

Intercultural Communication in An Undergraduate English Coursebook in Mainland China: A Discourse Analysis Perspective

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Abstract: In recent years, intercultural communication education is occurring frequently in Chinese English textbooks. However, there is a lack of study on how these textbooks present the knowledge of intercultural communication and competence. To fill this gap, this article proposes to conduct a qualitative analysis of one English textbook (College English Intercultural Communication Course) published in mainland China. With Derrida's deconstructive thinking, the topics, characters, contents, exercises and point of view provided by the textbook are evaluated via discourse analysis. Based on the deconstructive reading of the textbook, two cultural problems are found: (1) western-centric ideas; (2) essentialism and othering. There is an internal conflict between the deconstructive method of presenting intercultural communication and competence claimed by the textbook and an inner-circle unitary cultural center it actually constructs.

1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of globalization makes various national cultures meet, and the development of science and technology makes the world a global village [1]. People from different countries, races, and languages can easily cross distances and cultures for face-to-face communication. They can also exchange information anytime and anywhere through electronic technology. The increasing frequency of intercultural information exchanges highlights the necessity of understanding intercultural communication and the urgency of improving intercultural competence [2]. In recent years, many colleges and universities in Mainland China have offered intercultural communication courses and used various intercultural textbooks as teaching materials [3]. However, the theoretical elaboration in the textbooks is highly debated as the construction of a unitary culture center from the perspective of English-speaking countries [1]. In the article, I will analyze a textbook College English Intercultural Communication Course published in mainland China with deconstructive thinking, exploring how it presents intercultural communication and competence and to what extent the textbook manifests cultural decentering. This paper is divided into four sections: the literature review, methodology, coursebook analysis, and conclusion, as well as a discussion of further research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Culture

Holliday [4] states that culture is likely to be viewed as the object which is possessed exclusively by a particular national or ethnic group. From this perspective, culture is materialized into a finished product with no further possibilities for innovative creation and critical contestation. He mentions the term "high culture" to demonstrate this theory by interpreting culture as the masterpiece of a national group.

However, many researchers refuse to interpret culture as "logical, coherent, uniform, and static" [5]. Geertz [6][7] points out that culture is a dynamic symbolic system, in which individuals from a cultural group accomplished and updated it through social interactions. Liddicoat et al [5] also propose that the nature of culture is fragmented and contradictory since it is accomplished through numerous moments of individuals' interactions and different views of the same event. Echoed Liddicoat, Swidler [8] resigned to view culture as a coherent set of values that determines people's actions, but as an usher entailing individuals to practice in new tracks of actions. Every individual has the capacity to create more practices and has the access to conduct them in any cultural group. This sort of capacity is termed intercultural competence [5].

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2.2 Intercultural competence

From 1998 to 2008, researcher Kramsch developed two different interpretations of intercultural competence. The first one is communicative competence, which means the native-like speaking skills in the target language and the capacity to produce appropriate cultural contexts for participants in communication. Meanwhile, language learners own the right to accept or not accept native communicators' cultural understanding when they are engaged in intercultural communication.

The second one is symbolic competence. "Symbolic competence is the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else's language, but to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used" [9], which requires language learners to recognize the symbolic meanings hidden in the language and realize their complexity and creativity. With symbolic competence, the language learners are able to decenter their previous cultural identities and view them from numerous perspectives until the additional practice and assumption modes are set up [5]. The tight connection between language learning and intercultural competence is fully demonstrated through these interpretations. Thus for the next section, I would like to further explain the relationship between language and culture as well as the attitudes towards intercultural competence demonstrated by nowadays English textbooks.

