

Teaching Culture in China's TEFL Classroom

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Abstract—This paper focuses on how British and American culture can be taught to students of English within the foreign language curriculum at the university level in China. Taking into account the goals, the vastness of the subject, students' lack of background knowledge, the syllabus design and teaching method of culture studies must be subordinated to the overall aim of TEFL. However, the current practice of teaching British and American culture to non-native students of English tends to fall into some pitfalls in that students are bombarded with excessive cultural information on various aspects of the two English-speaking cultures. This paper will examine how the teaching of culture can be integrated into the learning of the English language by proposing an alternative approach to culture studies in TEFL classroom, namely the textual culture studies. In addition, a three-step method of teaching culture studies will be proposed and particularly the teaching of American primary belief of work will be exemplified to illustrate culture studies within the foreign language curriculum must be fundamentally different from similar ones in other disciplines or curriculums.

Keywords—culture studies; teaching of culture; textual culture studies; British culture; American culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language educators have long advocated that language and culture should be integrated in the language classroom [1]. It is claimed that "we cannot know what the new language means to the native speaker until we know in some systematic and fairly extensive way the meaning he attaches to the words and phrases he uses" [2]. For more than half a century now, the studies of English culture (or culture studies) have been an indispensable part of the teaching of English language and literature in many Chinese universities and colleges. So far teachers of English have not yet reached a general consensus on how to teach English culture to Chinese students who major in English, probably because the term culture itself is such a vast and broad concept. Nevertheless, there has long been a tradition that many teachers of English are naturally drawn to the work within British studies and American studies in the U.K. and the U.S. However, it is important to stress that English departments in non-English-speaking countries occupy a disciplinary position fundamentally different from that of similar institutions in Britain or America. It should always be borne in mind that English is taught to non-native students, and therefore the teaching of English culture must be subordinated to the overall aim of TEFL (teaching English as a Foreign Language). Then two crucial questions arise:

- What kind of analytical procedure should be pursued in the teaching of English culture studies?
- What sort of cultural material should students use as the object of study in order to best facilitate the learning and understanding of English language and culture?

In the current practice of teaching British or American culture to English majors, teachers often become exasperated at the almost unlimited amount of cultural materials that are relevant to the course. It is true that English majors must know something about the geographical, social, historical, political, folkloric and many other features and aspects of the U.K. and the U.S. But whether they can remember well all the 50 American states and their capitals, whether they can tell all the British historical figures in the Renaissance and all the presidents of America and their life stories, or whether they know clearly the political institutions and systems of Britain are surely not the issue necessarily conducive to their learning of English. Regarding this issue, it is an open question whether students should be bombarded with large amounts of such cultural information. Language, thank goodness, tends to change considerably more slowly than sociopolitical issues, and perhaps it deserves less concerned about how up-to-date students are with British and American social and political aspects, and more concerned about what and how TEFL teachers want their students to learn English culture.

This paper will propose a three-step method of culture studies teaching together with several example to illustrate the analytical procedure. But before that a brief review is necessary, which is related works on the teaching of culture and the major pitfalls of the teaching of culture studies.

II. RELATED WORKS ON THE TEACHING OF CULTURE

The role of cultural learning in the foreign language has been broadly analyzed by teachers and scholars. It is universally acknowledged that language is always culture-bound and "the language holds the culture through the denotations and connotations of its semantics" [3], and therefore it is very important to teach culture through its own language.

Some scholars hold that culture teaching should not aim at only giving factual information about the target civilization, about "the foreign culture which is evident during foreign language teaching" [4], but also at giving the

learner the opportunity" to develop cultural knowledge, awareness and competence in such a way that might lead to better understanding of the foreign culture, the other as well as of the learner's own culture, the self" [5]. However, one must first recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of unconscious culture" [6]. In this case, the main goal for the teaching of culture seems to help students acquire "the cultural understanding, attitudes and performance skills needed to function appropriately within a segment of another society" [7].

Other scholars have clarified the goals of instructing culture within EFL classrooms. For instance, Tomalin and Stempleski have completed the seven goals of cultural teaching as follows [8]:

- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
- To help students to develop an understanding that social variable such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
- To help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
- To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target language, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

All these aforementioned views on the teaching of culture, though insightful and multi-perspective, seemingly fail to integrate the teaching of culture into the overall aim of TEFL. Though the seven goals of Tomalin and Stempleski pay attention to certain linguistic aspects related to cultural studies, they seem far from facilitating students' learning or improving their English proficiency. Culture studies within the discipline of foreign language curriculum must be fundamentally different from culture studies taught in Chinese for Chinese students. The following section will discuss major pitfall of teaching culture studies and present an alternative, i.e. textual culture studies together with a three-step method of teaching American culture.

