

An Investigation of Culture Presentation in ELT Textbooks in the Context of English as an International Language*

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Abstract—English is assuming the role of an international language in the world. Based on the contemporary context of English as an international language, this study establishes an analytical framework based on Yuen’s classification criteria for cultural content and draws on Kachru’s concentric circle model to analyze the features of culture presentation in the new edition of China’s senior high school English textbooks. It was found that the cultural content in the new edition of China’s senior high school English textbooks is no longer dominated by Inner-Circle culture, and the proportion of Chinese culture is almost balanced with that of Inner-Circle category, but there is still an imbalance in the proportion of cultural content across different cultural content categories. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are given regarding teachers’ employment of textbooks and textbook development.

Index Terms—English as an international language; culture presentation; senior high school English textbooks

I. INTRODUCTION

As globalization continues to advance, English is no longer the exclusive domain of native speakers, but has become a tool for countries around the world to communicate and exchange with each other (Lu & Wang, 2018). The ownership of English has changed. English belongs to all English speakers, and it has assumed the role of an international language in the world. The newly revised *China’s English Curriculum Standards for General High School* (2017 Edition, revised in 2020) describes the nature of the curriculum as follows: “The English curriculum for general high school is a basic cultural curriculum at the high school level that comprehensively implements the Party’s education policy, practices the fundamental task of establishing moral education, develops the core literacy of the English subject, and cultivates socialist builders and successors”, and also points out that English “is an international lingua franca widely used in today’s world, an important communication tool for international exchange and cooperation, and an important carrier of ideas and culture” (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 1). It is a very clear definition of the nature of the English curriculum at the basic education level. Teaching materials are an important carrier of curriculum content, an important part of foreign language education, and play a decisive role in what and how teachers teach (Tomlinson, 2012; Cunningsworth, 1995). Culture is a core component of language teaching, and almost all language materials contain cultural information (Kramsch, 1993; Kumaravadivelu, 2008). English is used as an international language, and the cultural content in textbooks should not be limited to the culture of native English speakers. Does the presentation of culture in the new version of China’s senior high school English textbooks based on the curriculum reflect the status of English as an international language? The answers to the above questions will help ELT better create good conditions for learners to absorb the essence of world culture and spread Chinese culture.

Given that, this study selected senior high school English textbooks widely used in China for cultural content analysis, to explore whether the presentation of culture in our national senior high school English textbooks is consistent with the status of English as an international language. On this basis, suggestions are made for how teachers should employ the textbooks and for the development of future teaching materials.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Concept of EIL*

The concept of English as an International Language (EIL) came into being in the 1970s and refers to “the Language

* This study was supported financially in part by Henan Province New Liberal Arts Research and Reform Practice Project (2021JGLX042); Henan Province Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project (2019BYY006).

used by people in different countries to communicate with each other” (Smith, 1976, p. 38). Some scholars now believe that ELF is gradually replacing EIL, but in essence, ELF is more of a perspective, attitude, and belief, as well as a group of loose theoretical concepts formed thereby, and is not a clear and consistent theoretical model that can be directly applied to language teaching (Gao, 2015). In addition, the definition of EIL is more comprehensive than that of ELF and can be regarded as a superordinate term of ELF. Therefore, this study agrees with McKay (2012) that EIL covers English use in various contexts, including English use in Kachru’s Inner Circle (English-speaking countries), Outer Circle (Countries where English is a second language), and Expanding Circle (Countries where English is a foreign language), which better reflects the current situation that English is widely used in international communication and is more applicable to language teaching. Then in the context of EIL, teaching materials as the primary means of cultural transmission should not be limited to transmitting the culture of native English speakers, but rather the culture of the world.

B. Defining Teaching Materials

There are broad and narrow definitions of teaching materials. Broadly speaking, materials refer to all teaching materials used by students in and outside the classroom, including textbooks, audio and video recordings, tutorial materials, newspapers and magazines, broadcasting, etc. In a narrow sense, materials refer only to textbooks that students use for lessons and review according to the syllabus (Liu, 2011). In the current study, we adopt a narrow definition, and materials only refer to textbooks.