2.3 The relationship between language and culture

The tight engagement between language and culture can be traced back to the researcher, Humboldt, who proposed the idea that language is a unique method of conveying people's worldview. Steiner [10] goes further on this culture-language association and collects what he called the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The hypothesis states that "the fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group." [11]. In Sapir's view, there are no two languages identical enough to represent the same social contexts and these distinguished social contexts illude to totally different cultural worlds. Also, Whorf [12] considers different linguistic grammar rules are reflections of different observations and evaluations of very identical behaviors. In Whorf's view, these similar behaviors result in inequivalent grammars must mirror observers' different views of the world.

2.4 The Construction Thinking in the Published English Textbooks

As the association of language and culture mentioned above, learning a foreign language could be viewed as a process of "placing a mirror up to one's culture and to one's assumptions about how communication happens" [13].

The language textbooks are viewed as an important site to develop students' intercultural competence. In existing English textbooks, there are two educational

perspectives when it comes to profiling culture-the cultural perspective and the intercultural perspective [14]. Liddicoat points out that the cultural perspective requires language learners to develop their basic knowledge about one culture without stepping inside it, which means the learned culture is still external to learners and they don't need to change their previous cultural identity. While in the intercultural perspective, learners need to understand human ideology is shaped by culture and explore the border between "self" and "other". By acknowledging one's own culture and other's cultures are the diverse practices and assumptions derived within certain cultural contexts, as well as the role they take in communication, language learners decenter themselves from their previous identity and establish a mutual intercultural identity based on the engagement with additional cultures. Through this decentering process, language learners stand between cultures, seeking a voice in foreign languages which can express their unique cultural understanding. Kramsch concludes this stance language learners stand by as "third place" [15] where learners are supposed to develop a hybrid cultural identity.

As the result of globalization, English is gradually ceased to be a unique property of any cultural group. This role transformation of English entails researchers' reflection of the preexisting construction thinking in the published English textbooks [16].

The early attempt of English textbooks intends to classify the whole world as three concentric circles: the inner circle, in which English is the first language; the outer circle, in which English is spoken as the second language with additional localized varieties; and the expanding circle, in which English is spoken as the lingua franca [17]. However, Kanavillil Rajagopalan [18] finds some of the published English textbooks tend to establish the countries within the inner circle as the model to display the "standard" linguistic examples to the rest of the world and hold the authority to define the nature of other cultures according to their own cultural perspectives. This centralization of certain cultural groups has been criticized by deconstruction thinking, which is the emphasis of the next section.

2.5 Deconstruction Thinking Profiled by the Intercultural Perspective in Second Language Learning

According to Sarup [19], the early understanding of deconstruction is simply conducting the reversal of the existing hierarchy that makes the subordinate one dominant, since the equal and harmonious coexistence of binary opposition is considered impossible. However, by rearranging the dominant and subordinate poles, the new construction has been set up and inequality has derived from it again. To criticize this superficial reading of deconstruction, Spivak [11] states that deconstruction thinking is not to deny the preexisting structure but rather to dip further and find the internal nature and order of the structure. Besides the agreement with Spivak's theory of deconstruction, Derrida [20] points out the self-contradicted disposition of the deconstruction and

the chaotic while harmonious coexistent relationship it may achieve. He carefully considers that the deconstructive reading does not aim to reverse the order of the binary oppositions by forming another one but to find an appropriate place between the opposite poles and observe them without assigning the precise definition to any word in the text. This appropriate place subtly echoes Kramsch's "third place" [15] where the appropriate place language learners seek to find for developing a hybrid cultural identity without denying any cultural ideologies.

Deconstruction thinking prevails across the second language teaching field nowadays, Aguado & Malik [21] proposes that the deconstructive reading of the language textbooks attempts to assist students to obtain a tolerant view of cultural opportunities and help them improve intercultural competency. In this paper, I would set out from the perspective of deconstruction thinking, focusing on the cultural problems that existed in one English textbook published in mainland China.

3 EMPIRICAL STUDY

Intercultural communication and competence as an academic subject have been discussed in various educational fields. Many studies related to China and not related to China researching intercultural communication education from different perspectives.