III. MAJOR PITFALLS OF TEACHING CULTURE STUDIES

When the British and American culture is taught to English majors, it is very likely that teachers lecture them on such major aspects as history, geography, politics, society,

race, ethnicity, education, economy of the U.K. and the U.S. In other words they tend to bombard their students with excessive information on major aspects of the two English-speaking countries. Such excessive information syndrome, which is so commonly practiced here in department of English of most Chinese universities and colleges, can be classified into the soon-to-be discussed four pitfalls of teaching British and American culture studies that are obviously steered away from the central tasks as teachers of English.

A. *The Political Institutions Pitfall*

When teaching British or American culture to students of English, teachers tend to overwhelm them with excessive amount of information of political institutions such as the British Parliament and the American Congress, the Scotland Yard in London, the electoral system of the U.S., etc. It is not to say that political institutions or systems of government are less important in the studies of English culture, but they seem to occupy far too large a part of the culture studies syllabus, which is out of all proportion to their function as part of the study of the English language. For instance, it is doubtful whether a detailed knowledge of how an American president is elected or why Nebraska is a single-chambered state contributes significant to students' understanding and learning of the English language.

B. *The Figures and Numbers Pitfall*

In teaching of British and American culture, most teachers are likely to be carried away in focusing on facts and figures and pretentiously make students believe that they are important in culture studies. For instance, the Severn, the longest river in Britain is about 354 kilometers, and Charles I of England was executed in 1649, and Hispanics accounted for 18% of the U.S. population (almost 59 million) in 2017, etc. These excessive figures and facts become a mental burden for students to remember, because one statistical table leads often to another, making the studies of culture kind of a rote memorization of huge number of sociological figures, numbers and years. It should be borne in mind that teachers of TEFL are not sociologist or demographer but teachers of the English language. Such preoccupation with figures and numbers makes little sense for non-native students majoring in a foreign language.

C. *The Social Issues Pitfall*

In the teaching of culture studies it is likely to fall into the social issue pitfall in which a large number of past and current social issues or problems in Britain and America to students of English have been introduced. For instance, teachers time and time again introduce such social problems as the homeless, drug abuse, poverty (e.g. the past of the London East End), those sweatshops in the British Industrial Revolution, the racial segregation in American, to name just a few.

It is uncertain whether one of the primary teaching tasks is to get students of English familiar with British and American society in such a way. Admittedly social issues do deserve a place in the culture studies, but it is not the main

concern to arouse in students a considerable interest in these huge volumes of complex social issues. After all teachers of English are not social engineers.

D. The Racial-ethnic Minority Pitfall

It is also quite usual that much time is likely spent on discussing racial and ethical issues of various British and American minority groups. This preoccupation is especially true in the case of American culture studies in that America is known a Melting Pot or a Salad Bowl where live immigrants of various cultures and ethnicities. The overemphasis on minority will overshadow the middle-class mainstream American thought it might be pedagogically tempting to discuss minority problems that are eye-catching and controversial. Another reason for such preoccupation on minority is that a lot of teaching materials on problems areas are easily available while materials on every day, middle-class America or Britain is less manifest and scarcer. But it should be realized that the study of mainstream dominant culture is not inconsistent with minority culture. As a matter of fact, the discussion of the mainstream culture can help students to clearly see how it defines itself in relation to minority culture. In the discussion of minority culture, perhaps teachers should elucidate specific minority's relation to the dominant culture so that students can have a better understanding of how subcultural features are products of the adoption of and reaction to the mainstream beliefs and values.

To briefly sum up, the problem of the four pitfalls discussed above has long been a common practice of teaching the English culture studies in most Chinese universities and colleges. Such pedagogical approach to culture studies has led us, as teachers of English, from the central task of teaching English to non-native English majors. There is a fundamental difference between native English speakers and non-native English learners when it comes to the culture studies of the English language. For non-native students of English, the primary objective of teaching British or American culture studies must always be that they help students to better understand how culture determines people's use of language.

