Cultural Contents in a University EFL Listening Textbook in China

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Abstract
The inseparable relationship between culture and language is always taken into account when English teaching and learning is discussed. Within the particular EFL teaching and learning conventions in China, it is observed that the textbooks play a very important role influencing teaching and learning in the EFL classroom. EFL teaching should aim to provide learners with the opportunities to learn various cultural contents for enhancing their intercultural communicative competence. The present study designed 3 culture categories and 16 themes for Big “C” and little “c” culture domains to analyze and investigate the way culture is addressed in EFL listening textbooks in China in terms of Big “C” culture and little “c” culture categories at the university level of education as well as to what degree the culture contents in textbooks can facilitate learners’ intercultural communicative competence in particular. Findings show that Big “C” culture is served as the supreme source of culture in the target textbook while the little “c” culture is presented with a much lower frequency. The research results show a possible reason that the intercultural incompetence of Chinese students and the lack of little “c” culture may be a factor that the target textbook cannot facilitate learners’ intercultural communicative competence better.

Keywords: Language and Culture, International Language, Intercultural communicative competence, Cultural Contents, Big “C” culture, little “c” culture, EFL culture learning in China
1. Introduction

Language is the ‘carrier’ of culture, since it is through language that we learn about, share and participate in the development of culture (Duranti 1997). Applied linguists and language teachers have become aware that foreign language can rarely be learned without addressing the culture of the background and context in which it is used. Kramsch (1998: 3) identifies the ways how language and culture are bound together by indicating that people use language to express facts and ideas but also to reflect their attitudes which were gradually developed through the way that they live in the cultural communities. Moreover, language symbolizes cultural reality because people view their language as a symbol of their cultural identity. Therefore, this inseparable relationship between culture and language is always taken into account when English teaching and learning are discussed.

Smith (1976) defines the term ‘international language’ as a language which is used by people of different nations who do not share a common native language to communicate. In her book, McKay (2002) identified in English performed as an international language four features of an international language originally noted by Brutt-Griffer (2002). The features of an international language are: First, the international language is demanded because of the development of global integration includes economical, scientific, cultural and intellectual life. Second, it establishes itself alongside of other languages in multilingual contexts. Third, it is learned by the people from various levels of society. Fourth, it spreads not through speaker migration but rather by many individuals acquiring the language. Thus, as an international language, one primary function of English is to enable speakers to share their ideas and culture with people coming from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The above projections of four features support the pedagogical sense of English learning: English learning should focus on improving learners’ ability to understand cultures, including your own, and to use this understanding to communicate with people from other cultures successfully, namely Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Intercultural Communicative Competence is the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and
appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (Parry, 1999). Intercultural communication is not confined to the socioeconomic elite because it takes place across a broad range of situations, from high-level political issues at international stages to ordering dishes while on vacation in another country. Learning different cultures provide people with more open-minded approach toward international understanding, to communicate better with people of different cultures, and to understand one’s own culture by comparing with other cultures.

2. Statement of the Problem and EFL in China

Along with the development of international English teaching theories, there is a significant reform in the curriculum for English majors of higher education institutions in China. The latest version of the EFL national curriculum states that one of the aims of English majors’ education is to enhance students’ intercultural communicative competence in term of cultural awareness, tolerance to ambiguity and open-mindedness towards the variety of cultures. The curriculum also particularly emphasizes that students should comprehend culture including English-speaking countries’ geography, history, cultural values and customs. (Ministry of Education of China, 2000). These regulations indicate that culture learning is considered as important as linguistic learning for English education in the Chinese EFL classroom at a theoretical and oriented level.

However, in a practical way, according to my observation as an English teacher, the Chinese students’ intercultural communicative competencies do not seem to meet the requirement of the curriculum. I observed that my students could for example describe places of historic interest, history, current political and economical issues, in a superficial way, which are referred to the products and contribution to society (as Big “C” culture) while communicating with foreigners. But once discussions were more detailed and specified, especially when the living patterns and style, everyday routines and cultural values topics were concerned, they were usually confused on such a contrast of cultural differences. The phenomenon led to an investigation of the possible factors affecting students’ cultural communicative competence.
According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999)’s report and my own experience as a student, many Chinese students approach textbooks as teachers and authorities. They expect the teacher to help their knowledge expounded on the basis of the contents presented in textbooks. Many Chinese English teachers take the English textbooks as the only or indispensable resource for their everyday teaching. Students are made to spend a large amount of time on textbook-related work in classrooms. It is not difficult to see that many teachers and students expect to cover everything in a textbook. Following this way of thinking, the textbooks probably are thus viewed and accepted as facts, as authority documents both in linguistic and cultural contents. Therefore, when the intercultural communicative competence and cultural learning are presumed, it is necessary and primary to examine the in-used textbooks for cultural elements in the Chinese EFL context. Furthermore, compared with the increasing number of studies on linguistic-related on textbook contents; there are few studies on counterparts on cultural aspects in China.

