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Corpus-based Study on Cultural Values in EFL Coursebooks from the Perspective of Social Roles

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Abstract

The present study makes a comparison of social roles reflected in two series of EFL coursebooks published before and after a new round of curriculum reform started from 2001 in China by means of corpus. The purpose is to explore the cultural values embedded in EFL coursebooks, particularly shown in three aspects of social roles, namely gender, race and age. The results show that after the curriculum reform there are some obvious changes of EFL coursebooks in presenting social roles, but there is still room for further improvement.

Index Terms: Social Roles; Cultural Values; EFL Coursebooks; Corpus

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1. Introduction

English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (henceforth *The New Curriculum*) [1] in China lists five curriculum objectives, i.e. language skills, language knowledge, affect and attitude, learning strategies and cultural consciousness. The incorporation of cultural consciousness into *The New Curriculum* for the first time as one of the five teaching objectives distinctly reveals the essentiality and significance of cultural content in foreign language teaching and learning. Some scholars have also emphasized the value of culture in foreign language teaching and learning.

According to Joiner [2], the coursebook is perhaps the most single influential cultural carrier. Heusinkveld [3] believes that culture is the key to sound and solid language learning. Since culture plays such an important role in foreign language learning, the evaluation of its content in coursebooks can not be ignored. However, the situation is not always satisfying, just as what Richards [4] argues, "They (textbooks) may distort content. Textbooks often present an idealized view of the world or fail to represent real issues." Moreover, Cummingsworth [5] stresses that, "If they have any subject content, coursebooks will directly or indirectly communicate series of social and cultural values which are inherent in their make-up. This is the so-called 'hidden curriculum' which forms part of any educational program." In other words, while learning the explicit cultural content in EFL coursebooks, the young learners consciously or unconsciously accept its influence and implication with their cultural psychology accumulated. But if misrepresented or distorted cultural content appear, they may acquire negative attitudes toward the people who speak a foreign language or toward foreign

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language itself, which has been shown to affect the success of language learning in a person from school age on up[6][7].

In view of these, the present study plans to take social roles as the starting point so as to reveal the underlying cultural values in EFL coursebooks. Just like what Popenoe [8] suggests, most values as one component of culture are closely tied to the social roles people play and Zhu [9] also proposes that one important symbol to reveal values is the exposure of social roles and its extent. By analyzing and comparing the cultural contents in EFL coursebooks published before and after the curriculum reform starting from 2001, the present study tries to answer a general question, i.e. what changes take place in presenting social roles between these two series of coursebooks.

2. Literature Review

Despite the significant influence of cultural values in EFL coursebooks on language learning and teaching, there are not quite many studies conducted to examine cultural content of EFL senior high coursebooks, especially from the perspective of social roles. The literature review reveals that studies about culture abroad are rich, including Yilmaz [10], Super [11], Dominguez [12], Otlowski [13], Candlin et al. [14] etc., whereas at home relevant studies appear late. Most of them focus their attention on college or junior college coursebooks [15] [16] [17] and seldom touch upon middle school ones. However, there are many scholars who have offered detailed evaluation checklists and done the research at a micro level [5] [18] [19]. They all hold that fairness, diversity and objectiveness can be treated as important criteria for the evaluation of social roles, which will be also applied for the present study.

The studies based on the means of corpus at home are even fewer, such as He [20], Xie [21] and the paper published by the author [22]. Actually there are some studies done abroad about teaching materials by means of corpus [23] [24], etc. Corand [25] points out that one trend of the development in coursebook discourse research is to analyze the educational function of coursebook words, especially the underlying teaching ideology in language education by means of corpus and its research tools, which places emphasis on empirical study and combines the process of “quantitative+ qualitative +explanatory” together. Consequently, corpus will be adopted as the major research tool for the examination of words in the present study.

3. Research Method and Procedure

3.1. Selecting Two Mini-corpora of Coursebook

In current study a comparison will be made between two series of senior high coursebooks published by People's Education Press. One is *Senior English for China* (SEFC) published before the curriculum reform and the other is *New Senior English for China* (NSEC) published after the curriculum reform. Although the two series of coursebooks have different book numbers, i.e. 11 and 6, they are comparable in the present study in the following aspects: (1) both of them are EFL coursebooks for high school learners, (2) the entire length of studying time for both of them lasts for three years, (3) their total number of word tokens is close to each other with 298,083:262,616.