In language teaching, “materials” will be taken to be anything that can be used to facilitate the learning of a language, including textbooks (Tomlinson, 2012). Textbooks are one of the basic elements of classroom teaching (Xu, 2015), as well as important content and means for students to learn and teachers to teach (Chen, 2020), and play a key role in the realization of the goals of foreign language talent cultivation (Adamson, 2004). The vital function and role of language teaching textbooks have been widely recognized in the world, both from the linguistic knowledge and cultural levels (Davidson & Liu, 2020).

C. Analysis of the Cultural Content of English Textbooks

Recent research on the cultural content of English textbooks is rich in perspective and diverse in approach (Davidson & Liu, 2020; Derakhshan, 2021; Moss et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2011; Song, 2013;). One of the more common approaches is to draw on Kachru’s (1990) concentric circles model of World English (i.e., the division of English into Inner, Outer, and Expanding circles based on its historical background, and its status and role in different parts of the world) to explore whether the cultural contents of the materials reflect the international status of English. For example, Murayama (2000) examined two best-selling English textbooks in Japan from a cross-cultural perspective, and found that one textbook (English Course I) followed the concept of EIL and reduced the proportion of Inner Circle culture, while the other textbook (Oral Communication A) still focus on Inner Circle culture especially American culture; Yuen (2011) explored the representation of foreign cultures in two English textbooks used in Hong Kong secondary schools, and found that these textbooks describe the cultures of Asian and African countries far less than those of English-speaking western countries; Keles and Yazan (2020) conducted a diachronic analysis to examine the changes in cultural content in five editions of the New Headway textbooks at the primary level, and found that over time, NHE still focused on Inner Circle culture, and NHE editors did not sufficiently improve global cultural awareness of English language learners, as multicultural perspectives of English language variants were rarely involved. In contrast, relatively few domestic studies have analyzed cultural contents in textbooks with the help of Kachru’s concentric circles model. Based on this finding, Yuen’s (2011) classification criteria for cultural content and Kachru’s (1990) concentric circle model were adopted in this investigation to establish an analysis framework to explore whether the presentation of culture in China’s senior high school English textbooks reflects the status of English as an international language.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following question: What are the characteristics of the culture presentation in China’s senior high school English textbooks in the context of English as an international language?

B. Selection of Textbooks

To ensure the representativeness of the research results, we chose the widely used high school English textbooks published by the People’s Education Press of China in 2019 as the research object. The curriculum standards mention in the chapter on curriculum structure that to meet the needs of diverse development of senior high school students, the high school English curriculum is designed to construct a curriculum structure that combines compulsory, optional compulsory, and elective courses. Among them, the compulsory courses are the courses that all high school students need to take to lay a common foundation for their future development. In view of this, this study selected three compulsory textbooks as the research object. In addition to a WELCOME UNIT in the first volume of the three textbooks, the other two volumes are composed of five units, and each unit contains eight modules.

C. Method for Analysis of Textbooks

1. Define and Adjust the Analysis Framework

After identifying the research question and the research object, this study combined Yuen's (2011) classification criteria for cultural content and Kachru's (1990) concentric circle model to create analysis framework for coding cultural content in textbooks. Yuen divided cultural content into four categories: products, practices, perspectives, and persons (i.e. 4Ps). Products include languages, places, and proprietary names for specific cultural objects, such as food, clothing, movies, literature (e.g. *the Phantom of the Opera*). Practices are product-related activities (e.g. *She is studying at an American high school for one year.*). Perspectives are about myths, religions, important dates, and inspirations that have had a profound impact on world history (e.g. *Good habits formed at youth make all the difference.*). Persons refer to real people (e.g. *the Chinese Emperor Qinshihuang*) or fictional characters (e.g. *Hi, I'm Max Jackson.*) created and contextualized by textbook authors. Kachru established this model based on the historical contexts of English, its status, and functions in different parts of the world. The Inner Circle (IC) includes the regions where English originated and where, through spread, English later became the first language of the local population (the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand). The Outer Circle (OC) includes former colonies or regions under the dominance of England or American, such as India, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Hong Kong, etc. The Expanding Circle (EC) includes regions where English is becoming the dominant foreign language for education and business, such as Russia, France, Turkey, Egypt, China, etc. Taking into account the actual situation of the textbooks, the presentation of local culture, i.e. Chinese culture, is also the focus of this study. Therefore, we divided the extended circle into two subcategories, they are EC|Non-China (EC|NC) and EC|China (EC|C).

