A Study on Cultural Input in Non-English-major College English Education

Yang Jiaoyan

School of Arts and Law, Sichuan Agricultural University, Chengdu, China

937653817@qq.com

Keywords: Evaluation of Course-books, New 21st College English, Evaluation of College English Teachers, Solutions to Current Cultural Education

Abstract. Given that cultural input is insufficient in Non-English-major college English education, the paper analyzes the reasons from two aspects: one is the current English college course-books for non-English majors, and the other is the English teachers in China. Furthermore, it proposes solutions to the current cultural education for non-English majors.

Introduction

English is universally recognized as the world language, which is widely used in the more and more frequent all-around international interactions. Meanwhile, with the rapid development of China, the status of Chinese has greatly been improved. Chinese is selected as one of the six official languages in UN. According to Baidu Encyclopedia, there were 500 Confucius Institutes in 134 countries with 1,900,000 students until 2015.[1] Now, more than 30 million foreigners are studying Chinese by various means in the world and Chinese is taught in over 2,500 universities in 100 countries.[2] The largest number of people in the world use Chinese as their mother tongue in the world and Chinese was learned as the second language by the sixth largest number of people in the world.[3] But the rise of Chinese is still overshadowed by the thriving of English. The influence of Chinese is incomparable to that of English. As a result, in the inter-cultural communication, it is critical to strengthen the impact of Chinese by the output of Chinese culture. But Chinese English learners are ill-equipped for that, for Chinese aphasia is wide-spread in the English education. Since Lado (1957) first proposed the necessity of integrating culture into language teaching,[4] more and more language instructors in China have realized the close link between cultural education and language education and add cultural elements in their language teaching process. But in the process, the language teaching is separated from culture teaching. Specifically-speaking, vocabulary, phrases, sentences, and texts are taught with no consideration of the culture that they may involve while there are independent cultural courses like Introduction to the Culture of English-Speaking Countries and British and American Culture attempting to teach students culture, which will instill in students’ mind a misconception that language learning is chiefly involved in grammar and culture learning is mainly linked to the acquaintance with some historical figures and events of the target culture, the outline of the politics, economy in the English-speaking countries. The misconception will mislead the students in their language learning. Given the situation, the paper attempts to analyze the existing problem with current cultural input in college English education and propose some methods to improve the unoptimistic situation.

Assessment of Cultural Elements in New 21st College English

English teachers in China conduct language teaching based on the course-books. Whether the cultural elements in the course-books are sufficient and proper determines the success or failure of cultural education of college education to a large degree. Consequently, it is really of great necessity to evaluate the cultural elements in the college English course-books in China.

Hutchinson’s Method of Evaluation

Hutchinson (1987) proposed that “Evaluation is a matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose. Evaluation is, then, concerned with relative merits. There is no absolute good or bad – only degrees of fitness for the required purpose.”[5] His method of evaluation commences
with the definition of evaluation criteria, then subjective and objective analyses are conducted, and at last the results of the analysis are matched to find out to what degree the teaching materials have fulfilled the criteria that are defined by the evaluator. Based on the means, Hutchinson (1987) put forward a criteria that consisted of five factors, namely, objectives, listeners, content, methodology and other standards.[5] Furthermore, he designed twenty-one subjective questions, which were aimed at making sure the material users’ need for the materials, and twenty-one objective ones, which were aimed at collecting information about the materials used. The evaluator of the materials would compare and contrast the results obtained from the subjective questions and objective ones, then draw a conclusion about the fitness of the materials analyzed. This method is firstly applied for evaluation of English-for-special-purpose courses, but for its validity and easy operation, it is widely applied in the assessment of the common language courses. Although Hutchinson has presented the direction for the evaluation of cultural elements in college English course-books, yet the standards proposed by him are not specific enough, for one of his five standards are other criteria, which is not easily managed. It is necessary to seek more manageable criteria.

Criteria for Evaluation of Cultural Elements

Byram centered on the evaluation of cultural elements in course-books and he (1989) presented his standards for assessing the treatment of cultural elements in language course-books. The standards involves seven facets, which are respectively: 1) giving factually accurate and up-to-date information; 2) avoiding stereotypes by raising awareness; 3) presenting a realistic picture; 4) being free from (or questioning) ideological tendencies; 5) presenting phenomena in context rather than as isolated facts; 6) explicitly relating historical material to contemporary society; 7) making it clear how personalities are products of their age.[6] In addition, Byram (1993) focused on the eight manners and fields that the culture in the course-books involved, which are: Social identity and social groups which mean social class, regional identity and ethnic minorities; social interaction which means various levels of formality as outsider and insider; belief and behavior which mean moral, religious beliefs and daily behaviors; social and political institutions which means government, departments of health care and social security, institutions of law and order; socialization and the life style which mean families, schools, employment, rites of passage; national history including historical and contemporary events which mark the national identity; national geography consisting of geographic elements which are considered being significant by members in the specified culture; stereotypes and national identity which is typical symbols of national stereotypes.[7] Byram has checked the cultural content in language course-books and supplied significant perspectives for establishing a feasible evaluating standards of cultural content in college English course-books for this paper. With consideration of Hutchinson’s and Byram’s theory, the assessing criteria applied in the paper are: 1) the coverage of macro-culture including social and political institutions, national history, stereotypes and national identity and national geography, which are proposed by Byram; 2) the presentation of micro-culture including social identity and social groups, social interaction, belief and behavior, which is mentioned by Byram; 3) cross-cultural angles in the course-books; 4) authenticity of materials compiled in the course-books.