IV. AN ALTERNATIVE : TEXTUAL CULTURE STUDIES

Textual culture studies are the approach to studying culture by using appropriate texts. It has long been held in Peirce and the Whorfian views that language and culture are interdependent, or language is part of culture. However, such broad description of the relation between language and culture is somehow inappropriate for the current discussion. Instead, it is necessary to claim that not all use of language fall within the domain of culture, and moreover only some (perhaps limited) part of the use of language fall into the domain of mainstream cultural assumptions. The relationship between culture, language and mainstream cultural assumptions may be illustrated in "Fig. 1".

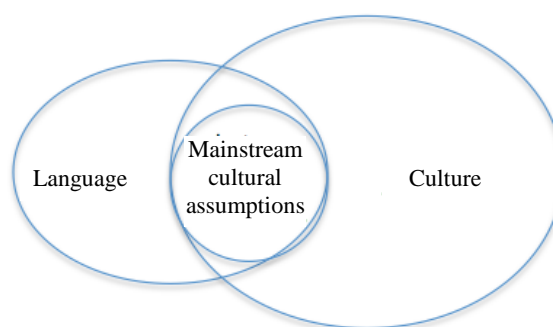


Fig. 1. Culture, language and mainstream cultural assumptions.

Let me use an illustration from my own teaching of how culture studies can be so easily carried away into the aforementioned pitfall of instilling excessive cultural information into our students. When teaching the subject of American Dream as part of the culture studies course to English majors, I would often present them with a rather comprehensive history of American Dream from the Puritan times to the present, including James Adams' definition in 1931 that life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone with opportunity for each regardless of social class or circumstances of birth; its root in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; the current interpretation such as the opportunity for prosperity and success as well as an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work; and perhaps ending with a one-hour group discussion on the concept of the American Dream used in American literature ranging from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, to name just a few. All of these aspects about the American Dream are interesting to discuss, but are they actually the most appropriate ones, given the fact that they are part of the teaching of English and not part of some history course? Would it not have been a good idea, given the priorities of an already packed English study, to spend a little less time on historical information and a little more time on, for example, cultural beliefs and values closely related to the core concept of the American Dream? And why not just use a short text like the one below as the starting point to guide students to discuss relevant cultural assumptions manifesting the American Dream?

With such teaching principle in mind, it is not improper to use the following text, which is an excerpt from the playbook of the shuttered Trump University, to illustrate how a short yet appropriate text can be used to teach mainstream American cultural beliefs and values. The playbook is entitled *Three Master Secrets of Real Estate Success* in which hundreds of pages of suggested compelling scenarios try to convince potential customers to sign up for the pricey program.

"Most wealthy people made their money in real estate and it usually started with a decision to get the knowledge and skills to be successful. You need to look at what this

small investment will fix in your life. ... You're here today because you're sick and tired of being sick and tired and you want to change that — you're not alone. I'm going to help you take your first step to create the life you've dreamed of. Follow me and let's get you enrolled. Congratulations!"

A short text like this provokes us to the question of both language and culture. Teachers could for example ask their students whether the use of the underlined verbs like 'fix', 'change', 'create' and 'dream of' might tell them anything about the American mainstream culture? What cultural attitudes and assumptions do such uses of language reflect?

This short text employs such culturally valued and favored verbs as change, fix and create, all of which are directly associated with specific cultural assumptions (particularly the value of change) to produce an illusion in its readers that the it can help them to change their lives for the better just like those successful wealthy people in real estate. At this point it is necessary to remind students that why these verbs are culturally specific and much valued is that they can point directly to the core concept of the American Dream that any individual, regardless of sex, race, social class, circumstance of birth, can change their lives for the better and the richer and move up the social ladder for prosperity and wealth. In addition, other underlined words and phrases like wealthy, decision and knowledge and skills are closely related to mainstream American culture values: success in America is often measured in terms of wealth; success is often up to the individual's decision, a manifestation of the individualism; Americans value knowledge and skills, a precondition to gain success. All of these pave the way to the realization of the American Dream of each individual.

