

Research on the Phenomenon and Causes of “Chinese Cultural Aphasia” in English Learning Among High School Students

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Abstract

Under the strategic backdrop of “Chinese culture going global” and the “cultural power” initiative, English classrooms bear the important mission of telling Chi-na’s stories well and disseminating China’s voice. However, for a long time, China’s English education has overly emphasized the input of Western culture while neglecting the output of local culture, leading to a widespread phenomenon of “Chinese cultural aphasia” among students—that is, despite possessing a certain level of English proficiency, they struggle to effectively express Chinese culture in English. This phenomenon not only weakens students’ cultural identity but also hinders the development of cross-cultural communication skills, impeding the international dissemination of China’s excellent traditional culture. This paper analyzes the causes of Chinese cultural aphasia and explores practical approaches to integrating Chinese culture into English classrooms, aiming to enhance students’ cultural communication abilities and national pride, thereby better promoting the inheritance and promotion of Chinese culture in the global context.

Keywords

English Learning; Chinese Culture; Chinese Cultural Aphasia

1. Introduction

The term “aphasia” originally refers to a medical condition involving language impairment due to damage to the brain’s language areas. Professor Cong Cong from Nanjing University first applied this concept to English teaching, proposing the phenomenon of “Chinese cultural aphasia.” She argued that English teaching should not focus solely on language skills but must also emphasize cultural education, which should encompass both the cultures of English-speaking countries and China’s own culture.

However, the current issue lies in the excessive emphasis on Western culture in English teaching. Many students can fluently discuss Shakespeare or American history in English,

but when attempting to introduce the Spring Festival, Confucius, or Chinese tea culture, they often struggle to find the right words. This is a typical manifestation of “Chinese cultural aphasia.” Such a situation not only undermines students’ cultural confidence but also affects genuine cross-cultural communication.

In today’s era of globalization, issues like unilateralism and protectionism have emerged. Against this backdrop, China has proposed the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” emphasizing mutual respect and common development among nations. This places new demands on English education: to cultivate a new generation of talents who understand both the world and Chinese culture. English teaching should serve as a bridge for cultural exchange, learning foreign cultures while also disseminating Chinese culture.

Yet, in practice, the teaching of Chinese culture remains insufficient. Although teachers have begun to emphasize cultural confidence, classroom content related to Chinese culture is still minimal. Therefore, English teachers need to integrate more Chinese culture into their teaching, enabling students not only to communicate in English but also to tell China’s stories well. This paper aims to analyze the causes of Chinese cultural aphasia and explore practical approaches to integrating Chinese culture into English classrooms, helping students build cultural confidence.

2. Background and Causes of Chinese Cultural Aphasia

2.1. Limitations in Teachers’ Cultural Literacy and Teaching Methods

Cong Cong (2000) first introduced the concept of “Chinese cultural aphasia,” highlighting the critical role of English teachers in cultural education. Currently, English teachers generally exhibit a structural imbalance in cultural literacy: while they possess ample knowledge of Western culture, their systematic understanding of traditional Chinese culture is notably lacking. This imbalance directly influences the cultural orientation of classroom teaching. In practice, most teachers adhere to traditional “teacher-centered” methods (Xiao Longfu et al., 2010), overemphasizing mechanical drills on language forms while neglecting the depth of cultural content. Specific manifestations include classroom activities focused on vocabulary memorization and grammar exercises, with little organic integration of Chinese cultural elements. Such teaching methods fail to cultivate students’ cultural awareness and reinforce a narrow perception of language as merely a tool.

2.2. Dual Challenges of Student Motivation and Practical Skills

Huang Juan (2018) pointed out that utilitarian learning motivations significantly hinder the development of students’ cultural expression abilities. Surveys show that over 80% of students view English learning as primarily for exam purposes, with only a minority recognizing the value of disseminating Chinese culture in English. This motivational bias leads to insufficient investment in cultural learning. Additionally, the lack of a language environment results in a disconnect between learning and application: knowledge ac-

quired in the classroom is rarely translated into practical cultural expression skills. When faced with scenarios requiring introductions to traditional festivals or philosophical ideas, students often encounter expressive barriers. Zhu Guisheng's (2016) empirical research indicates that such deficiencies further erode students' confidence, creating a vicious cycle.

2.3. Structural Flaws in Teaching Materials and Evaluation Systems

Chai Hua (2014) analyzed textbooks and revealed a clear bias in content selection: over 75% of current English teaching materials focus on Western culture, while topics related to Chinese culture account for less than 20%. This imbalance directly affects students' cultural cognition. More critically, existing cultural content often remains superficial, lacking in-depth interpretation. In terms of evaluation mechanisms, standardized tests overly emphasize linguistic accuracy, rarely assessing cultural expression skills. Zhang Shan (2017) noted that this evaluation trend leads teachers and students to prioritize language skills, further marginalizing cultural education.

2.4. Societal Environment and Cultural Identity Interactions

Weng Xiaohong (2019) emphasized the subtle yet profound influence of societal language environments on cultural learning. Current English usage is predominantly confined to business and technology, with few opportunities for cultural dissemination. This limitation deprives students of practical chances to express Chinese culture in English. On a deeper level, the long-standing emphasis on Western culture in teaching has led to an unconscious belief in the superiority of Western culture (Zhu Guisheng, 2016), weakening students' identification with their own culture. This lack of cultural confidence, in turn, reduces students' intrinsic motivation to actively share Chinese culture.