The course design of intercultural competence education is the main theme among foreign researchers. Peck and Wagner conduct qualitative research aiming at developing South Korean and USA students' concept of intercultural communication through class teaching. They find that comparative orientation is very important in developing intercultural competence. Students need to be aware of comparing their output in juxtaposition. Meanwhile, Melina et al [22] conduct qualitative research in which they design a series of online courses in English classroom to develop intercultural competence as well as English proficiency of students from Argentina and Denmark. The researchers find that to cultivate students' intercultural communication skills, teachers need to provide guidance on how to compare, interpret and decenter different cultural issues.

While domestic research frequently focuses on the existing pedagogical problems and strategies to cultivate students' intercultural competence in the multidisciplinary context. Zhao [23] points out that successive intercultural communication relies on the consensus linguistic context. Zhao thinks that teachers should make the language classroom intercultural by providing more cultural and traditional knowledge of the learned culture. Lai [24] finds out several problems in English education in China's universities through her quantitative studies. She considers that teachers' poor ability to integrate Chinese and Western cultures, the insufficient exploration of teaching resources, and the single focus on language skills cause students' failure to master intercultural communication skills and low enthusiasm for intercultural knowledge learning. Also, the researcher points out that there's an inclination

demonstrating students prefer a native speaker to teach them the target language and culture.

However, besides the extensive research putting emphasis on the course design and pedagogical strategy in intercultural education, there is a dearth of studies exploring the problems existing in the English textbooks. In this paper, I would conduct a qualitative analysis of one particular English textbook published in mainland China to explore the problems hidden in the contents.

4 METHODOLOGY

The study I conducted is qualitative research. the textbook I would analyze belongs to the retrospective secondary official document category [25]. This English textbook College English Intercultural Communication Course (by Tsinghua University Press) was published in mainland China in 2015 and is selected as the teaching material for China's English major undergraduate students by many universities. Relying on the China national course standard of "College English intercultural communication", this textbook has also been selected for China's National Planning Textbook of the 12th Five Year Plan for general higher education. In this paper, I would carry out qualitative research to explore the answer to my questions:

(1) How does the textbook present the content of intercultural communication?

(2) How does the textbook develop students' intercultural competence?

With the inspiration of Gray's [16] descriptive framework, I intend to use the strategy of discourse analysis to explore the indication of naturally repeated topics, characters, the source of texts, the genres of texts, the genres of exercise, and the authoritative view given by the textbook. Then I would review these data with Derrida's deconstructive thinking, finding out whether there exist internal conflicts between the aim claimed by the textbook that developing students' intercultural competence from the intercultural perspective and the point of view the textbook actually constructs.

Although acting as a researcher and an evaluator is a common research strategy, based on the situation of evaluating the book published by my own cultural group, it is difficult for me to maintain a fully objective point of view. During the whole research process, I would present more original examples and theories in the textbook to ensure the objectivity of my research.

5 DATA ANALYSIS

College English Intercultural Communication Course relies on the International Excellent Course of College English Intercultural Communication [1]. This book has divided into 10 chapters, through which the definition, modal and dimensions of culture, the types of intercultural communication, the obstacles in the process of intercultural communication, the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication, the stages of intercultural adaptation and strategies for cultivating intercultural competence are presented. Each chapter

consists of the introduction, opening proverbs, learning objectives, chapter outline, pre-class case analysis, chapter body (3-5 articles in English), chapter summary, after-class exercises, and self-assessment log.

5.1 Western Centric

In College, there are observations indicating that the textbook establishes the culture of the inner-circle (western English-speaking) countries as the center of the intercultural world and let it takes the role of modal to other cultures. This western-centric idea is demonstrated in the following three aspects:

First is the cultural description lacking in authenticity. For example, in the textbook, subtly directed language is used to construct the extreme contrast between the business cultures in China and the United States (chapter 8). When describing Chinese business culture, the textbook points out that Chinese corporations still reflect the past tradition of collectivism and Chinese outweighs face value over legitimate rules:

“Chinese business value emphasize kinship, interpersonal connections, respect for elders, and hierarchy...The managers sometimes feel reluctant to criticize and punish the poorly performing employees for the sake of ‘face’ value...Business contracts are often specified in legal terms but implemented relying on trust and relationships between the parties involved.” (p. 252).