Analysis of Present Widely-used College English Course-books

There are six widely-used college English course-books for non-English-major college students in China, namely, New College English (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1999),[8] New Horizon College English (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001),[9] New Century College English (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2007),[10] New Standard College English (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2008),[11] New Vision College English (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2011)[12] and New 21st College English (Futan University Publishing House, 2013).[13] The course-books are the significant foundation on which foreign language teaching is based on. The adoption of these course-books in the subject of intensive reading for non-English majors is aimed at improving the language skills of non-English-major college students. Therefore the evaluation of cultural elements in the books is of great assistance to perceive the cultural education for non-English majors. Given the limitation of
research time and the author’s familiarity with the course-books, the paper centers on the evaluation of the cultural elements in New 21st College English.

Each unit in New 21st College English contains four parts, which are Lead-in, Reading Focus—Text A, Integrated Exercises, Reading Focus—Text B. Lead-in includes two kinds of exercise: part A is a discussion on a cartoon and part B is a listening test related to the content of the unit. Reading Focus—Text A consists of the text, new words and expressions, notes to the text, comprehension of the text. Integrated Exercises is made up of vocabulary study, cloze test, translation, discussion forum, and writing forum. Reading Focus—Text B includes the text, new words and expressions, notes to the text, comprehension questions for Text B, banked cloze and compound dictation.

In terms of macro-culture, New 21st College English has done a comparatively better job. The notes to the text provide some background information concerning the politics, historical backgrounds, society and important figures and institutions mentioned in the texts. For example, on Page 31, Book 3, there are detailed introduction to Lotsa Helping Hand and CBS Studio Center. With the help of the notes, college students can have a brief glimpse into the target culture. In addition, the topic that each unit involves in is universally common. In other words, the topics are familiar to the college students. For example, the topics in Book 3 are Teaching and Learning, Helping People in Need, Conformity or Diversity, Famous People, Hobbies, Success, Honesty and Environmental Protection. All the topics tend to reveal the things in common of different cultures rather than demonstrate the discrepancy of different cultures. The arrangement of the topics offers students no opportunities to experience cultural shock in their process of language learning, which will impede the cultivation of their cross-cultural communication abilities.

In terms of micro-culture, the topics in New 21st College English demonstrated the beliefs, behaviors, social groups and interactions in target culture. For example, Honesty in Book 3 and Positive life Attitude in Book Two have shown the morals and ethics that native English speakers have valued. Conformity and Diversity in Book 3, Generation Gap in Book Two and Parenting in Book One have indicated the means of social interactions between the individual and the group, the old and the young respectively. These texts can enable students to have a brief idea of foreign views on human nature and have an insight into foreign thinking mode. However, the content of the text is inclined to show college students the weaknesses of the English culture instead of the strength. For example, Racism and Sexism in Book describes the racial and sex discrimination in American Society, but fails to mention the improvement of the situations. In that case, college students are unable to know the multifaceted target culture.

In terms of cross-cultural angles, all the 64 texts studied in the paper only involves in target culture without any narration of Chinese culture, or the other cultures. Consequently, the application of the books fails to foster the cross-cultural communicative ability for the solitary cultural input of the course-books.

In terms of authenticity, “Really authentic material is the material that creates an authentic response, that informs, challenges, stimulates, enriches exercises, encourages curiosity, develops judgment, and does other things that real language does” (Cunningsworth, 2002). In the aspect, New 21st College English has done a great job, for the texts in the books are chosen from popular magazines or websites, famous newspapers, etc. Although there is some adaptation or abridgement of the original texts, yet the cultural content is maintained for the original texts are adapted or abridged to ease the difficulty of expressions and boost students’ understanding.

From the previous assessment of cultural elements in New 21st College English, the compilation of the books is good in terms of the presentation of macro-culture and authenticity, but there is still room to be improved when it comes to the presentation of micro-culture and cross-cultural perspectives.
Evaluation of College English Teachers in China