The above example clearly shows several advantages in using such a short text to teach culture studies. First, it requires less extensive knowledge of excessive historical and sociological facts and thus makes the group discussion easier

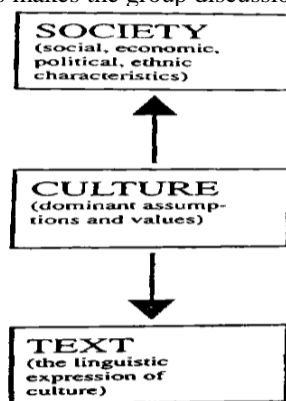


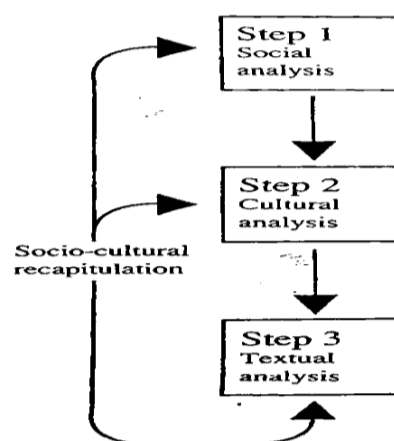
Fig. 2. The three steps of culture studies.

In the left column of the figure, the arrows of the CULTURE box point respectively to the SOCIETY box and the TEXT box, indicating the cognitive focus and direction of culture studies. In other words it is the focus of culture that guides the choice of relevant aspects of the society as well as the selection of appropriate texts. The criterion of

for students. Second, such a text does not represent some statement about culture, but it is itself a primary cultural text which is an appropriate material for students to make cultural analysis. Third, such a text serves as a good example for students to discover how certain mainstream cultural assumptions (beliefs and values) are imbedded in the very choice of words and phrases. In this way, the use of close analysis of short texts reveals how people of a particular nation use language to construct a particular world they live in. One prominent advantage of textual culture studies helps to abolish the idea that language represents us with information pure and simple; instead it shows how language creates a world of talk which, in order to understand and be understood, in turn requires a cultural competence in the reader or listener. Last but not the least, it should be emphasized that texts used for close analysis of culture studies ought to be very short ones. Brevity matters the most when texts are analyzed for the way in which language expresses cultural assumptions. Longer texts would carry away students' focus and attention from the close analysis of the linguistic means in which culture is indexed, to the hard digestion of excessive information and perhaps many new words and phrases. A text like the above one thus enables us to deal directly with the relationship between speech and culture, particular with the learning of English.

V. THE THREE-STEP METHOD OF TEACHING CULTURE STUDIES

The aforementioned textual culture studies are an advantageous alternative to the traditional practice of stuffing abundant cultural information to already overcrowding curriculum. In order to integrate cultural teaching with language learning, this paper would like to propose a three-step method of teaching culture studies in TEFL classrooms at the university level as shown in "Fig. 2".



selecting sociohistorical subjects is that they can shed light on mainstream ideology (dominant assumptions and values), and the criterion of selection texts is that they can point to, or be directly associated with such ideological system. Considering the aforementioned pitfalls of teaching culture studies, it should be reinforced that the Culture box must

give priority to dominant patterns of cultural assumptions and values over other subcultures or minorities in language-oriented culture studies.

In the right column of the figure, the analytical steps show the order to the three boxes: first social analysis; then cultural analysis; and then textual analysis.

A. Step One: Social Analysis

Step 1 is intended to provide a general informational framework about different aspects of British or American society that are related to dominant patterns of cultural assumptions. Because beliefs and values cannot be discussed in vacuum, they are shaped by economic, social, political, ethnic characteristics. Novice non-native students of English are often surprisingly unfamiliar with British and American life, and culture studies must give them a certain amount of hard-core knowledge of culture such as condensed historical introduction, geographical regions, social structure, economic system, ethnic constitution, religion, system of education and government / politics as well as mass media, popular culture, food, etc. But one thing that should always borne in mind is that the main objective of such comprehensive cultural information or knowledge serves only as a factual foundation for cultural analysis, and thus it must be reasonably delimited.

B. Step Two: Cultural Analysis

Step 2 is intended to guide students to analyze how those aforementioned social characteristics reflect particular patterns of dominant cultural assumptions that in turn define and legitimize them. In the analytical process the teacher should guide his students to focus on basic beliefs and core values that tend to occur time and time again in different aspects of social life, for they are the ideological basics of a cultural group's view of life. The reason for focusing on basic beliefs and core values is that they are representative of the mainstream culture and of the nation as a whole. Let's take the analysis of American culture for example. Students should be directed to pay attention to particular notions of freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness and how these cultural assumptions are interpreted in different context of situation. For instance, the basic belief of freedom can refer to the freedom of speech, of action, of moving around, of marrying, etc. But at the same time Americans realize that one cannot be totally free to do anything s/he wants. Laws and regulations make sure that people are not free to do whatever they want. Other ideological dichotomies are self-restraint v.s. high-level consumption, self-reliance v.s. (inter)dependence, individualism v.s. conformity, hard work v.s. leisure, etc. These seemingly contradictory beliefs and values and the meanings of interpreting them may vary according to the area or aspect of life to which they refer. Thus the context of situation is essential for the understanding of American cultural assumptions.