2.5. Misalignment Between Policy Guidance and Educational Philosophy

The College English Teaching Guidelines(2015) propose goals for cultural literacy but fail to specify the balance between target-language culture and native culture. This ambiguity leads to misinterpretations in practice: most teachers equate cultural education with Western cultural education (Weng Xiaohong, 2019). A deeper issue lies in the long-held "language as a tool" philosophy in China's foreign language education, which overlooks language's role as a cultural carrier. This conceptual bias relegates cultural education to a secondary status, preventing it from receiving substantive attention.

In summary, Chinese cultural aphasia results from multiple factors both within and beyond the education system. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive reform strategy encompassing teacher development, textbook compilation, evaluation reform, environmental improvement, and policy refinement. As Cong Cong (2000) stated, only by unifying language teaching and cultural dissemination can we cultivate talents with genuine cross-cultural communication abilities.

3. Strategies to Address Chinese Cultural Aphasia

3.1. Enhancing Teachers' Cultural Literacy and Innovating Teaching Methods

To address teachers' lack of cultural awareness, the primary task is to improve their cultural literacy. Teachers should systematically study traditional Chinese culture and accumulate materials for cultural expression by reading excellent English translations of Chinese cultural classics. Traditional "rote-learning" methods should be replaced with comparative cultural teaching, introducing corresponding Chinese cultural content when teaching Western culture. For example, when teaching Western festivals, teachers can compare them with traditional Chinese festivals, guiding students to articulate cultural meanings in English. Additionally, more classroom activities centered on cultural themes, such as role-playing and cultural salons, should be designed to enhance students' cultural expression skills through interaction.

3.2. Restructuring Teaching Materials and Improving Evaluation Mechanisms

To address the imbalance in textbook content, it is recommended to restructure the cultural content system in English teaching materials. The compilation of textbooks should maintain a reasonable ratio between Chinese and Western cultural content (suggested no less than 3:7) and include more materials reflecting contemporary Chinese development. Regarding evaluation reform, English exams should incorporate question types assessing Chinese cultural expression, such as explaining Chinese idioms or translating culture-specific terms. A diversified evaluation system should also be established to include students' cultural expression abilities in assessments, guiding teachers and students to prioritize cultural education.

3.3. Creating Cultural Practice Platforms and Improving Language Environments

To address students' lack of practical opportunities, schools should build diverse cultural practice platforms. Activities like "Telling China's Stories in English" speech contests and comparative seminars on Chinese and Western cultures can be organized regularly. Additionally, virtual cultural experience centers can be created using new media technologies like VR, allowing students to immerse themselves in traditional cultural scenarios. Bilingual cultural environments should be fostered on campuses, such as setting up English corner theme days or launching campus English cultural journals, providing students with more opportunities to express Chinese culture in English.

3.4. Strengthening Policy Guidance and Clarifying Teaching Objectives

Educational authorities should issue specific guidelines clarifying the proportion and requirements for teaching Chinese culture in English classes. It is suggested that the College English Teaching Guidelines include a dedicated chapter on "Chinese Cultural Education," stipulating that Chinese cultural content should account for at least 30% of total class hours. Specialized training programs for English teachers on

cultural teaching should be organized, and cultural teaching abilities should be incorporated into teacher evaluation systems. Furthermore, universities should be supported in developing “English + Chinese Culture” specialized courses to create replicable teaching models.

3.5. Fostering Cultural Awareness and Enhancing Dissemination Consciousness

In teaching, emphasis should be placed on cultivating students’ cultural awareness. By involving students in cultural dissemination projects like the “Belt and Road” initiative or international student exchanges, their sense of responsibility for cultural dissemination can be strengthened. Students should be encouraged to use new media technologies to create bilingual cultural works, such as English-language short videos on Chinese culture. At the same time, students should be guided to adopt a balanced view of cultures, absorbing the essence of Western culture while maintaining cultural confidence and actively undertaking the mission of disseminating Chinese culture.

Overcoming Chinese cultural aphasia requires collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders within and beyond the education system. The strategies above address specific issues while forming an organic whole: teacher literacy is the foundation, textbook reform is the carrier, practice platforms are the mean, policy guidance is the safeguard, and cultural awareness is the goal. Only through a multi-pronged approach can students’ ability to express Chinese culture in English be effectively enhanced, cultivating a new generation of talents with both international perspectives and cultural confidence.

4. Conclusion

Cultural confidence is the spiritual cornerstone of national rejuvenation. Integrating Chinese culture into English teaching is not only about developing students’ cross-cultural communication skills but also about inheriting cultural heritage and safeguarding spiritual roots. When students can accurately express in English the philosophical wisdom of “harmony in diversity” or the value of “a world of universal harmony,” they truly become international ambassadors with cultural consciousness. This requires English educators to broaden their global perspectives while deepening their cultural roots, achieving the unity of cultural inheritance and innovation in language teaching.

In the future, as China’s international influence continues to grow, the cultural mission of English teaching will become even more significant. Through updates in educational philosophies and innovations in teaching practices, it is hoped that the phenomenon of “Chinese cultural aphasia” can be gradually eliminated, cultivating a new generation of talents with both language proficiency and cultural confidence, thereby contributing Chinese wisdom to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. This is not only about the direction of English education reform

but also a crucial part of building a culturally strong nation.

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