3.2. Setting up Research Framework

Based on the above mentioned studies, a research framework for the present study will be set up. It is developed from two aspects: research target and research methodology. The former is carried out from three dimensions: gender, race and age. The latter includes content analysis and linguistic analysis. The subcategories and criteria used to investigate the research targets are specified below. They are developed on the basis of *The New Curriculum* [1], Cunningham's checklist [5] and Candlin et al.'s guideline [14], and are revised according to the research content of the present study.

1) Gender

Oxford Advanced Learner's English–Chinese Dictionary (4th edition) [26] defines gender as a term used to classify sex. However, in coursebooks there are some people who appear with no explicit implication for their gender, so these people will be categorized as unidentified. Therefore, three gender categories are used: male, female, and unidentified.

As for the criteria for evaluation, it is assumed that after the curriculum reform, (1) the gap between male and female in terms of frequency should be reduced, (2) the gap between male and female in terms of contribution should be reduced, (3) the gap between male and female in terms of occupation types should be reduced, (4) the description of male and female personal attributes should be closer to reality. In other words, the occurrences of males and females, celebrities, occupations, generic nouns and adjectives around the character names will be examined.

2) Race

Race applies to a wide variety of human categories, including people with roughly similar physical features, nationality and even the entire human species [27]. As far as the present study is concerned, people's different nationalities will be applied for investigating race. Country or city names in coursebooks are helpful for the identification of their origins.

The criteria for race are shown as follows and it is assumed that after the curriculum reform, (1) characters from different nationalities are shown to be more diverse, (2) the descriptions of celebrities' working areas from five major English speaking countries are more diverse.

3) Age

Three age groups are adopted here according to Ihm's classification: child, adult and elderly [28]. The criteria for age are shown below and it is assumed that after the curriculum reform, (1) the distribution of the three age groups tends to be more child-focused, (2) child group and elderly group are shown to be more active. In other words, the proportion of different age groups and dynamic verbs around the names of child and the elderly groups will be examined.

3.3. Retrieving Data from Coursebook Corpora

The corpus tool used in the present study is Antconc¹, which is a data-retrieving tool with many functions like *concordance*, *collocates* and *keyword list* etc. In consideration of others' research and the purpose of the present one, character names are chosen as the starting point and research keywords, which can best represent a concrete person. Every time a new person appears, some relevant and detailed information about his or her gender, race or age may also come around him or her, which can be taken advantage of for further analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Comparison of Exposure of Gender

1) Proportion of male and female characters

TABLE 1 shows the results. The total number of named characters after the curriculum reform has increased from 509 to 880, especially the number of named female characters has risen visibly from 150 to 283, and the proportion of male and female characters in NSEC (53%:32%) comes closer than in SEFC (54%:30%). The changes in number reveal that more female characters have emerged and coursebooks are trying to create an objective and real world.

¹ AntConc3.2.Ow.beta3 windows. 2006. Anthony, L. School of Science and Engineering, Wesada University, Japan

2) Celebrities of males and females

TABLE 2 shows that NSEC has greatly increased the total number of celebrities compared with SEFC (126:41). The number of both male and female celebrities has also largely increased, especially the females (26:4). It indicates the changes of women status and their remarkable achievements in reality are noticed by coursebooks, and are reflected in it, though the proportion between males and females (79%:21%) in NSEC are still far from being balanced.

TABLE 3 shows the detailed information about female celebrity arrangement with the development of times. In SEFC, there are only one Chinese female (*Yang Liping*) and three historical foreign celebrities, i.e. *Marie Curie*, *Helen Keller* and *Candice Bergen*. However, in NSEC, not only the number of female characters increases, but also characters living in different times.

Table 1.

TABLE 1 Distribution of male and female characters in NSEC and SEFC

Coursebooks	Male	Female	Unidentified	Total
NSEC	466(53%)	283(32%)	131(15%)	880(100%)
SEFC	277(54%)	150(30%)	82(16%)	509(100%)

a. the frequency in the table means the sum of characters that have definite names.

Table 2.

TABLE 2 Distribution of celebrities over gender in NSEC and SEFC

Coursebooks	Male	Female	Total
NSEC	100 (79%)	26(21%)	126(100%)
SEFC	37(90%)	4(10%)	41(100%)

Table 3.

TABLE 3 Distribution of female celebrities in NSEC and SEFC

NSEC	26
	Marie Curie, Helen Keller, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Margaret Mitchell, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Anne Bronte, Elizabeth Fry, Baez, Elizabeth, Mother Teresa, Queen Marry, Queen Victoria, Joan of Arc, Harper Lee, Helen, Princess Wencheng, Song Qingling, Lin Qiaozhi (20) Jane Goodall, Jody Williams, Jones, Maya Angelous, Fu Mingxia, Zhang Haidi (6)
SEFC	4
	Marie Curie, Helen Keller, Candice Bergen (3) Yang Liping (1)

a. the names in bold indicate those who are still alive, whereas the others are not.

