincided with Geng Xin's research, and utterance. Ma also put forward some measures to reduce or eliminate sexism in English textbooks. Wang Lingling & He Xiaodong [25] presented and analyzed the gender construction in two textbooks of *New Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press from three perspectives: frequency of occurrence, characters, and discourse analysis, which demonstrated that sexism exists in textbooks.

Different from previous research, Han Fang [26] found there was no trace of sexism in *Learning English* (Senior Student Book) (Hebei Education Press, 2004) based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of its linguistic and non-linguistic representation of man and women.

4. Deficiencies and Directions for the Future

Most studies are constrained in the aforementioned four types of classification frameworks and the cultural contents are analyzed separately without connection. Moreover, the classification criteria of cultural contents are not always clear-cut and some categories may be overlapping. Therefore, certain cultural contents may fall into different categories, which lie on authors' subjective judgement. Researchers can elaborate a more inclusive and comprehensive classification framework for future analysis.

In most quantitative analysis of cultural contents, the counting unit is the piece of reading that contains cultural contents. Many smaller units which embed cultural contents may be neglected. Detailed and thorough analysis of every corner in the textbook is needed.

From the perspective of compilation, some studies concluded that the distribution of cultural contents is inhomogeneous and relatively scattered and the arrangement is disjointed and lacks hierarchy. However, no research specifies the standards of a systematic compilation. Researchers can consider present a framework or detailed system for the arrangement of pre-recognized cultural contents.

The *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2017) lists cultural awareness as one of the five key competences. Compared with the 2003 edition

of curriculum standards, which emphasizes the cultivation of intercultural communication competence, the 2017 edition adds the cultivation of cultural confidence and the ability of culture spreading, which marks a transition from the training of linguistic skills to a higher level of ideology and morality construction. Previous studies on the cultural contents in English textbooks rarely take cultural confidence and cultural spreading into consideration, mainly oriented to intercultural communication competence. This transition in curriculum standards provides a new perspective for future studies on cultural contents in English textbooks.

5. Conclusions

The studies of cultural contents in English textbooks for Chinese senior high school from 2003 to 2018 focused mainly on two aspects: the compilation of cultural contents and the selection of cultural contents. The research findings on the former aspect concentrated on the lack of systematic compilation and lack of varied modes of presentation. From the perspective of the selection of cultural contents, three problems received intensive attention: the deficiency of native culture, lack of high-level culture, and existence of sexism.

Despite the fact that piles of studies adopted similar classification frameworks of cultural contents, the existing classification criteria are not always clear-cut and some categories may be overlapping. In quantitative studies of cultural contents in English textbooks, by and large, the counting unit is a broad one (*i.e.* the piece of reading), without consideration to smaller units, which may make the data collection unreliable and uncomprehensive. As for the studies of the compilation of cultural contents, most of them contended that the distribution of cultural contents is relatively causal and inhomogeneous and the arrangement lacks hierarchy and cohesion. However, their judgements on the compilation lack the support of specific standards of systematic compilation.

Future researchers on cultural contents in English textbooks can elaborate a more inclusive and comprehensive cultural classification framework for analysis and allocate more attention to a higher level of ideology and morality construction embedded in cultural contents. Chinese EFL learners can hold a critical view towards the cultural contents in these authoritative-deemed English textbooks, and sort out and analyze the cultural contents in a systematic or self-suited way, and supplement more up-to-date and high-level cultural contents during the learning process.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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