Study on Non-English Majors' English Proficiency in Chinese Culture From the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

PENG Hong-li

Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China

With the realization of globalization and the implementation of One Belt and One Road, the opportunities for intercultural exchanges are increasing dramatically. However, in this process, the phenomenon of Chinese culture aphasia has emerged. This paper intends to explore the theoretical possibility of implanting Chinese culture into College English teaching from the perspective of the "third culture" in intercultural communication. Based on questionnaire and interview, this paper tries to analyze the present situation of non-English majors' ability to express Chinese culture in English and probe into counter-measures from different aspects, such as teachers, teaching materials, curriculum, and testing so as to develop non-English majors' intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: intercultural communication, third culture, Chinese culture, expressing ability

Introduction

Due to the rapid development of science and technology in the area of transportation and communication systems, and with the reality of globalization, especially with the implementation of One Belt and One Road strategy, intercultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, abundant, and significant between China and the international community. However, the striking and disturbing phenomenon of Chinese culture aphasia has emerged, which leads to the misunderstanding of China by the international community. And more seriously, misunderstandings in the field of culture will be, accompanied by human communication, radiating to all aspects. As a result, it is of vital importance to introduce Chinese culture to the world for the sake of harmonious intercultural communication and avoidance of Chinese culture aphasia. To achieve this goal, it is indispensable to introduce Chinese culture into College English teaching as English is increasingly acknowledged as an international language all over the world. In so doing, it can not only satisfy the need of intercultural communication but also the need to maintain our cultural ethics.

The Third Culture in Intercultural Communication

In order to achieve successful intercultural communication, we must have an understanding about the relationship between culture and communication: Culture and communication are directly linked and closely twined. Culture is learned, acted out, transmitted, maintained, and perceived through communication while communication practice is affected and restricted by culture. Due to the differences in cultures, people from

different cultural backgrounds are distinctive in cognition and behavior, so it is imperative to understand how culture operates as an initial step toward improving intercultural communication.

Culture and communication are inseparable. In fact, they exist in accordance with each other. Both of them are omnipresent, complex, and all pervasive. They are everything and everywhere. What is more, under the influence of culture people learn to communicate so culture gives meaning for communication and shapes communication process. At the same time it is communication that links us to our world, shares our language and culture, and acts out our culture values. In a nutshell, culture and communication are intertwined and shaping each other, so much so that Hall (1977, p. 169) reminds us "culture is communication and communication is culture". The Chinese scholar Jia Yu-xin (2002, p. 16) cites the statement of W. B. Pearce "Culture is frozen interpersonal communication while communication is a flowing culture". To some extent, this is a more vivid description about the connectedness between culture and communication. Consequently, "to be understood, the two must be studied together. Culture cannot be known with a study of communication, and communication can only be understood with an understanding of the culture it supports" (cited from Zhuang, 2004, p. 3).

The relationship between culture and communication is essential to understanding intercultural communication, because it is through the influence of culture that people learn to communicate. In all aspects, everything about culture and communication applies to intercultural communication. It is well-known that words communicate meanings, but the choices and uses of words are greatly influenced by culture because the intended meaning is from the sender, not in the words. In intercultural communication, people are from different cultural backgrounds, different social environments, different ways of thinking and communication; they will surely have different understandings of the same communicative behavior. Therefore, to understand intercultural communication is more difficult than intra-cultural communication. But an honest desire to communicate with people from other cultures, and an attempt to understand cultural differences, will help lead to intercultural effectiveness outcomes.

Because of the reasons mentioned above, it is inevitable that there exist cultural conflicts in intercultural communication. In order to achieve effective intercultural communication, it is necessary for both sides of communication to put aside their respective culture A and B and construct an adaptive culture C, the coexistence of the two cultures derived from the conflict, that is, the third culture. The third culture is not simply the integration of culture A and B, but the creation of a third culture (culture C) from which they find commonality, and reduce uncertainty and anxiety for the needs of intercultural effectiveness. In this way, both sides of the communication maintain their own cultural identity with A and B but the communicative practice is carried out in culture C as demands dictate (Dodd, 2006, pp. 6-10). The creation of the third culture is aimed to ensure that both sides of communication can experience the adaptation of positive atmosphere, commonality, and trust in the nonthreatening climate established in culture C so as to lead ultimately to outcome success. For example, in the process of intercultural interaction between an American and a Chinese, the Chinese can adjust his self-conscious and introverted style to a more direct American style while the American can as well adjusts to the Chinese style, thus form a more inclusive and shared third culture.

