

An Analysis of Reading Materials in *New Senior English for China* Based on Cultivation of Cultural Awareness

—A Case Study of Compulsory Book 3

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Abstract

China is in the era of rapid development of information technology and the era of close cultural communication between countries, which requires English teaching to cultivate students' cultural awareness, develop their intercultural communicative competence. Based on Byram's checklist, this paper analyzes the cultural contents in reading materials of *New Senior English for China* (NSEFC) Compulsory Book 3. The research indicates that the textbook is rich in cultural content and the selected reading materials are authentic. However, there are two shortcomings: the uneven distribution of themes as well as cultural contents and the lack of cultural content comparison in the textbook. According to the findings, this paper provides some suggestions for textbook editors and English teachers, aiming at realizing the improvement and a better use of the textbook, so as to cultivate students' cultural awareness.

Keywords

English Textbooks, Reading Materials, Cultural Contents, Cultural Awareness

1. Introduction

The 21st century is an era of rapid development of information technology and an era of close cultural communication between countries. Also China's association with other countries is more and closer. Therefore, it is the requirement of the development of the times to cultivate students' multicultural awareness and develop their intercultural competence [1]. *The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2017 Edition) states that the specific goal of English cur-

riculum in senior high school is to cultivate and develop the discipline core literacy, which is the concentrated embodiment of the discipline education value and the correct values, essential qualities and key abilities gradually formed by students through subject learning. Among them, cultural awareness is an important part of the core competency of English subject [2], referring to an understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures, recognition of excellent cultures, and intercultural cognition, attitudes, and behaviors which students demonstrate in the context of globalization. Cultural awareness reflects the value orientation of the English subject's core competency [3]. Therefore, culture is very important for students in their learning. The Curriculum Standards also emphasizes that cultural knowledge is one of the six elements of English curriculum content. To contact and understand the culture of English speaking countries is propitious to understand and use English, cultivate the world consciousness, form cross-cultural communication ability and deepen the understanding of national culture. It is obvious that cultural content is pivotal in the nurturing of cultural awareness in the minds of EFL learners [4].

At present, Chinese and English textbooks are still the main channel to cultivate senior high school students' cultural awareness. It has an important influence on the cultivation of cultural awareness whether the cultural contents in the textbooks reflect the core quality of English. With the application of the New Curriculum Standards, it remains to be verified whether the cultural contents contained in our current senior high school textbooks have reached the cultural goal of the New Curriculum Standards. Therefore, it is very important and necessary to analyze and study textbooks. This paper will classify the cultural contents in reading materials of NSEFC Compulsory Book 3 published in 2019, analyze its advantages and disadvantages, and provide suggestions for textbook editors and English teachers, aiming at realizing the improvement and a better use of the textbook.

2. Literature Review

The research on cultural content in foreign teaching dates back to 1960s. There are various classifications of cultural contents put forward by different scholars. Byram (1989) proposes eight dimensions to classify cultural contents of language textbooks [5], while Cortazzi and Jin (1999) states there are three cultures which should be presented in textbooks: source culture, target language culture and international culture [6]. Others also show their own opinions on the culture classification, such as the five dimensions of culture including product, practice, perspective, community, and person [7].

Later, the cultural contents in foreign language textbooks received increasing attention from the academia. Shin, Eslami and Chen (2011) analyze the presentation of local and international culture in current international English-language teaching textbooks. They indicate that cultural presentation still largely remains at the traditional knowledge-oriented level and does not engage learners in deep

levels of reflection [8]. Tang (2011) compares the cultural contents in NSEFC and the old version based on Cortazzi and Jin's classifications [9]. Li (2016) evaluates the cultural contents to *PEP New Senior English for China* from the intercultural perspective. He conducts the research from the five perspectives, namely target culture, native culture, world culture, cultural contrast, and other cultural components [10]. Zhang (2021) studies the cultural contents in junior English books from six dimensions, that is, spirit, behavior, material, social, nature and concept [11].

In light of the literature reviewed above, although there are varieties of culture classifications, it can be found that there is a lack of analysis of the latest version of senior English textbooks in China with considering the New Curriculum Standards. Hence, it is necessary to conduct an analysis of English textbooks based on cultivation of cultural awareness.