3) Occupations of males and females

All the occupations in each series of coursebooks are grouped into four major types as is shown in TABLE 4. It is found that almost all the four occupation types have been extended after the curriculum reform for both males and females, and the administrative and technological ones taken by females have visibly increased from 3 to 6 and 16 to 20. The changes reveal that jobs considered to be men-dominated in the past are also undertaken by more and more women. Moreover, men also begin to do physical and serving jobs that are assumed to be mostly undertaken by women in the past.

Table 4.

TABLE 4 Distribution of occupation types over gender in NSEC and SEFC

Course books	Administrative		Technological		Physical		Serving	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
NSEC	9	6	64	20	11	1	11	6
SEFC	8	3	40	16	5	3	7	6

Table 5.

TABLE 5 Generic and non-generic nouns in NSEC and SEFC

Course books	Type	Word types	
		Generic nouns	
NSEC	16	English/British/business/Chinese/ American/Jewish/Maori/Muslim/New Zealand/Russian/Uros people, sportspeople, Chinese person, chain/spokes/sportsperson	
SEFC	9	English/British/business/Chinese/ French/Indian/Maori/Han people, salespeople	
NSEC	20	Phrases indicating both male and female he or she, he/she, his or her, him or her, his/her, him/her, himself or herself, man or woman, men and women, boys and girls, girlfriend/boyfriend, boy/girl, ironman/woman, sir/madam, waiter/waitress, policeman/policewoman, males and females, businessmen and women, his/hers, male or female	
SEFC	18	he or she, he/she, his or her, him or her, his/her, him/her, himself/herself, man or woman, men and women, men/women, boys or girls, girl or boy, boyfriend or girlfriend, boy(s) and girl(s), English man and English woman, actor(s)/actress(es)	
NSEC	12	Non-generic nouns (female-oriented) Australian/business/Chinese/Inuit woman, Chinese/Quaker women, American/English/British girl, sports/policewoman, girlfriend	
SEFC	5	Australian/English/American woman, Cambodian women, girlfriend	

a. the differences between NSEC and SEFC are highlighted in bold.

4) Generic nouns

In order to investigate more clearly how gender-related words are employed in target coursebooks, generic nouns and phrases indicating both male and female will be examined. Meanwhile, since it is often the case that those male-oriented nouns are often used to represent both genders (such as *sportsman* for *sportsperson*), female-oriented non-generic nouns are also investigated. The results are summarized in TABLE 5. NSEC has almost covered the words in SEFC except *salespeople*. Firstly, the types of *generic nouns* in NSEC are more

diverse than in SEFC (16>9). It has added new types of words from different social area including working place and sports, such as *chair /spokes /sportsperson*. Such change implies that coursebooks have begun to make use of more kinds of generic nouns to appropriately represent people whose genders are not specified. With regard to female-oriented nouns, the word types increase from 5 to 12. There are not only women from different nationalities, but also *business woman*, *sportswoman*, *policewoman* and so on, which authentically reflect women from different social groups.

5) Portrayal of males and females

All the adjectives collocating with male and female character names are grouped into three categories, i.e.

Appearance, Character and *Social status*. In order to more clearly reveal the changes of portraying male and female features, each category in two series of coursebooks is further classified according to their semantic differences with a slash separating them. The results are shown in TABLE 6. The word types in the three categories for males and females in NSEC have outnumbered the ones in SEFC (23>11, 21>16...63>39, 51>26), especially female-related adjectives (21>16, 20>7, 10>3), which reveals that wider and various human characteristics have been presented and female ones are enhanced. Meanwhile, the differences between male and female in the new coursebooks have also been reduced (23:21, 23:20, and 17:10), which shows that both male and female have been treated more fairly and diversely in personality description. The concrete examples further elaborate the changes. Under the category of *Appearance*, NSEC has enriched the description of both males and females. As for the adjectives under the category of *Character*, three semantic characteristics have been identified, i.e. positive, neutral and negative.

Table 6.