To make the third culture a functional adaptive arena is not automatic. In order to establish culture C, the two sides of the communication must have a certain understanding of each other's culture in order to find out the shared sections for the purpose of intercultural effectiveness outcomes. Just as Xu Li-sheng (2006, p. 207) comments: There are often many more difficulties and problems in intercultural communication than in

intra-cultural communication, to a large extent, because of the lack of cultural sharing between the two sides of the communication. Therefore, with the realization of globalization, China should not only "import" Western culture, but also "export" Chinese culture to the outside world, so as to let the world have a better understanding of China, to guarantee the success of the intercultural exchanges and dialogue between China and the international community, and to achieve successful and harmonious intercultural communication.

University students, as the future pillars of the country, should shoulder the responsibility of carrying forward and spreading Chinese culture and enhance the soft power of the country. The latest edition of the *College English Curriculum Requirements* laid down by the Ministry of Education in 2017 points out:

> It (College English) not only serves as an instrument, but also has humanistic values. When designing College English courses, therefore, it is necessary to take into full consideration the development of students' cultural capacity and the teaching of knowledge about different cultures in the world.

Here the Curriculum Requirements put stress on the humanistic values of College English and students' cultural capacity as well. It requires that non-English majors have the capacity and skill to effectively introduce and disseminate Chinese culture in English. Therefore, it is of great significance to know the present situation of non-English majors' ability to express Chinese culture in English.

Research Design

Objective and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to find out the present situation of the non-English majors' ability to express Chinese culture in English. The following questions are to be answered:

(1) How is the non-English undergraduates' English proficiency in expressing Chinese culture?

(2) What are the reasons for the situation?

(3) What are the possible countermeasures to improve the situation?

Methodology

Subjects. Subjects for this study were 150 non-English undergraduates from our university, a provincial normal university. Among them, 45 are from Science Class A4 (includes mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and computer science. Students of science are divided into three tiers (A, B, C) based on the English test results and tier A is the best). Also, 105 students were chosen from Class 1, 2 of the College of Chinese Literature and Journalism. All subjects have been studying in our university for one semester already. And during that period their English was taught by the same teacher. On the whole, these subjects represent the average level of the non-English majors' English proficiency in expressing Chinese culture.

Procedure of Data Collection

Our research team designed the questionnaire with reference to some books, such as *Chinese Culture: An Introduction*, *A Brief Introduction to Chinese Culture*, *College English Cultural Translation Course* and the questionnaire by Zhang Wei-min and Zhu Hong-mei (2002). What is more, our research team also took into account the Sichuan local cultural characteristics while making up this questionnaire. It is aimed to know the non-English undergraduates' understanding of Chinese culture and test their ability to express it in English.

The questionnaire mainly adopts the subjective items because it can truly reflect the students' English level. The items of the questionnaire cover a wide range of Chinese culture from food, folk culture to scenic spots or historic sites. It is divided into three parts: (1) translate 20 items of vocabulary with Chinese cultural characteristics concerning Chinese food, snacks, history, literature, religion, calligraphy, architecture, and arts, etc.; (2) introduce a Chinese traditional festival and its related celebration activities, for instance, the Spring Festival, the Tomb-Sweeping Day, the Dragon Boat Festival, or the Mid-Autumn Festival, etc.; (3) introduce a Chinese historic site or scenic spot. The content of the questionnaire is comprehensive, and moderately difficult. In the course of answering the questionnaire, students were required to finish it in 30 minutes without referring to any dictionary and book. And all the questionnaire papers were collected right away when the time was due. Among the 150 copies, 149 are valid. Based on the questionnaire results, 19 testees were interviewed thereafter. We list the questionnaire results as illustrated below.