It should be noted that this study focuses on cultural content with country-specific orientation, including all texts, images, and videos in all modules of sixteen units in three textbooks.

2. Coding

After defining the analysis framework, the coding process began. First, we screened all the units in each textbook for country-specific cultural content; then we identified which of the four categories of products, practices, perspectives, and persons they belong to; and finally, we judged which these cultures belong to and encoded them. For example, when coding "Tian Hua", it is first determined that this content belongs to "persons", and then through the context, it is judged that she is a Chinese student, so "Tian Hua" is encoded as "Tian Hua" (person- EC|C). In addition, it is mentioned in the text that she is doing a one-year study in a high school in the United States, which is a product-related activity, so we encoded it again as "She is studying at an American high school for one year." (Practice-IC). If the same coding unit appears in different textbooks or in different units or even in different parts of the same unit, it was coded again and included in the proportion calculation. For example, the place Machu Picchu appears first in the module "Reading and Thinking" of Unit 2 in Book 1, and then appears in the last module of the same unit "Video Time". Although it is the same place, it was encoded twice because of the different location and presentation. In addition, the length of each cultural content in the textbooks varies from hundreds of words to several sentences or even several words. For example, the editor took up a large space to introduce the two sports legends Lang Ping and Michael Jordan in the module "Reading and Thinking" of Unit 3 in Book 1, while the famous basketball player Yao Ming only appears as an example for the post-reading discussion. Editors have their own focus when presenting different cultural content out of various considerations when compiling textbooks. However, this study mainly focuses on the frequency of the occurrence of cultural content, as this reflects the breadth of the culture involved in the textbooks. While the influence of the location or length of cultural content on the effect of cultural communication is limited by how teachers and students use and perceive materials, it is not within the scope of this study. In order to improve the accuracy of the coding, we communicated with first-line high school English teachers and took some valuable opinions into account during the coding process, and finally completed the coding of the cultural contents of the textbooks unit by unit.

3. Calculate the Proportion

After the coding was completed, the number of cultural contents of each cultural category, the number of cultural contents of different circles, and the number of cultural contents of different circles in each cultural category in the three textbooks were summarized separately. And on this basis, the proportion of cultural contents of each cultural category, the proportion of the cultural contents of different circles, and the proportion of the cultural contents of different circles in each cultural category in the three textbooks were calculated.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis, it was found that cultural contents exist widely in the three selected textbooks, not only in the units whose themes are closely related to culture, such as "Cultural Heritage", "History and Traditions", "Festivals and Celebrations" and "Diverse Cultures", but also in the units whose themes are not related to culture, such as "Teenage Life". This is in line with the requirement in the curriculum that all thematic contexts should include Chinese and foreign cultures. Besides, various cultural categories and circles are involved. Figure 1 shows the data analysis of the frequency of occurrence of the four categories of culture. It can be seen that in terms of cultural categories, product is the most frequent cultural category, followed by person, and perspective is the least. Although the three textbooks cover all four cultural categories, the frequency of presentation is uneven. This imbalance is also present in the frequency of

cultural contents across different circles. However, from Figure 2 it is obvious that, different from the research results of Keles and Yazan *et al.*, the frequency of culture contents of Expanding Circle exceeds that of Inner Circle, and the culture contents of Inner Circle no longer plays a dominant role in the textbooks, culture contents related to Inner Circle are no longer the focus of English textbooks. The frequency of Chinese cultural contents almost reaches a balance with that of Inner Circle. The editors seem to be trying to reduce the proportion of culture contents of Inner Circle and increase the proportion of Chinese culture to improve the phenomenon of “Chinese Culture Aphasia” in English teaching in China, so that students can learn to tell Chinese stories well in English.