TABLE 6 Adjectives modifying male and female in NSEC and SEFC

	Appearance	Character	Social status	Total
NSEC Male	tall(est),short,fat,slimmer,small(er)/old(est),elderly,young(est),little/deaf,blind/black,dark,red-headed,white/handsome,rich-looking, nicest, mad (23)	brave,kind,gifted,proud,considerate,wise,kindest,pleasant,good,loyal,honest,amusing,understanding/quiet,simple,reserved/bad-tempered,rude,vain,strange,selfish,foolish,silly (23)	great(est),outstanding,famous,better,rich(est),educated,well-known,best,excellent,successful,/poor,penniless,unimportant,homeless,insignificant (17)	63
	tall,short,small,smaller,slim,little/old,youngest,young(er),eldest/deaf,blind,disabled/black/elegant,beautiful,weak,refined,charming,perfect (21)	honest,kind,clever,good,competitive,inspiring,grateful,smartest,tolerant/independent,common,curious,quiet,special/silly,ungrateful,unnatural,crazy,eccentric,jealous (20)	successful, superior, upper,remarkable, richest, great, powerful, famous, excellent / poor (10)	
SEFC Male	tall, small/ old, young, little / blind /black, white, bare-footed / handsome, strong (11)	brave,wise,smart,kind,nice,good,hard-working,kind-hearted,honest, fair, clever,careful/funny,simple,special, shy /strange,cruel,greedy (19)	successful, great(est), rich, famous, wealthy, skilled, world-famous / poor(9)	39
	tall,fat,old,young(er),little/deaf,disabled,deaf-blind,blind /black, white-haired/beautiful,pretty, fine, lovely(16)	hard-working, kind, brave, nice, grateful, careful/simple-minded(7)	wealthy, rich, educated(3)	
				26

a. the number in parentheses refers to the number of adjective types under each category.

Both male and female features in NSEC have covered all these three aspects, whereas SEFC only part of them. With regard to *Social status*, characters are divided into two types: prominent and common. Compared with SEFC, males in NSEC are not only *successful, famous, rich*, but also *unimportant* and *insignificant*, which breaks the old tradition that most of the outstanding persons are men. At the same time, females turn to be both

prominent (e.g. *successful*, *remarkable* and *excellent*) and common (e.g. *poor*). These changes show that a more balanced and authentic male and female world is being built up.

Table 7.

TABLE 7 Distribution of characters from different nationalities in NSEC and SEFC

	NSEC	SEFC
Country names	25 America, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Greek, Italy (Rome), Poland, Russia (Prussia), Spain, India, China, Albania, Czech Republic, Greek, New Zealand, Holland, Jordan, Netherlands, Scotland, Slovenia, Brazil, Japan, South Africa	16 America, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Greek, Italy, Poland, Russia, Spain, India, China, Austria, Ireland, Gambia

a. The differences between NSEC and SEFC have been highlighted in bold.

4.2. Exposure of Race

1) Variety of different nationalities

In order to identify different characters' nationalities, words indicating the country or city that people come from or their origins are examined and classified in the form of country names (see TABLE 7). In SEFC, people from 16 countries are presented, while in NSEC, there are 25, in which people from Asian and African countries are also mentioned. These changes manifest that characters from more diverse nationalities have emerged and the coursebooks are gradually transmitting real world culture to EFL learners.

2) Celebrities from major English speaking countries

In order to uncover whether there are diverse and rich descriptions of different celebrities from English speaking countries and their achievements, names of celebrities are reclassified according to their origins, including America, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As shown in TABLE 8, it is observed that the total number of celebrities from major English speaking countries after the curriculum reform largely increases from 22 to 73. The proportion imbalance among these five countries is also decreased after the curriculum reform (41%, 55%, 3%, 1%, 0 : 73%, 27%, 0, 0, 0) and celebrities from America are no longer the most prominent group in coursebooks. The changes indicate that coursebooks are trying to display a comparatively diverse and objective picture of celebrities from English speaking countries.

3) Portrayal of characters from different nationalities

In order to investigate whether the coursebooks have elaborated celebrities from different working areas, occupation nouns collocating with the names of celebrities from English speaking countries are examined. TABLE 9 shows the results.

First of all, named celebrities from three countries, i.e. *America*, *Great Britain* and *Canada* are mentioned in NSEC, whereas in SEFC characters from only *America* and *Great Britain* are presented. Secondly, the concrete occupational areas that are displayed in new coursebooks have also extended. In SEFC, celebrities from the areas of art, medicine, science, politics, journalism and navigation are presented. However, NSEC has newly added the areas of sports and literature.