3. Classification of the Cultural Contents of the English Teaching Materials

The present study employs Byram's (1989) checklist, which provides eight cultural themes. Michael Byram is a professor at Durham University, whose model for intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is one of the most widely used models, and he has a unique insight into intercultural communication. After proposing the ICC model, Byram also proposed the evaluation mode of textbook cultural contents, which aims at cultivating students to form cultural awareness in foreign language education, helping foreign language go from teaching to education, and improving the basis for cultivating qualified global citizens [12]. Michael Byram is considered to be one of the most prominent researchers on intercultural learning and cultural contents in foreign language textbooks. He has proposed criteria to investigate textbooks comprehensively and critically, which encompass not only sociological factors but also social, historical, and geographical factors.

According to Byram's (1989) theory, there are eight cultural themes in the checklist. The first theme is *social identity and social group* which includes social class, ethnic minority and majority, regional identity, professional identity, and an individual's social identities. The second theme is *social interaction* that encompasses a situation or manner used in a certain group of society; it includes verbal and non-verbal behaviour in social interaction, differing levels of formality, and characters (feelings, attitudes, values, and perceived problems). The third theme is *socialization and the life cycle* that includes a smaller level of institutions, for instance, family, school, and the office, as well as ceremonies that mark passage through stages of social life. The fourth theme is *stereotypes and national identity* which is a typical symbol of the national inherent pattern, like the landmarks of nations, including artifacts, popular places, or people. The fifth theme is *belief and behaviour* which concerns about daily activities in society that involve religious and moral values. The sixth theme is *social and political institution* that contains the form of government, laws and regulations, medical

security, social security, and local government. The seventh theme is *national geography* that refers to geographical features associated with a certain group of people and their environment. The last theme is *national history* which encompasses historical and contemporary moments, which are pivotal for supporting teaching and learning in the classroom. Here comes a table:

From **Table 1**, it can be seen that Byram's classification of the textbook cultural contents is very detailed and comprehensive. It involves many aspects, including social communication, local system, history, geography, nation and values, which are basically consistent with the three aspects of context contents in the New Curriculum Standards, people and self, people and society, man and nature [3], showing that Byram's evaluation model is in line with the contemporary requirements to cultural awareness cultivation in China. Furthermore, his eight cultural themes cover cultural contents that students may encounter when learning foreign languages so widely that the cultural layout of the textbooks can be relatively scientifically presented. Therefore, this paper will analyze cultural contents in reading materials of NSEFC Compulsory Book 3 based on Byram's classification.

4. Research Method

The research analyzes the cultural contents in reading materials of NSEFC Compulsory Book 3, on the basis of Byram's classification of the textbook cultural contents. Focusing on 10 reading passages, the content analysis is employed to collect the data to present the distribution of the cultural contents in Compulsory Book 3, the proportion of cultural themes in the reading materials and the frequency of cultural contents involved in each unit. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Is there enough cultural content covered in the reading materials of the compulsory senior high school English textbook 3?

Table 1. Cultural themes and explanations.

Themes	Explanations
A. Social identity and social group	social class, ethnic minority and majority, regional identity, professional identity, and an individual's social identities
B. Social interaction	verbal and non-verbal behaviour in social interaction, differing levels of formality, and characters
C. Socialization and the life cycle	family, school, office, as well as ceremonies
D. Stereotype and national identity	a typical symbol of the national inherent pattern, like the landmarks of nations
E. Belief and behaviour	daily activities in society that involve religious and moral values
F. Social and political institutions	form of government, laws and regulations, medical security, social security, and local government
G. National geography	geographical features associated with a certain group of people and their environment
H. National history	historical and contemporary moments

RQ2: According to the analysis of cultural content, what suggestions can be provided for English teachers and textbook editors to improve the cultivation of students' cultural awareness?

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Analysis of Cultural Contents in Reading Materials

There are three textbooks in NSEFC compulsory course, each with five units that include eight parts respectively: *Listening and Speaking*, *Reading and Thinking*, *Discovering Useful Structures*, *Listening and Talking*, *Reading for Writing*, *Assessing Your Progress*, *Project and Video Time*. Based on Byram's classification, this paper analyzes cultural contents in *Reading and Thinking* and *Reading for Writing* of NSEFC Compulsory Book 3. The results are summarized in the following table and charts:

As shown in **Table 2** and **Chart 1**, the cultural contents about *social identity and social group* are relatively rich, accounting for 31%, including different professional identities, such as doctors, servants, tailors, etc. In the part involving Chinese culture, the reading material presents the minority cultural content, such as the Naadam Festival, to cultivate students' identity of Chinese culture and inheritance, also deepen the appreciation of other excellent culture.

Secondly, the cultural content of *social interaction* involved in Compulsory

Table 2. The distribution based on the cultural contents in Compulsory Book 3.

