

0630

A research on the development of English textbooks as a medium for the transmission of cultural values-----the case of English textbooks in Chinese primary schools

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Background

Language, as a part of a culture's symbol system, provides a tool with which individuals can reflect, express and pass on culture. In this process, language acts as the tool while culture is used as a resource. Language and culture are interwoven and inseparable. Communication will not be successfully completed without both being presented. In other words, a language is used and understood in a cultural context. In addition, by carrying various culture learning, languages open a door for people to learn the culture outside their own groups.

As an existing lingua franca, English may be the most popular means for international communication. As mentioned earlier, language is culture loaded. In order to communicate in English effectively, learners have to do more than simply gain linguistic abilities. Thus, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has received increased attention in English language teaching and learning. Different from other language learning approaches, the ICC approach emphasizes the integration of culture into the English language curriculum. (Corbett, 2003) Today, it has been widely adopted in English language teaching (ELT) activities. Instead of the unconscious spread of alien culture, the consciousness of culture knowledge has been brought to the table as a key target of ELT.

In 2001, People's Republic of China (PRC) drafted a new curriculum for English language subject during the nine-year compulsory education period from primary to secondary school. It targeted the comprehensive improvement of students' communicative competence, which was addressed through five dimensions: language skills, language knowledge, emotional attitude, learning strategies and cultural awareness.

After the launch of this 2001 curriculum, a series of textbooks were produced by different agencies. To develop pupils' cultural awareness in English language teaching, a number of foreign cultural elements were added to the teaching materials. On the other hand, there is always a debate about the balance between local culture and target culture. Primary school pupils are at the critical stage of learning and building up their socio-cultural knowledge and establishing their identity. For a child who learns English as a second language in China, it is considered necessary for an English textbook to contain cultural information which can assist English language learning and also help the learner to fit into Chinese society.

Research Questions

This research aims to explore cultural values and how they are transmitted through English textbooks. An initial analysis of two selected volumes of textbooks, which currently dominate the textbook market in the PRC, helped the researcher to define the targeted cultural values and locate the research questions.

According to Scollon's framework of major cultural factors in intercultural communication, both texts and illustrations in textbooks were analysed with the focus on their narratives, setting of illustration and design of images. (Scollon, 1995: 127)

As a result, for cultural values, the researcher decided to focus on 'the philosophy of education, gender role, diligence, respect and obedience, collectivism and patriotism', which were found in both two volumes of textbooks. This research looks at these two main questions:

- (1) How has the national English language textbook developed as a medium for the transmission of cultural value?
- (2) How is textbook design affected by curriculum policy within the context of Chinese primary education?

Methods

This research follows a qualitative approach. Between June and early December 2009, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 31 people in the PRC and Canada. They were 6 directors from Ministry of Education, 3 senior curriculum designers, 10 textbook editors (including one Canadian editor who was involved in textbook design for Chinese primary schools), 2 illustrators and 10 classroom teachers.

Frame

Those two selected volumes of textbooks, which were mentioned earlier, are seen as literature as well as data. The secondary textbook analysis is underway along with the analysis of interview data.

Research findings

At the time of writing, the findings are as follows:

- (1) In PRC, Confucian philosophy on education serves as the principle which guides both curriculum design and textbook development. It emphasizes the importance of education on the moral development of the individual, so that the state can be governed by moral virtues.
- (2) Within the textbook design process in the PRC, illustrations were neglected, despite holding considerable responsibility for making students aware of the visual representation of the target language and cultural group. Based on the English language curriculum, cultural values such as respect, collectivism and patriotism were consciously added in English textbook. At the same time, traditional gender roles, diligence and obedience were also presented in textbooks by the interpretation of text through illustration.
- (3) The change of English subject curriculum has significantly affected textbook development. The 2001 English subject curriculum acts as a guideline to textbook design. Most curriculum designer of the 2001 English subject curriculum either participated in textbook development as chief editors or engaged in textbook censorship.
- (4) To some extent, the process of textbook development is not straightforward. Information may be lost when transferred between international and local publishers. Communication between editors and illustrators may result in similar problem.
- (5) The implementation of English subject curriculum in classroom teaching was mostly guided by publishers through teaching training as a part of the 'after service' in textbook market. However, the interpretation of curriculum policy by various editors, who take charge of teacher trainings, may be different. In addition, the transmission of cultural values in pedagogy is rather problematic, as it is limited by the quality of human capability and the quantity of teaching resources in education.

References

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