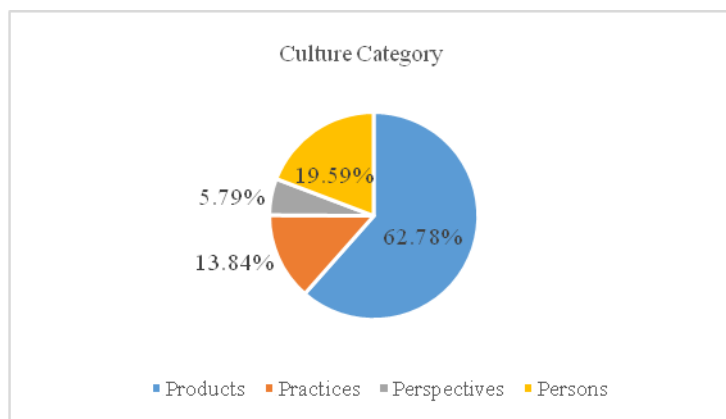


Figure1: The Proportion of Cultural Contents in “4 Ps” Culture Categories

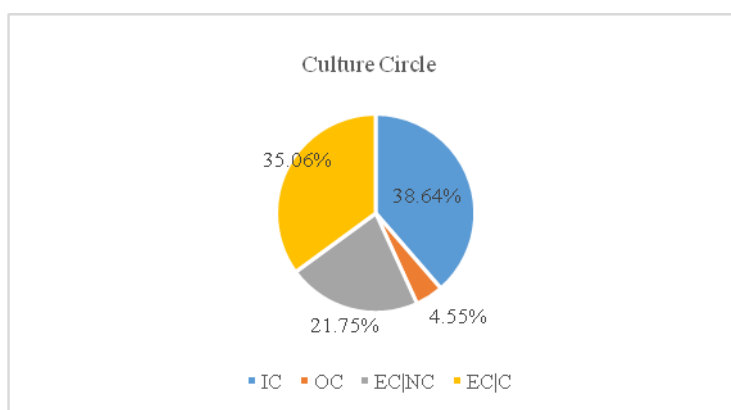


Figure2: The Proportion of Cultural Contents in Different Circle Categories

As shown in Table 1, data analysis of the circle category to which the cultural contents in 4Ps category belong was conducted separately, and essentially the same findings were obtained. Thus, from the perspective of reducing the proportion of cultural contents of Inner Circle, the presentation of cultural contents in senior high school English textbooks is largely consistent with the status of English as an international language. Further discussion of the study results was presented below.

TABLE 1
THE PROPORTION OF CULTURAL CONTENTS IN DIFFERENT CIRCLE CATEGORIES OF 4PS CATEGORIES

	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons
IC	38.99%	22.22%	45.84%	39.58%
OC	2.29%	16.67%	12.50%	6.25%
EC NC	22.94%	22.22%	20.83%	16.67%
EC C	36.78%	38.89%	20.83%	37.5%

A. The Proportion of Cultural Contents of 4Ps Is Unbalanced

It can be seen from Figure 1 that the proportion of products dominates the four cultural categories, reaching 62.78%. The products associated with tourist attractions (e.g. *Iceland, Peru, Jiuzhaigou and the Terracotta Army*) have the highest proportion. It also includes products related to food (e.g. *apple pie, pudding and Laba porridge*), movies (e.g. *The Million Pound Note and the Phantom of the Opera*), and music (e.g. *Symphony No. 3 and Symphony No. 5*). The ways of presentation of cultural contents include text and images. Among them, the presentation in the form of text is divided into primary and secondary. For example, the entire “Reading and Thinking” module of Unit 2 in Book 1 is used to introduce Peru and its four tourist routes, while some products only appear as a name in an exercise. Like the text, images also assume the role of cultural carriers and are presented in a more visual way than the text, as shown in

Figure 3, where the editors use images to visually introduce some of China's cultural heritage. While the cultural contents related to products are rich and presented in various ways, but most of them are introduced to learners in the form of "tourist perspective". The depth of cultural materials needs to be further explored, which is the reason why cultural contents related to perspectives appear less frequently. Each cultural phenomenon has certain support behind it, such as religious traditions, myths and legends, values, etc. This reflects the depth of cultural materials and can help students better understand various cultural phenomena. However, there is very little introduction about this aspect in textbooks, and this lack will cause the confusion of knowing what it is and not knowing why it is to learners.