4.3. Exposure of Age

1) Proportion of different age groups

With regard to age, it is observed from TABLE 10 that the number of characters in different age groups have greatly increased after the curriculum reform (69>20, 323>154, 31>17), especially the child groups rise obviously from 20 to 69. It means that more and more named characters from different age levels have appeared and the child group depicted under such a real context is shown to be more authentic.

2) Portrayal of different age groups

As far as lexical meaning is concerned, verbs can be divided into two aspects: static and dynamic [29]. Since both child and elderly groups are required to need not only protection and care, but also to be active, all the dynamic verbs are the chief concern here. Based on different lexical meanings, dynamic verbs can be further divided into five kinds: momentary verbs, activity verbs, process verbs, transitional verbs and verbs of bodily sensation. TABLE 11 shows the results. All the words are alphabetically listed for the sake of easy comparison.

Table 8.

TABLE 8 Proportion of celebrities from major English speaking countries in NSEC and SEFC

Coursebooks Race	NSEC	SEFC
America	30(41%)	16(73%)
Great Britain	40(55%)	6(27%)
Canada	2(3%)	0
Australia	1(1%)	0
New Zealand	0	0
Total	73(100%)	22(100%)

Table 9.

TABLE 9 Occupation nouns collocating with the names of celebrities in NSEC and SEFC

	America	Great Britain	Canada
NSEC	inventor, scientist, minister , ministers , author , sportsman , sportsman , writer	actor, doctors, doctor, doctor, author , authors , authoress , authoresses , authoress , critic, dramatist, editor, footaller, king, king, navigator, physician, poets, writers, writers, writers, writers, writers, writer, writer	doctor, doctor
SEFC	actor, actor, actors, doctors, inventor, film-maker , reporter, president , President , singers President , presidents	actor, inventor, scientist, director, photographer , seaman	

a. the differences between NSEC and SEFC as a whole are highlighted in bold.

Table 10.

TABLE 10 Distribution of characters over age in NSEC and SEFC

Age groups	NSEC	SEFC
Child	69(8%)	20(4%)
Adult	323(37%)	154(30%)
Elderly	31(3%)	17(4%)
Ambiguous	457(52%)	318(62%)
Total	880(100%)	509(100%)

Table 11.

TABLE 11 Dynamic verbs produced by child and elderly groups in NSEC and SEFC

	Verb types	NSEC	SEFC
Child group	Momentary verbs	picked, picked, grabbed, passed, patted	bouncing
	Activity verbs	ask, asked, allocates, attached, attended, began, beamed, called, climbed, do, do, described, escape, enquired, finds, found, given, gets, honored, join, laughed, laughed, laugh, looked, looked, looked, lived, living, learned, perform, performed, paid, posted, presented, ran, said, said, say, say, says, shook, shook, study, studying, studying, show, shows, smiled, smiling, spending, talking, talking, threw, threw, take, taken, telling, told, tied, used, write, wrote, waited	beginning, called, find, reading, say, said, said, said, spoke, talking, studying, traveling, talking, working
	Transitional verbs	come, comes, fell, go, goes, went	go
Elderly group	Momentary verbs	woke, woke	
	Activity verbs	asks, did, experienced, give, gives, gives, helping, help, handed, handed, listening, live, made, says, says, says, spent, start, swimming, tell, use	living, lives, provided, told, walk
	Process verbs	improved	recovered
	Transitional verbs	arrived, died, died	come

NSEC has enriched the description of children's actions by using more kinds of verbs, especially activity verbs. Although it seems that both of the two series of coursebooks have covered the momentary, activity and process actions of children, the verb types and meanings in NSEC are much richer than the ones in SEFC. For example, in SEFC activity verbs are mainly involved with people's communication like *say, said, talking, etc.*, whereas in NSEC, they not only talk, but also *attended* activities, *laugh, perform* something, *study* and *write*, etc.

Considering elderly group, their actions after the curriculum reform are also enriched, particularly from the respect of activity verbs.

5. Conclusions

Concerning gender NSEC after the curriculum reform has made certain progress in the arrangement of occupation, the usage of generic-nouns and the portrayal of personal attributes. In order to fulfill the aim of presenting a fair and authentic description about characters with different genders, the distribution of male and female characters and celebrities could be further improved. The results for race in terms of nationality reveal that certain progress has been achieved and further improvements can be made from the distribution and depiction of celebrities from English speaking countries. The proportion of child group has increased after the curriculum reform and can be further enhanced. Child and elderly groups are shown to be more active after than before the curriculum reform.

On the whole, the EFL coursebooks have made some progress in presenting social roles in terms of gender, race and age after the curriculum reform, and there is still room for improvement.

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