Themes	Unit	Topic	Section	Culture Evidence
A. Social identity and social group	Unit 1	Festivals and celebrations	<i>Reading for Writing</i>	Mongolian
	Unit 2	Morals and virtues	<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	doctor
	Unit 5	The value of money	<i>Reading and Thinking</i> <i>Reading for Writing</i>	servant tailor
B. Social interaction	Unit 2	Morals and virtues	<i>Reading for Writing</i>	the test of the king
	Unit 1	Festivals and celebrations	<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	the celebrations to the festival
C. Socialization and the life cycle			<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	The million pound bank note (ACT 1, SCENE 3)
	Unit 5	The value of money	<i>Reading for Writing</i>	The million pound bank note (ACT 2, SCENE 1)
D. Stereotype and national identity	Unit 3	Diverse cultures	<i>Reading for Writing</i>	Chinatown
	Unit 4	Space exploration	<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	the progress in space exploration made by China
E. Belief and behaviour	Unit 1	Festivals and celebrations	<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	the significance of celebrating the festival
F. Social and political institutions	/	/	/	/
G. National geography	Unit 3	Diverse cultures	<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	the map of America
H. National history	Unit 2	Morals and virtues	<i>Reading and Thinking</i>	the introduction to Lin Qiaozhi

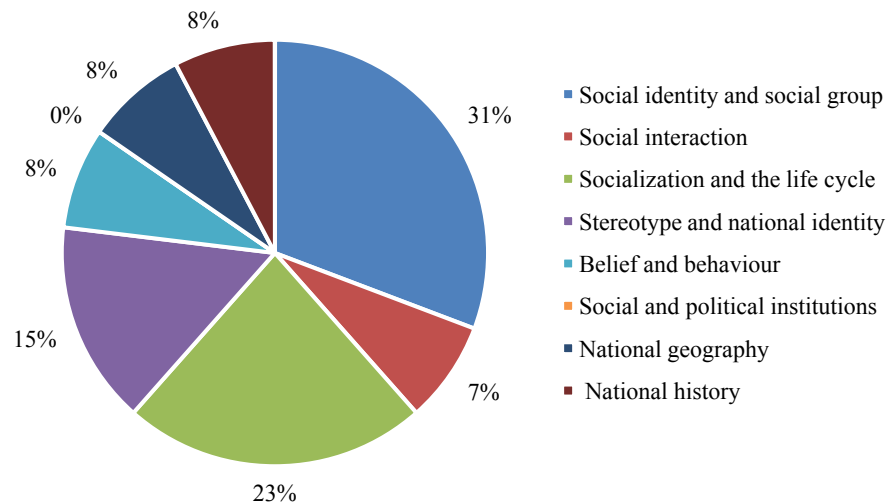


Chart 1. The proportion of cultural themes in the reading materials.

Book 3 is vivid and interesting. In the part *Reading for Writing* of Unit 2, students need to write a review after reading a fable, and the fable selected in the textbook named *The Stone in the Road* is about a king's test. It is favorable for students to experience the opportunities and difficulties existing in the intercultural communication, and consciously cultivate their intercultural communicative competence in their future life.

Thirdly, the cultural themes of *socialization and life circle* and *belief and behaviour* are close to students' real life. For example, the reading passage in the part *Reading and Thinking* of Unit 1 discusses the importance of festival. Students need to talk about which festivals they celebrate and why people celebrate different festivals. That making students think about the meaning of the festival before reading and read with questions can activate students' enthusiasm for reading.

Fourthly, the Chinese cultural contents selected in the materials contain not only the traditional Chinese culture, but also the modern culture. In *Reading and Thinking* of Unit 4, the article first makes an introduction to the development of the world space exploration, and then focuses on the great success of the development of China's space exploration so far. Although China's space exploration started late, it has made great progress in a very short time. Reading such articles can make students give birth to a strong sense of pride for the motherland and identity of Chinese culture.

Fifthly, the cultural contents display the role of Chinese women in *national history*, which balances the gender culture to a certain extent. In *Reading and Thinking* of Unit 2, the article is about the story of Lin Qiaozhi, an outstanding Chinese female doctor. She never gets married and cares for many women and children selflessly. She believes that doctor's duty is to help patients and treat them as her family. Learning from the life experiences of outstanding women can help students know their great life and learn from their tenacious, brave and selfless dedication, and better avoid the gender discrimination.