Nevertheless, the management pattern in the United States is displayed as the product of modern individualism and egalitarianism:

“...In the United States, a manager (1) does not own a business but sells his skills to act on behalf of the

owners and (2) does not produce personally but is responsible for making others produce, through motivation.” (p. 253)

The contrast in the business values between China and the United States is one-sided. The above description is supported by no authentic interview, questionnaire or research data but the plain expression of the authors. The Chinese company organization is partially described as outdated and chaotic while the American company is rational and well-ordered. Regardless of the reality, the business culture of the United States is established as the advanced modal in the financial world while the one of China leaves an impression of low-effective to readers.

The second aspect is the imbalanced portion of opinions from western and eastern researchers selected in the textbook. In College, nearly all the key definitions and theories listed to direct students’ understanding are from researchers belonging to western English-speaking countries. For example, the textbook uses Edward T. Hall’s context-culture theory to display the definition of high-context and low-context (chapter 7); Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s value orientation theory is selected to illustrate the cultural dimensions (chapter 7); American researcher J.W. Berry’s theory is chosen as the sole definition of culture acculturation(chapter 9); American researchers Neuliep, James W’s U-curve and W-curve pattern is regarded as the prototype to divide phases and recursion of intercultural adaptation (chapter 9).

Moreover, the after-class exercises do not give students any opportunity to contemplate critically the learned theories. The after-class exercise is divided into three general sections. In the first section, there are filling in blanks, true or false questions and group work:

2. True or False Questions

Directions: Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) according to what has been learnt in this chapter.

- (1) ___ In industrialized societies like the United States, the mastery-over-nature view tends to predominate.

Figure 1. College English Intercultural Communication Course (p. 242)

Students only need to answer according to the authoritative theories and apply them to different contexts. In the second section, there is a case analysis and three critical-thinking questions. However, these questions only require students to explain a cultural phenomenon through the provided modal. For example, the three critical thinking questions in chapter 7 are stated as:

“(1) use Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s value orientations to describe your culture.

(2) use the masculinity-femininity dimension to measure your culture.

(3) Assess power distance in your culture.” (p. 243).

Through these three perspectives, the power of construction and interpretation is totally given to the researcher from the English-speaking country within the

inner circle. The nature of culture is solely defined by inner-circle countries and their cultures are profiled as the advanced and “standard” cultural modal to countries outside the circle. Through this construction of the western cultural center, students cannot understand different cultures via the intercultural perspective-they are not able to decenter themselves from their previous cultural identity and develop a new mutual intercultural identity [14] but can only interpret all cultures through mechanisms established by the inner circle. Besides the western-centric idea, there are another two cultural problems presented by the book, which I would further explain in the next section.

5.2 Essentialism and Othering

Researchers Holliday et al [26] once pointed out that in the process of intercultural communication, if the interlocutors fail to recognize the complexities of human, but simply act according to the stereotype, then the cultural phenomenon of essentialism and othering occurs. During my analysis, I find out there are certain contents leading to these problems.

Holliday et al [26] describe essentialism as regarding all individuals within a culture would do the same things. In other words, the essentialists tend to simplify a culture to a fixed panel of characteristics and behaviors. Connecting with the textbook *College*, when talking about high-context and low-context communication (chapter 7), the scaffolding of Edward T. Hall's context-culture theory gives certain cultural groups stereotypes:

"In high-context cultures (Native Americans, Latin Americans, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans), people are very homogeneous... Meaning, therefore, is not necessarily contained in words. In high-context cultures, information is provided through gestures, the use of space, and even silence." (p 218)

Meanwhile, the book files some western countries into the low-context culture

"In low-context cultures (German, Swiss, and American), the population is less homogeneous... Members of low-context cultures expect messages to be detailed, clear-cut, and definite. If there are not enough data, or if the point being made is not apparent, members of these cultures will ask very blunt questions." (p. 219).