The cultural education is mainly carried out by College English teachers in China, therefore their understanding of cultural education, their own knowledge of culture and their teaching skills will have an impact on the cultural education. It is necessary to assess the teachers’ attitudes toward cultural education, their knowledge of culture and their teaching skills. The paper has interviewed 25 college English teachers in Sichuan Agricultural University. The interview has demonstrated that they have a consensus that it is important to incorporate cultural teaching into language education. But the current popular exam-oriented education has compelled them to decrease the cultural education in their daily English instruction, for students are more interested in passing CET 4 and CET 6 rather in understanding of culture. Among the 25 teachers interviewed, only 3 have been in American for a year, about 4 have been to Australia for one and a half months. Consequently, about three fourths of the teachers have never experienced the target culture in person. And all of them have admitted that they learn culture mainly from the books, which is rather superficial. Most of them feel disqualified to undertake the cultural teaching. As the teaching skills, their English instruction is mainly about the explanation of words and texts, the cultivation of listening, writing, and translating ability, for they are closely linked to CET 4 and CET 6. And the teachers say that the cultural education is not indispensable, which means that if the time is allowed, then they will add some, otherwise they will skip this part. Although the interview is conducted among 25 teachers, yet the results from it are common. And it can be seen that cultural education in current college education is random and optional.

And the methods in which the teachers present culture to students are mainly their narrations with some pictures. The method is so monotonous that the students are easy to lose interests in it under the pressure of exam. And the content of culture that the teachers present is only limited to target culture for they take it for granted that their students have already had a good command of Chinese culture because they live in China. But the teachers fail to understand that the comparison and contrasts of target culture and native culture cannot only better students’ understanding of their own culture, but also improve the cross-cultural communicative competence of the students.

Solutions to Current Cultural Education

Compilation of Better Course-books

Given the defects of present college English course-books for non-English majors, it is essential to compile better course-books which properly and sufficiently present the target culture and native culture to the students. Compared with target culture, Chinese culture is in the weak position for some of the English-speaking countries enjoy the stronger military and economic positions. If Chinese cultural aphasia is continuing in college English education, it is easy for the students to blindly accept target culture and underestimate Chinese culture, which is harmful for the balance of the relationship among culture, language and countries.

Improvement of Cultural Education from the Perspective of Teachers

When it comes to teachers’ deposit of culture, teachers should be provided more chances to experience the target culture in person, which means that government should offer to them more opportunities to study abroad. In that case, the teachers can deepen their mastery of the target culture so that they can enable their students to have deep insight into the target culture instead of the superficial comprehension. Meanwhile, the college English teachers should have training courses of Chinese culture and train themselves to present Chinese culture in English properly and smoothly.

Concerning the teaching methods, the teachers should cleverly integrate cultural teaching into all aspects of language teaching. Although the teachers are helpless in changing the exam-oriented college English education for non-English majors, yet there are still a lot that they can do to conduct cultural teaching. The current college English education for non-English majors usually consists of vocabulary and grammar explanations, English reading, listening, writing and translation. In every aspect, the teachers can add some interesting cultural elements in a clever way.
When it comes to vocabulary instruction, the teachers can add the connotative meanings of words to the instruction rather than only cram the students with the denotative meanings of the words. Denotative meanings is different from connotative meaning in that denotation is the conceptual or the literal meaning of the word, which reflects the relationship between the word and the item in the nature that the word refers to while connotation is what is communicated by virtue of what language refers to. In other words, denotation is the meaning consulted in the dictionary, which ensures the communication, while connotation conveys the emotional suggestions related to that word, which is supplementary to the denotation and culturally-bound. For instance, the teacher can add the cultural elements by distinguishing the English words, farmer and peasant. Although they have the same meaning in Chinese, yet the teacher can tell the students that the connotation of peasant is rude, illiterate and that farmer has no such connotation. In this way, not only can students have a better command of the two words, but also have learned a little culture.

When it comes to grammar education, the teacher can still instill some culture into the students. For example, when the teachers teach the reverse structures in English, they can compare the Chinese reverse structures and English ones. Through the comparison, it can be known that there are no structural inverse structures but meaning inverse structures in Chinese, however, that there are both in English. Through this way, the students cannot only have a better mastery of the grammar, but also have a deep understanding of the Chinese and English language.

When it comes to the cultivation of listening, reading, writing and translating ability, culture elements can also be included in the process. The teacher can arrange the students to listen to some cultural passages such as the Christmas shopping in America and How Chinese Spend the Spring Festival, read some cultural reports such as Two-child Policy in China and European Population Reports, write some composition about culture such as Introduction to Chinese Higher Education and Comments on the American Election Systems, and translate some cultural texts such as Paper-cutting, and Qi Pao Today. By means of the addition, language teaching is cleverly combined with cultural teaching.

In addition, English teachers should diversify their ways of presenting cultural elements in the class. Besides the narration with pictures, they can organize oral activities like discussion on the content of the text, and the role-play in a specified situation. For example, the teacher can require students to discuss about the child’s respect for the father’s decision to choose die with dignity rather than live with shame in My Father’s Best Gift in Book One. Through the discussion, the students can better comprehend the text and know the different ways of Chinese and Americans to show their love towards parents.

Acknowledgements

The draft of the paper is impossible with the support of my family and friends, so I would sincerely thank those who lifted me up when I was depressed, those who offered me some valuable suggestions when I encountered difficulties in the writing of the paper, and those who helped me find the useful reference materials when my schedule was tight.

References