C. Step Three: Textual Analysis

Step 3 is the analysis of a text closely to see how these cultural assumptions are reflected in the particular use of language itself. Ways of speaking are viewed culturally

marked. What people say and how they say things refer to general patterns that are not explicitly referenced in a conversation [9]. That is to say, people always make meanings in specific social and cultural settings, and they make those meanings in relation to each other as they perceive each other [10]. Those perceptions are the shared ground for interaction in a setting. It is upon the ground that participants may stand and continue their interaction [11]. In the culture studies such shared ground is the commonly shared cultural beliefs and values, upon which participants within a particular cultural group can perceive and understand each other. In this sense it is said that a text is a particular expression of culture. Also the arrows reconnecting Step 3 with Step 1 and 2 are meant to suggest that the textual analysis might be rounded off by resituating the text within the larger sociocultural discourse.

VI. THE TEACHING OF AMERICAN CULTURE EXEMPLIFIED BY THE PRIMARY BELIEF OF WORK

So far the three-step method of teaching culture studies for non-native English majors at the university level has been proposed. This section will use such tripartite to exemplify how American culture can be taught in the TFEL classroom. First of all, the number of cultural topics that can be taught to beginner students of English (first-year or second-year English majors at the university level) seems unlimited, yet the exemplary principle must be pursued. In other words, what makes people American with immigrants arriving from all over the world with vastly different cultural traditions, values and customs? How does a nation of such diversity produce a recognizable national identity? Why not start with the introduction of basic beliefs that Americans hold to be true and self-evident?

Beliefs come from our real experiences and are often the convictions generally held to be true, usually without actual proof or evidence. Beliefs are basically assumptions people make about the world and literally shape their map of reality. The following table briefly summarizes some of the basic beliefs of the mainstream American culture [12]. However, the list is not an exhaustive description of all basic beliefs. There are bound to be more beliefs that can be added to the list. Yet what is important is that they are the prototypical representation of American culture that is most likely to be realized in speech in daily communication.

TABLE I. AN ILLUSTRATION OF BASIC BELIEFS OF AMERICAN MAINSTREAM CULTURE

American mainstream culture	
Basic beliefs	Primary beliefs of work
	Fundamental belief of equal freedom
	Beliefs on human nature of doing what is right
	Religious beliefs of praying
	Frontier belief of helping others

Here attention will only be paid to take the primary beliefs of work as an example to show how it can be taught by following the tripartite procedure of social, cultural and textual analysis. The first lecture hour supplements and discusses the sociohistorical information given in the

students' textbooks on a particular subject of American life (e.g. work). The second lecture hour proceeds from this social aspect to a cultural one by focusing on the belief systems that serve to legitimize such sociohistorical matters,

i.e, the assumptions which guide, say, the emphasis on work in the eyes of most Americans. The third lecture hour focuses on a brief text in close connection with the aforementioned beliefs or values discussed.

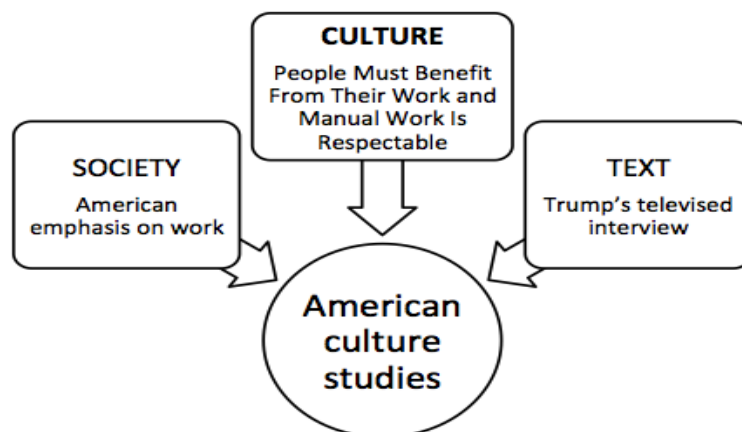


Fig. 3. The Three-step Analysis of American culture studies.