Figure 2. College English Intercultural Communication Course (p. 143)

The antonym behaviors of the characters (kneeling to standing; humble to confident; apology mood to announcement mood) highlight the contrast between reducing oneself and highlighting oneself. This striking contrast makes Asian cultures carry humble and submissive nature, while the western culture is far more confident and aggressive.

Such tendentious examples are presented throughout the textbook. These partial illustration assign different cultures to extremely opposite poles. Students are guided to view culture as high culture: a homogeneous finished product that the differences between them are static and irreconcilable [27]. They are directed to understand the intercultural world through the cultural perspective: drawing a firm boundary between "my culture" and "other cultures" rather than perceiving them as diverse

To stretch this difference to an impassable gulf, the textbook uses plenty of fictional examples: in chapter 1, the Chinese student Li Ming and the American student Tony's unsuccessful intercultural communication is presented. Li Ming keeps repeating "You've shaved your head" to indicate Tony to sweep the bathroom floor, but Tony simply responds with "Yeah, I did" each time; in chapter 5, the textbook divides the direct and indirect style according to the straightforwardness of the message. The authors file Chinese into the indirect style while Americans into the direct one; in chapter 7, this cultural difference is exaggerated by quoting Edward T. Hall's statement "High-context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low-context people insist on giving them information they don't need." (p.219).

Besides the presence of essentialism, the examples used to portray intercultural communication cause another problem-Othering. What differentiates it from essentialism is that othering is established on accepting the stereotypes and then considering oneself superior over others [26]. In *College*, there are contents indicating the dominant and subordinate characteristics of different cultures, here is an example:

In chapter 5, the textbook discusses self-enhancement (emphasizing one's achievement and ability) and self-effacement (emphasizing one's humility) communication styles. The book describes Asian cultures often use self-effacement communication style (like apology) to show politeness and modesty, However, western cultures tend to prefer the self-enhancement style. To illustrate this contrast, the textbook uses a picture of a kneeling Asian woman of humble complexion and a standing western woman of confident complexion.

practices and assumptions [14]. Along with the advanced-outdated contrast provided by western-centric examples, the dominant and subordinate nature are assigned precisely to each culture. As the result, students spontaneously approach the inner-circle cultural center, while considering other cultures as secondary.

6 CONCLUSION

According to the deconstructive reading of *Colledge*, I find that the textbook presents intercultural communication (1) by using the unauthentic cultural description and a large portion of western researcher's theory; (2) by emphasizing the irreconcilable differences between cultures; (3) by portraying the inner-circle cultures as advanced cultural modal. The textbook

defines intercultural competence from the cultural perspective rather than the intercultural one claimed by the authors. Students are expected to understand intercultural competence only as the capacity to understand people from a certain cultural group would act in a fixed pattern. Rather than decentering students from their previous cultural identity, the polarization of cultural differences leaves students within their own cultural paradigm to interpret the discourses and behaviors of communicators from other cultural paradigms. Opposite to the dynamic and chaotic nature of deconstruction, students would easily assign precise definition to other cultures. Instead of developing a hybrid cultural identity and finding an appropriate place between cultures advocated by Derrida's deconstructive thinking, cultures from inner circle countries are constructed as the unitary center of the intercultural world.

However, this paper is solely supported by my analysis of the textbook contents, without any further data from students and teachers who have actually used this book in their classroom practice. Further research can focus on how teachers use College or other textbooks on intercultural communication in practice and how the textbooks and teachers' practice influence students' learning process.

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