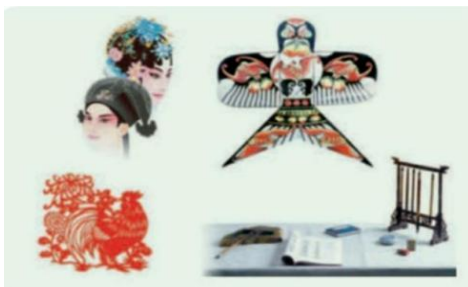


Figure 3: An Example of Cultural Content Presented in Image Form

B. The Proportion of Cultural Contents in Various Circle Categories Is Unbalanced

Like the situation of cultural categories, the proportion of cultural contents in each circle category is also uneven. In addition, there is an imbalance in the proportion of cultural contents from different countries and regions within each circle category. As shown in Table 2, the cultural contents in the three textbooks cover only four Inner Circle countries and are dominated by English and American cultures, with a scattering of Canadian and Irish cultures, and no culture related to the two countries of Australia and New Zealand was found. Similarly, as shown in Table 3, the cultural contents of the Outer Circle place the emphasis on cultures associated with India and South Africa. We also analyzed the cultural contents of the Expanding Circle excluding China, which involve relatively more countries, such as France, Germany, Russia, Spain, Egypt, Japan, and Korea, etc. However, those that appear more frequently are mainly focused on cultures related to European countries, such as France, Germany, and Russia, and those related to Asian and African countries appear less frequently. It should be noted that cultures related to Pakistan, Cambodia, Serbia, Nepal, and other countries that have always maintained friendly and mutual assistance relations with our country do not appear in the three textbooks. In addition, the cultural contents of the Expanding Circle in the textbooks are presented in a fragmented manner and lack systematization.

TABLE 2
PROPORTIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF CULTURAL CONTENTS IN THE INNER CIRCLE

England	America	Canada	Ireland
45.38%	49.58%	3.36%	1.68%

TABLE 3
PROPORTIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF CULTURAL CONTENTS IN THE OUTER CIRCLE

India	South Africa	Other
35.71%	28.57%	11.29%

C. Efforts to Increase the Proportion of Chinese Culture

From the proportion of the cultural contents of each circle category in the three textbooks, we can see that the editors may have tried to reduce the proportion of cultural contents of the Inner Circle and increase the proportion of the Chinese cultural contents. As can be seen from Figure 1, the proportion of Chinese cultural content is almost close to a balance with the cultural contents of the Inner Circle. Taking a specific module as an example, during the coding process, we found that compared with the previous version of the textbooks (published in 2007), the new version of the textbooks (published in 2019) added a "Video Time" module, which opens a window for learners to learn and understand cultural knowledge in the form of video. Given that, we analyzed the cultural contents of all the "Video Time" modules in the three textbooks separately. It was found that there were 12 cultural contents with obvious country-specific orientation, including 4 pieces of cultural content of Inner Circle and 5 Chinese cultures, and the number of cultural contents of China even exceeded that of Inner Circle. Take a unit as an example, the theme of the unit is "Festivals and Celebrations", which is a unit closely related to culture, mainly introducing various festivals at home and abroad. The study found that 15 festivals are introduced in this unit, among which there are 8 festivals related to China, accounting for about 53.33%. The EIL theory is an important reflection and conceptual subversion of the traditional paradigm of EFL communicative competence development, whose core idea is that the criterion of success in English language learning is no longer the native language as the only reference system, but the effectiveness of communication in the context of globalization (Yu & Liu, 2019). And the effectiveness of such communication is not

limited to the understanding of the communicator, but also the cultural sharing with the communicator and the cultural influence on the communicator, which in some cases are more important for successful communication. For Chinese learners, it is to improve their own ability to express Chinese culture in English, which is the starting point for textbook editors to increase the proportion of Chinese culture in the context of English as an international language.