3. Objective
The present study focuses on the cultural contents of an in-used textbook in the foreign language classroom and attempt to find some factors that the culture contents in textbooks may affect learners’ intercultural communicative competence. The main aim of the study is to examine the state of references to Big “C” and little “c” cultural categories in the EFL in-used textbook.

4. Technical Terms
4.1 Culture
According to Byram (1989), culture refers to the whole way of life of the foreign country, including but not limited to its production in the arts, philosophy and ‘high culture’ in general. Hinkel (1999:1) also noted there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviors, and activities in many definitions of culture.
In the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996 volume), culture is defined as formal culture, including the formal institutions (social, political, and economic), the great figures of history, and those products of literature, fine arts, and the sciences that were traditionally assigned to the category of elite culture. In contrast, culture is defined as the aspects of daily living studied by the sociologist and the anthropologies, such as housing, clothing, food, tools, transportation, and all the patterns of behavior that members of the culture regard as necessary and appropriate (Hinkel, 1999).

These definition shows that culture is seen as something which is learned, and passed down from one generation to the next. Culture is seen as having to do with the material productions as well as people’s knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, ways of thinking and behaving.

**4.2 Big “C” and little “c” culture**

**Big “C” Culture**  
The culture, which focuses on the products and contribution to a society and its outstanding individuals, is often referred to as large/big/capital “C” culture (Chastain 1988: 303), including politics, economy, history, literature, fine arts, sciences and geography. In his description on Big “C” culture, Lafayette (1997) indicates, those that fit the Big “C” category include recognizing and explaining geographical monuments, historical events, major institutions (administrative, political, religious, educational, etc.), and major artistic monuments.

**Little “c” culture**  
‘Way of life’, daily living and culture patterns including the routine aspects of life, have become to be known as culture with a small/little “c”, such as food, holidays, living style, customs and values. (Tomalin & Stempleski 1993:6, Pulverness 1995:9) According Lafayette (1997), the little “c” goals he suggests include recognizing and explaining everyday active cultural patterns such eating, shopping and greeting people; every passive pattern such as social stratification, marriage and work; and acting appropriately in common everyday situations.
5. Framework

The textbook analysis was done based on a modified version of Chen (2004) and Lee (2009) model, designed and adopted for a similar purpose. Chen (2004) designed 9 themes for Big “C” culture and 13 themes for little “c” to investigate the attitudes of students for cultural learning in Chinese EFL classroom with references from Lessard (1996). Lee (2009) collected 11 high-school EFL conversation textbooks used in Korea to see how the textbooks teach culture. The themes he designed for Big “C” and little “c” domains are based on Paige et al.(1999,2003) and Hinkel (2001).

Following the definition of Big “C” and little “c” culture, the whole 129 listening tasks (texts) were classified into three categories with reference to the nature and the main idea of each listening task: Culture Free Category, Big “C” Culture Category and Little “c” Culture Category with an intention to provide a relatively comprehensive picture of the state of the culture in the textbook. Some texts had no reference to a specific cultural point. It was not clear to any cultural information. For example: a guideline for applying for a student visa, the best way to present the advertisements. This type of texts was classified as Culture Free Category.

For acquiring the Big “C” culture category and little “c” culture category, 16 themes were designed for examining the detailed classification under each category.

The detailed themes are:

1. **Big “C” culture category (9 themes):** Governments/Politics(G/P), Economy(Ec), History(Hi), Geography(G), Literature/Art(L/A), Society’s norms(S), Education(Ed), Architecture(A) and Music(M).

2. **Little “c” culture category (7 themes):** Food(F), Holiday(Ho), Living Style(L/S), Customs(C), Belief/Value(B/V), Hobbies(Hob) and Gesture/body language(G/B).