Findings in the Study

Table 1

Correct Expression Frequency and Percentage of 20 Chinese Words

Chinese vocabulary	Correct expression frequency (No.)			Correct expression percentage (%)		
	Science Class A4 (44)	Chinese Language and Literature Class 1, 2 (105)	Total number (149)	Science Class A4	Chinese Language and Literature Class 1, 2	Average percentage
1 deep-fried dough stick	3	1	4	6.8	0.9	2.6
2 tofu	22	78	100	50	74.2	67.1
3 glutinous rice ball	2	14	16	4.5	13.3	10.7
4 steamed stuffed bun	5	2	7	11.3	1.9	4.6
5 deep-fried dough twist	7	0	7	15.9	0	4.6
6 wonton	3	4	7	6.8	3.8	4.6
7 rice dumplings	8	6	14	18.1	5.7	9.3
8 dumplings	35	77	112	79.5	73.3	75
9 fried eggs and tomato	0	8	8	0	7.6	5.3
10 sweet & sour spare ribs	0	0	0	0	0	0
11 Confucius	6	24	30	13.6	22.8	20
12 A Dream of Red Mansions	3	6	9	6.6	5.7	6
13 writing brush	1	9	10	2.2	8.5	6.7
14 the Warring States Period	0	2	2	0	1.9	1.3
15 Chinese painting	12	22	34	27.2	20.9	22.8
16 Sichuan Basin	2	10	12	4.5	9.5	8
17 Buddhism	4	10	14	9	9.5	9.3
18 classical Chinese garden	9	25	34	20.4	23.8	22.8
19 Beijing Opera	26	60	86	59	57	57.7
20 subtropical climate	0	1	1	0	0.9	0.6

Note. Due to the influence of Sichuan dialect without velar nasal consonant [ŋ], the translation of Beijin Opera is accepted. So are some minor grammatical errors.

Catering is an important part of Chinese culture. There is an old saying in China: "Food is of the utmost importance to people". Dating back to ancient times, eating is very important to Chinese people. As a result, catering culture of China enjoys great reputation throughout the world. In addition, food is also most closely

related to our daily life and an inevitable link in interpersonal communication, so mastering the English expression of diet culture is also conducive to promoting intercultural communication.

However, Table 1 shows, on the whole, the results are not satisfactory, and the students' ability to express Chinese culture in English is limited. With the exception of "tofu" and "dumplings" which have been taught in middle school, no one can correctly translate "Sweet and Sour Spare Ribs". The accuracy percentage of the other seven kinds of food is also very low, basically lower than 10%.

In terms of the translation of Chinese cultural common sense, "Beijing Opera" is comparatively better, 57.7%, followed by "Confucius", "Chinese painting", and "classical Chinese Garden", about 20% respectively. The correction percentage of the rest items is below 10%. Only one student could translate the "subtropical climate" correctly, and two students' translations of the "Warring States Period" are acceptable. Even though the proper name "Confucius" has been taught in high school, still, some students used Chinese Pinyin "kongfuzi". However, the translations of "Chinese painting" and "classical Chinese garden" are completed by students using their existing English language ability and understanding of the vocabulary. If correct, it is purely coincidental. Even if our university is located in Sichuan Basin and also the hometown of the Leshan Giant Buddha, the largest stone-carving Buddha in the world, the vast majority of the students have no idea about the English expression of "Sichuan Basin" and "Buddhism".

Table 2

Correct Expression Frequency and Percentage of Chinese Folk Culture

Introduction of Chinese folk culture	Correct expression frequency (No.)			Correct expression percentage (%)		
	Science Class A4 (44)	Chinese Language and Literature Class 1, 2 (105)	Total number (149)	Science Class A4	Chinese Language and Literature Class 1, 2	Average percentage
	7	14	21	15.9	13	14

The second part is about the introduction of Chinese folk culture. Among the 149 copies, only 21 copies are both readable and with the introduction of Chinese traditional festivals.