A. Step One: Social Analysis of American's Emphasis on Work

In this step the teacher can briefly introduce the American tradition of emphasis on work. Most Americans value work and work at least 40 hours a week. They sometime work extra hours and seldom complains about it, because they regard work as a necessary part of their lives and a decent means to go from rags to riches. In addition an increasing number of women quit being a full-time housewives and take jobs contribute economically to the family. Unlike the European preference on social welfare, most believe that people should hold jobs and not live off welfare payments from the government. There have been many efforts to reform the welfare system so that people would not become dependent on welfare and stop looking for jobs to support themselves. Thus it can be said without exaggeration that Americans are quite 'workaholic'.

B. Step Two: Cultural Analysis of the Value of Work

In this step the teacher should explain the belief system that legitimate or provide cultural justification behind the sociohistorical phenomenon introduced in Step one. Actually the value of work has long been a primary belief of American culture that derives from the early settlers' necessity for survival in a wilderness, and thus relate to work. Americans hold these beliefs to be true that people must benefit from their work and manual work is respectable. The value of labor work can be traced back to early colonial days when making hands dirty was much respected even for a gentleman of aristocratic origin. In contrast, physical labor was confined to the lower class in the old world (Europe). Thus it can be said without exaggeration that America may be one of the few countries in the world where it seems reasonable to speak about the dignity of human labor, i.e. hard and physical labor.

C. Step Three: Textual Analysis of the Cultural Assumption

After the sociohistorical and cultural analysis in the previous two steps, it is time to pick out a short text to analyze how the primary belief of work is embedded in natural language conversation. The follow excerpt is taken from one of Donald Trump's televised interviews during his presidential campaign.

In an interview Sunday with ABC News' host George Stephanopoulos, Trump criticized Khizr Khan's wife for standing silently next to her husband at the 2016 democratic national convention and tried to defend himself against Khan's accusations "you have sacrificed nothing". [13]

"I work very, very hard. I've created thousands and thousands of jobs, tens of thousands of jobs, built great structures. I've had tremendous success. I think I've done a lot," Trump said.

In response to the host's question the then presumptive Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump cunningly employed several culturally preferred action verbs to defend himself against criticism. Why did Trump particularly choose these verbs? Why were they important in such speech situation in response to his political opponent's attack? The action verb work is directly associated with the primary belief of work. In Trump's eyes, the verb work is a kind of sacrifice that he has made, because the belief it is directly associated with is that *People Must Benefit From Their Work*. The thousands of jobs he has created benefit thousands of Americans, which are the testimony to his devotion to work.

VII. CONCLUSION

Teaching British and American culture has long been an indispensable part within the TEFL curriculum at the university level. But such culture studies must be fundamentally different from those beyond the foreign

language curriculum, because the teaching of culture must be subordinated to the overall aim of TEFL. Studies on the teaching of culture focus mostly on developing cultural knowledge, awareness and competence at the cognitive level, and the common practice of teaching British and American culture to non-native students of English often falls into some pitfalls in that the teacher tends to overwhelm students with excessive amount of cultural information such as political institution, figures and numbers, social issues and racial-ethnic minority, etc. Such huge amount of culture facts, though interesting and necessary to discuss, seems to steer away from the objective of helping students to better understand how culture determines people's use of language. Under this circumstance, this paper would like to propose an alternative, namely the approach of textual culture studies. It is a better solution that a short text, which is culturally sensitive, can be used to discuss how certain mainstream cultural assumptions are embedded or reflected in the use of certain words, phrases or even grammatical structures. Moreover, a three-step method of teaching culture studies has been proposed, which consists of social analysis, cultural analysis and textual analysis. The paper has also exemplified such method by taking the teaching of American primary belief of work as an example. The advantage of taking such method of teaching culture requires less extensive cultural knowledge and leads students to discover how the use of some words and phrases may point to certain basic beliefs and core values of the U.K. and the U.S. What people are primarily concerned with is certain symbolic phenomena (i.e. linguistic symbols) that require cultural interpretation. The use of a carefully selected culturally sensitive short text can bring us most directly back to the objective with which teachers start their own work as real language teachers.

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