6. Textbook Analysis
Under the inspection and approval of the Ministry of Education, most English teaching materials that are currently being used in China fall into two categories: international/global textbooks written by English native speakers and local/locally produced textbooks written by Chinese English educators.

The target textbook for the current study entitled *Contemporary College English for Listening 3*, is for sophomores in the English major program in Jiangxi University of Science and Technology, China. It is the local textbooks written and edited by Chinese English educators from *Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press*. It was chosen because it was widely used in universities and colleges, which was conformed to the requirement of the national curriculum of China.

The *Contemporary College English for Listening 3*, containing 15 units, is designed based on 129 listening comprehension tasks.

In the students’ book, each unit contains four parts: objectives, listening aids, tasks, and exercises.

1. **Objective**: describes the requirements for both listening skills and comprehension of topics.
2. **Listening aids**: vocabulary which is presenting in the unit
3. **Tasks**: each unit contains 7-11 tasks for students to listen
4. **Exercises**: questions for students to answer according to the listening tasks

In the teachers’ book, there are also four parts in each unit: objectives, scripts, keys and notes.

1. **Objectives**: describes the requirements for both listening skills and comprehension of topics, same as in students’ book
2. **Scripts**: script for the listening tasks
3. **Keys**: the answers to the exercises in students’ book
4. **Notes**: for teachers to give further explanations on listening comprehension
The present study focused on listening tasks in the students’ book, scripts in the teacher’s book, as well as the notes in the teacher’s book. These three parts are more informative for the analysis. Objectives are also considered as a reference but not analysis while analyzing the listening tasks because the objectives indicate the general topic of the whole unit. Due to the exercises part from the student’s book and keys part from the teacher’s book are redundant of the listening tasks part which two are focus on the comprehension; the present analysis has dropped these parts from the study. The listening aids part (vocabulary) from the students’ book has also been dropped from data analysis for it is simply the explanations of new words.

The model of the present study concentrated on an account of the amount (percentage and frequency) and kind (categories and themes) of presentation given to cultural categories in the textbook.

7. Results and Discussion

Figure-1 shows the authors of *Contemporary College English, Listening 3* spent a considerable amount of devotion (50%) to the Big “C” culture category through dialogues, monologues, descriptive texts and argumentative texts. However, little “c” culture learning (33%) was observed with a much lower portion of themes. The rest was culture free category which was 17% of total 129 tasks. Calculating by frequency, there are 9 themes of Big “C” culture occurred 65 times, while 7 themes of little “c” culture were observed 42 times in all listening tasks in target textbook. Thus, it is noticeable from the analysis results that the cultural contents settings in the textbook appear to depict major products and contributions of society (Big “C” culture) to learners.
Figure-2 signifies the frequency of the themes under Big “C” culture and little “c” culture category. Throughout the tasks in the target textbook, the “Living style” theme of little “c” culture domain ranked top frequency, with a total of 20 times in the textbook. It is followed by the “governments/politics” theme, the “belief/value” theme, the “history” theme and the “music” theme, which four themes respectively occurred 15 times, 14 times, 12 times and 10 times. By contrast, gesture/body language was not found in tasks. The other 3 themes only occur one time each, which are food, holiday and hobbies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Big “C” culture themes</th>
<th>little “c” culture themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G/P, Governments/Politics</td>
<td>F, Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ec, Economy</td>
<td>Ho, Holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi, History</td>
<td>L/S, Living style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G, Geography</td>
<td>C, Customs</td>
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<tr>
<td>L/A, Literature/Art</td>
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<td>S, Society’s norms</td>
<td>Hob, Hobbies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ed, Education</td>
<td>G/B, Gesture/body language</td>
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<tr>
<td>A, Architecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>M, Music</td>
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Similar results can be found from Lee (2009). The findings show that all of the 11 high school textbooks from EFL classroom in Korea neglect the small “c” culture learning. A lot of educators (Chastain 1988:303, Tomalin & Stempleski 1993, Pulverness 1995) agree that the priority of culture learning should be given to little “c” in EFL classroom which is able to improve language learners’ intercultural competence more. To be exact, culture learning should aim at familiarizing English learners with customs and habits, food, holidays, life-style, generally-accepted world view. The result of textbook analysis may explain as previously mentioned problems of intercultural communicative competence the author observed from Chinese English students.