Of these 21 introductions, 10 are concerning the Spring Festival, 10 about the Mid-Autumn Festival, and one, the Tomb-sweeping Day. However, with regard to the introduction of the Spring Festival, no one uses the word "Chinese New Year's Eve", nor does anyone write "couplets". For the translation of "red envelopes", most of them use "red bags" or "red pockets" or even in Chinese Pinyin "hongbao". In addition, the timing of the Spring Festival is not accurately understood, such as on Dec. 30th night, the first day of January, or at 30th January of a new year. As for the duration of the Spring Festival, there are a great variety of understandings, for instance, seven days, 10 days, or even more than 20 days. Few students can translate the "Mid-Autumn Festival" correctly, such as the translation of "the Middle Festival". As for the date of the Mid-Autumn Festival, most students avoided it. Translation with a definite date is "on the 15th of August". Students who can use the word "lunar calendar" to express the time of the Chinese traditional festivals are rare, just four, accounting for only 2.6%.

The students' performance on the questionnaire reveals their lack of Chinese traditional cultural knowledge. According to the followed interviews, most students introduce the traditional festival based on their own personal experiences. That explains why some students think that the Spring Festival lasts seven days, because their parents take seven days off work. Others report that they do know some traditional festival customs, but do not know how to express it in English, like lunar calendar, couplets, red envelope, moon appreciation, grave sweeping, and so on so forth.

Table 3

Correct Expression Frequency and Percentage of Chinese Historical Sites

Introduction of Chinese historical sites	Correct expression frequency (No.)			Correct expression percentage (%)		
	Science Class A4 (44)	Chinese Language and Literature Class 1, 2 (105)	Total number (149)	Science Class A4	Chinese Language and Literature Class 1, 2	Average percentage
	5	14	19	11	13	12.7

The third part is to introduce a Chinese historical place of interest in English. The result of this part is even more worrisome. 10 out of the 149 questionnaires are blank papers without writing anything, taking up 6.7%. Some papers are written with only the names of scenic spots without any further information. Only 19 are qualified, including the introduction of historical sites with correct knowledge and English expression.

With the exception of the 10 blank papers, of the remaining 139 questionnaires, 77 describe the Great Wall, accounting for 55%. Through the later interviews we find out the reasons why so many students have picked up the Great Wall. Most students do not have any actual travel experience and without extensive reading. It happened that they learned the text about the Great Wall in high school, so that is why quite a few have chosen the same topic.

Despite the fact that they have studied the Great Wall in high school, few students still spell it in Chinese Pinyin "Changcheng". In some introductions, there is obviously inadequate amount of information, such as, just one sentence "The Great Wall is the symbol of China". Some seem to have written a lot, but there are no substantial presentations. Some of them have no cultural content. What is more, some give even the wrong knowledge, such as "The Great Wall is situated in Beijing" and "The Great Wall was built in the Ming Dynasty". Some have made too many linguistic errors and cannot be read.

The questionnaire and interview results demonstrate that the students' command of Chinese cultural knowledge is not correlated to their English proficiency. A few students who have passed CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) have got only one and two items correct in the first part of the Chinese cultural common sense, for example, one student who scores 520 in the CET-4 (the total score is 710) only gets "dumplings" completely correct. There is also another student who scores 454 in the CET-4 even blank in this part. But some students who have not yet taken the CET-4 answered 11 items correctly. In addition, it is found that students who have performed well in the questionnaire had the opportunity to be exposed to Chinese culture, either because of their high school English teachers' efforts or because the students themselves learned it by reciting the culture-related translation model text in the course of preparing for the CET-4.

Countermeasures to Improve the Situation

The questionnaire data show that the non-English major undergraduates' English ability to express Chinese culture is weak. To improve this situation and to develop their intercultural communicative competence, we should proceed from different aspects of the College English teaching.

First of all, our policy makers should place more emphasis on it. The 2017 edition of the *College English Curriculum Requirements* by the Ministry of Education makes it clear that English is not only an important tool for international communication, science, technology, and cultural exchange, but also for the dissemination of Chinese culture. Therefore, the English expression of Chinese culture should be included in the College English syllabus as a necessary part. For university students, they should not only study Western culture in English

learning, but also undertake the important task of carrying forward and spreading our national culture. Only in this way can College English teaching live up to its expectation.