D. From Monoculturalism to Cultural Diversity

From existing studies of the language textbooks, it has been found that the cultural contents in the textbooks present the characteristics of monoculturalism, which limits learners' understanding of the diversity of the world and hinders the development of multiculturalism, which is inconsistent with the idea of EIL. Although the frequency of the cultural contents of various circle categories in the new edition of senior high school English textbooks is uneven, the textbook editors have attempted to present learners with a more diverse and inclusive culture in terms of a single country. For example, when introducing Chinese festivals, not only the main traditional festivals (such as *the Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Double Ninth Festival*, etc.) are included, but also Chinese minority festivals (such as *the Naadam Festival in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the Zhuang People's Folk Song Festival*), showing diversity. This multicultural presentation will lead learners to realize that the culture of each country is not only related to one or a few selected cultural characteristics, and that ethnic groups are not homogeneous, and they all present their rich cultural characteristics. In addition, the textbooks also present some examples of cultural integration, such as a food called "Mexican-Chinese noodles", San Francisco's Chinatown and the world's biggest melting pot, Queens in the United States.

V. CONCLUSION AND INSPIRATION

This study chose the three English textbooks published by the Peoples Education Press of China in 2019 as the research object and explored whether the presentation of cultural contents in the textbooks reflects the status of English as an international language. In general, the characteristics of culture presentation in China's senior high English textbooks are consistent with the background that English has developed into an international language. The cultural content in the textbooks is no longer dominated by the Inner Circle category but presents us with more diverse world culture. However, the representation of 4Ps categories and different circle categories, as well as the cultural contents of different countries within each circle category, is still unbalanced. Based on the problems identified in the textbook analysis, textbook editors can try to make improvements in the following aspects: First, they should increase the proportion of cultural content about perspectives category and choose more multicultural content. For example, they can add background knowledge about cultural phenomena, rather than just presenting cultural contents in the form of a tourist's perspective, increasing the depth of cultural materials; Second, the representation of the cultural content of each circle category should no longer be limited to a few representative countries, but should increase the cultural contents of more countries, so that learners can be exposed to more diverse cultures. For example, they can add the cultures of countries that have been maintaining good relations with China, such as Pakistan, Cambodia, and Serbia, as well as the cultures of countries along the "Belt and Road". The extent to which the cultural content in textbooks is transmitted to students is influenced by the teachers. Teachers are the dynamic force in educational reform, and English textbooks can only be truly effective in achieving the cultural mission they carry through teachers' creative interpretations based on the actual teaching situation (Guo, 2020). Teachers need to correctly understand the new positioning of English in the new era, establish the EIL teaching concept, and improve their professional quality. In terms of teacher education, teachers can also be provided with relevant teacher training on the concept of cultural content compilation in textbooks, and English teachers can also conduct cooperative teaching with teachers in other subjects closely related to culture (such as history and politics). This study focused on the proportion of each cultural content and examined the breadth of the cultural content. While the depth of the cultural content, i.e., how each culture content is presented, whether it is presented implicitly or explicitly, and the length of each culture content, will affect the attention of teachers and learners to culture, which in turn affects learners' perception of culture.

With the globalization of the economy and the networking of information exchange, the essence and role of English have changed. It is no longer a language unique to native-speaking countries such as the England and the United States but has become an international language used by different countries and peoples to express different cultures. Changes in the domestic and international situations have brought challenges to the traditional cultural teaching concept of English education in China, and the traditional cultural teaching concept is no longer in line with the background of the new era. Wen (2012) mentioned in relation to how to teach culture in the context of English as an international language that to achieve the expected effect of culture teaching, it is necessary to cultivate students' intercultural competence in three aspects: sensitivity to cultural differences, tolerance to cultural differences, and flexibility in dealing with cultural differences, and to enhance students' sense of identification with the excellent traditional culture. And the path to its realization needs to present students with diverse world cultures. English textbooks, as an important way of cultural transmission, need to shoulder their cultural mission in the new era.

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