Finally, there are some shortcomings. One is that the cultural content of *national geography* focuses on Western countries but lacks the geographical culture of other nations. Secondly, as shown in **Chart 1**, the content of Social identity and social group accounts for the largest proportion, while *social and political institutions* is obviously absent. Furthermore, according to **Chart 2**, although all the units involve culture, there exists uneven frequency of cultural contents in each unit.

To sum up, although there are some weaknesses in the textbook, the cultural contents are relatively rich on the whole, especially in the selection of materials that reflects the concept of education. By learning the cultural knowledge, students can form correct attitudes, values and behavior tendencies in the intercultural communication.

5.2. Suggestions on Cultivating Students' Cultural Awareness in English Teaching

Through the analysis of reading materials in NSEFC Compulsory Book 3, it can be found that the compulsory textbooks contain rich Chinese cultural contents and adopt the real language materials. However, there are also some problems, such as uneven cultural theme distribution and lack of cultural contrast content. In order to promote a better use and the improvement of reading materials, relevant suggestions are put forward to English teachers and textbook editors.

First of all, English teachers are supposed to improve their own cultural quality. For becoming an excellent language teacher, they should not only have solid language skills, but also have rich Chinese and Western cultural knowledge. For instance, teachers can spare some time every day to read English newspapers and magazines or browse relevant websites. Secondly, with the development of e-education, teachers should try to conduct e-teaching to expand some cultural knowledge [13], in order to make up for the lack of teaching materials. This can not only stimulate students' interest, but also mobilize students to actively understand

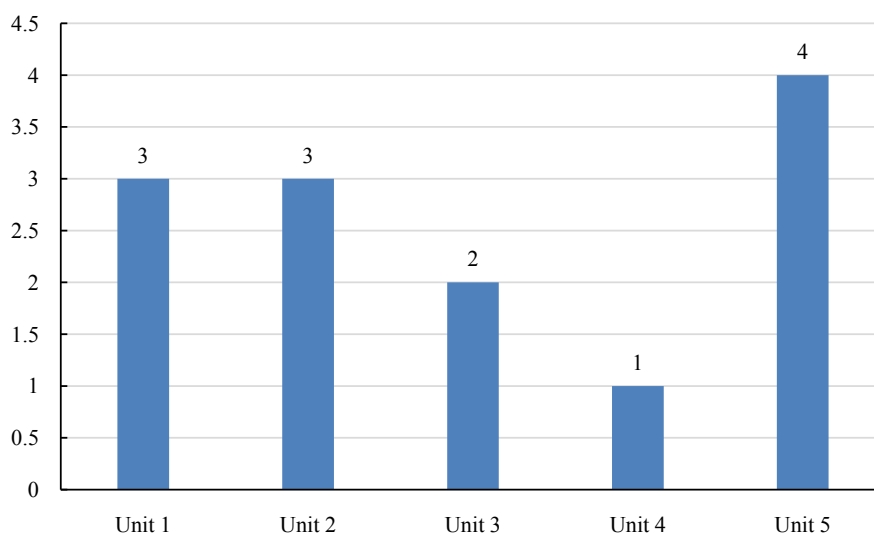


Chart 2. The frequency of cultural contents involved in each unit.

and master the presented cultural knowledge. Finally, in order to cultivate students' cultural awareness, teachers are encouraged to use the ways of exploring, experiencing, comparing, contrasting to guide students to learn Chinese and foreign cultural knowledge, so as to internalize cultural knowledge into cognition, behavior and character with correct value orientation. At the same time, teachers can also carry out some cultural activities, such as debate contest, speech contest, English poetry recitation contest, so that students can participate in them actively.

For editors, if they can design more contrasting cultural contents in the reading materials, it will help to enhance teachers' awareness of cultural contrast teaching, and then cultivate students' awareness of cultural contrast. Moreover, editors should add some contents in the future textbook compilation, such as social and political institutions, which are absent in Book 3.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of cultural awareness, this paper analyzes the cultural contents in reading materials in NSEFC Compulsory Book 3 based on Byram's classification. It can be found that the textbook is rich in cultural content and the selected authentic reading materials, which are good for students' understanding of the process of learning. Therefore, it can be seen that the editors have considered the needs of the students. However, since the range of culture is so wide that it's very difficult to cover all the themes, there are also some problems: the uneven distribution of themes as well as cultural contents and the lack of cultural content comparison in the textbook. So this paper gives several suggestions to the textbook editors and English teachers respectively. Due to the limitations of materials and time, this study also has some shortcomings, which need to be further explored and improved in the future.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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