Secondly, the characteristics of Chinese culture should be embodied in the compilation of the textbooks, teaching syllabus, and testing of College English. The existing College English textbooks are all integrated into the culture of English-speaking countries, and few involve the content of Chinese culture. The series of the Nucleus College English Reading textbooks make an exception. There is one out of three reading articles in each unit about Chinese culture, which is far from enough. Therefore, we can compile some English teaching materials concerning Chinese culture suitable for Chinese university students. Besides, the content of Chinese culture can be reflected in the reading, listening, and writing parts of CET-4/6, for in doing so, College English teachers can attach importance to Chinese culture in their teaching. Moreover, the English courses on Chinese culture should be added to the College English curriculum. The combination of Chinese culture with the English language learning cannot only improve the students' English proficiency but also cultivate their Chinese cultural literacy.

Finally, it is extremely important to improve the cultural literacy of College English teachers. The implantation of Chinese culture into College English teaching is also challenging to College English teachers. It requires teachers to have a higher Chinese cultural literacy as well as great English language skills. In this way College English teachers can organize classroom activities centering around Chinese culture in English, or consciously implant Chinese culture into the classroom instruction, or supplement some relevant English expressions of Chinese culture, and gradually enhance students' capability to express Chinese culture in English.

Conclusion

To sum up, based on the questionnaire results and the interviews thereafter, it is found that the Chinese non-English majors lack Chinese cultural knowledge and have limited English expression ability. However, with the reality of globalization, intercultural communication is becoming more and more necessary. And with the rise of China's economy, it is increasingly urgent to let the world to understand China and the Chinese culture. To solve this problem, some English courses on Chinese culture should be offered in College English curriculum, so that university students can simultaneously master the knowledge of Chinese culture and its related English expressions. At the same time, as the pillars of the country, university students are duty-bound to act as an embassador for the dissemination of Chinese culture in intercultural communication. Consequently, it is urgent and necessary to introduce Chinese culture into College English teaching and cultivate qualified intercultural communicators in order to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

Note

College English is a proper noun specifically referred to the English courses for non-English majors in colleges and universities.

References

Cong, C. (October 19, 2000). Chinese culture aphasia: Defect in China's English education. *Guang Ming Daily*.

Dodd, C. H. (2006). *Dynamics of intercultural communication* (5th ed.). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Hall, E. T. (1977). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, New York: Anchor.

Jia, Y. X. (2002). *Intercultural communication.* Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Jiang, Y. Y. (2014). Strategies of improving non-English majors' ability to express Chinese culture in English. *Journal of Jimei University*, (1), 125-128.

Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., & Stefani, L. A. (1998). *Communication between cultures* (3rd ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Samovar, L. A., & Porter, R. E. (2007). *Intercultural communication: A reader* (10th ed.). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

The Higher Education Division of Ministry of Education. (2017). *College English curriculum requirements*. Retrieved from https://wenku.baidu.com/view/a514b9865ebfc77da26925c52cc58bd630869

Wang, J., Fu, R., Wang, H., & Zhao, Y. R. (2016). Research on the lack of native culture input in College English teaching. *Education Modernization, 10*, 182-183, 186.

Xu, L. S. (2006). *Studying language and its use: An intercultural approach*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Xiao, L. F., Xiao, D., Li, G., & Song, Y. W. (2010). Research on the status quo of "Chinese Culture Aphasia" in English teaching of China's Higher Education Institutions. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice*, (1), 39-47.

Yuan, X. L., Zhao, J., & Dong, M. (2017). Research on the status quo and reasons of Chinese cultural awareness cultivation in foreign language education. *Foreign Language Education*, (3), 56-61.

Zhuang, E. P. (2004). *Intercultural business communication readings and cases*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Zhang, W. M., & Zhu, H. M. (2002). Chinese culture in college English teaching. *Research Education Tsinghua University (Supplementary Issue), 1*, 34-40.