### 7.1 The Big “C” culture

The “Governments/politics” theme was found 15 times in tasks, which was ranked as second among all 16 themes of both Big “C” culture and little “c” culture. The political policies were included when news tasks were presented in listening tasks such as gun control, farming policy, war issues, and heads’ presentations of countries. The theme of “History” was observed by a high frequency as 12 times. They were introduced as related to history of education institutions, farming history, history of famous arts and Olympics Games.
“history” themes were not only related to a solo country, but also were presented by introducing significant issues in particular fields all over the world. The “Music” theme was found as 10 times when Chinese and British pop music stars, American rock singer, Chinese traditional music and people’s preferences of music were introduced. The classic music was also presented such as Mozart, Tchaikovsky’s well-known contributions to the music field. The author paid great attention to the music’s role of transferring various culture values and brought the learners with different types of music from different culture backgrounds, Chinese learners’ own culture knowledge were especially considered.

With the above detailed contents of Big “C” culture showed in the textbook in mind, one would find, although Big “C” culture were given a heavy proportion in terms of total amount, however, they were presented in a superficial way. It is suggested that cultural content related to the Big “C” category needs to be presented with some explanation in relation to how particular Big “C” contents reflects the underlying cultural values and beliefs.

7.2 The Little “c” culture
Little “c” culture themes such as “Food”, “Holiday” and “Hobbies” were only presented in the textbook for one time. These three themes are common cultural contents which could be found in many language materials to transfer little “c” culture information. By contrast, the three themes were rarely found in the current textbook. Of all the themes, the “Living style” theme from little “c” culture was utilized most frequently (a total of 20 times, 19%) and widely presented in most units (9 units of total 15 units). People were talking about their daily routines and various living styles in dialogues and monologues in the target textbook. As well, some tasks were designed to compare the change of living style in different times and countries, including the UK, USA, and France. It is found that “Belief/value” themes overlapped much with these other components of cultural systems largely because beliefs and values play such a pervasive role in culture.

Body language exists in every culture and differs from each other. It was indicated by Edward
Hall (1959), gesture and body languages were important as the signals of cultural distinctions. However, as seen in Figure-2, the “Gesture/body language” theme was not involved in any tasks in the target textbook. In Xiao and Petraki’s (2007) research, the results derived from questionnaires and interviews revealed that the Chinese students encounter many difficulties when interacting with students from other countries which they ascribed to lack of knowledge of intercultural communication, culture shock and differences in nonverbal communication and politeness strategies. The absence of the theme may, at some level, shows a possible reason for the intercultural incompetence of Chinese students.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined an in-used university listening English textbook in China to investigate what categories of culture were included in term of big “C” culture and little “c” culture and to what degree these culture contents will facilitate learners’ intercultural communicative competence. The study found that a strong preference for Big “C” culture learning such as facts and statistics in arts, economy, politics and history. A low percentage and frequency of little “c” culture learning was observed with a limited portion of themes.

The result shows a distinct conflict with the researchers’ statements of little “c” culture playing a more significant role in promoting language learners’ intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, the evidence does not suggest a positive contribution towards students’ intercultural understanding or communication because of the way the textbook treats little “c” culture category. Such a slight portion of little “c” culture may remain insufficient for the students and may not prepare students well in order to achieve an intercultural communicative competence purpose.

One possible cause of this unsatisfactory situation might come from the traditional concept of English teaching and learning in China. Traditional EFL teaching in China unduly values linguistics competence but neglects culture which comes with it. Moreover, teachers and students focus only on the four language skills and the students are highly motivated to
achieve high test scores. Although there is cultural content presented in the target textbook, the tasks are still designed as kind of tests by requiring students to listen firstly, then complete the questions and check with the keys and answers. Culture learning from textbook is still taken as a supplement of the formal instruction (Gao, 1997). Students of such type of EFL teaching in China are quick at doing multiple choice questions, but when communicating with native speakers of English, they cannot communicate appropriately.

The present study investigated a listening textbook for the second year students in English program in China. Although the study presented some results regarding cultural contents of Big “C” and little “c” categories, however, the conclusion about cultural orientation were set on only one textbook. Thus, some of these are recommended for further study:

1. A whole series of Contemporary College English for Listening (1-8) should be investigated to get a better and fuller picture.
2. Other types of textbook, including local textbooks and commercial textbooks should be examined.
3. More cultural categories should be examined on which culture are presented in the textbooks in term of source culture, target culture and international culture.

References