

An Inside and Outside Look Into Cultural Identity Construction of the FLTRP Cup English Public Speaking Contest—A Two Decade Review

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As the admittedly top-level English competition in China, the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) English Speech Contest has celebrated its 20-year anniversary. The competition not only provides a platform for the contestants to showcase their talent but also serves as a think tank for teachers to gain insight and inspiration as to the latest teaching methods and national educational policies. This essay finds evidence, by examining the given topics for prepared speech, to prove that increasing attention is being shifted from language skills acquisition to intercultural competence and cultural identity construction of the students. In light of the ever-globalized world, the issue is further complicated by the emergence and wide use of new media which accents the influence of individuals in public diplomacy.

Keywords: FLTRP Cup English Public Speaking, cultural identity, public diplomacy

Introduction

In 2003, China Ministry of Education issued its notice to initiate a series of college English teaching reforms; the next year 180 out of 288 colleges which had applied were included in the first trial program. It was about the same time when the FLTRP English Speech Contest came into being. It could be considered a sign of focus shift from grammar-based teaching methodology to skill-oriented approach. Listening and speaking classes became popular with emphasis on topical or situational communication. Few schools offered public speaking courses though. The FLTRP Cup ventured to shed light on the reform path of English teaching in China.

A Timeline for the FLTRP/National Talents Cup

The FLTRP English Speech Contest had its debut in 2002; at the time, named the CCTV Cup and co-sponsored by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) and China Central Television (CCTV), it was broadcast nationwide as a major event for all college-level English learners and practitioners. The finalists made their way through preliminary, intermediary, and semi-final by outstandingly accomplishing given topic speech, Q&A, and impromptu speech.

In 2010, the competition became the FLTRP Cup and was co-sponsored by FLTRP and College Foreign Languages Teaching Committee of China Ministry of Education. Meanwhile, a series of forums and seminars

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on English public speaking were organized by FLTRP attracting hundreds of college teachers and scholars annually to exchange ideas and experiences in the field. The publication of *The Art of Public Speaking* (10th edition), written by Prof. Steven E. Lucas marked the new era of public speaking teaching in China by becoming the one chosen textbook for college courses due to its adaption tailored for Chinese learners.

The FLTRP Cup included writing contest in 2013 and then reading contest in 2015, but its speech contest remains the highlight event which reaps the most attention and discussion. In 2014 its online entrance alone witnessed almost 2,000 participants to upload their competing videos. In 2017, the FLTRP Cup became global by welcoming foreigners to enroll in the competition. In 2018, the FLTRP Cup was renamed the FLTRP/National Talents Cup and, together with the writing and reading contests, comprised the U-Challenge Series.

A Comprehensive Review of the Given Topics for Prepared Speech

The given topics for prepared speech in the first decade are the usual subjects for liberal arts discussion, either inquiring the speaker's view of humanistic issues or attempting to provoke the speaker's philosophical or critical thinking. Narrow or broad, those topics carry no specific cultural symbols of China until the 2013 topic "When Socrates Meets Confucius" officially introduces the Chinese culture by naming two great thinkers in the human history representing the west and the east. The choice topic prompts speakers to explore the fundamental differences between cultures by tracing back to the origin for west and east thoughts and values. It can be safely considered now a clear sign of an intercultural perspective to be stressed and later stipulated in the national English teaching guidelines in China.

Since 2015, topics for the prepared speech either fly Chinese symbols or project China in a global context, and have been released in the form of a short video allowing for alterations according to the speaker's content. The 2018 topic "The Stones, _____" alludes to the Chinese saying "mo zhe *shi tou* guo he", meaning cross the river by feeling for the stones, which pays tribute to the 40th anniversary of opening-up and reform policy adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978. *Red Star Over China* authored by American journalist Edgar Snow becomes the inspiration for 2021 topic to celebrate the centennial of the founding of the Communist Party of China and the completion of its first hundred-year plan of alleviating poverty and building a well-off society.

It is safe to say that to communicate messages about China in English has become and will remain the main theme for future events.

Year	Given video	Chinese elements
2015	Huizi & Zhuangzi	Two ancient Chinese philosophers
2016	Communication Is Wonderful	Intercultural communication
2017	China, a Global View	China image/view
2018	The Stones, _____	40th anniversary of China's Open-Door Policy
2019	My Big Story in 2049	Centennial of PRC (1949)
2020	Challenge to All	The coronavirus pandemic
2021	Red Star Over China	Centennial of CPC (1921)

Figure 1. List of given topics and Chinese cultural elements.

Where the FLTRP Cup Meets With National Goals for English Education

The latest *Guidelines for College English Teaching* (2020) stipulates the goal is to cultivate students' English competence, reinforce their intercultural awareness and communicative skills, and foster their autonomous learning so that they are able to effectively employ English in their daily life as well as their academic and professional life. It further states that college English courses should not only equip the students with the language tool kit but also improve their knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity. Students are expected to broaden their cultural horizons by comparing Chinese culture with foreign cultures. The socialist core values should be prioritized in course design aiming to nurture the all-round development of virtuous people. The intercultural dimension has become an indispensable factor in college education in order to accomplish the following three aspects of talent development scheme.

Enhancing Cultural Confidence

Chinese President Xi Jinping first mentioned the term “cultural confidence” at the 95th anniversary of CPC as one of the four requirements for CPC members, the other three being faith in the Chinese route, theories, and political system. He also pointed out that faith in the Chinese culture is the most fundamental, profound, and ever-lasting source of power to unite all Chinese home and abroad since it has been running in every Chinese bloodline as a spiritual gene for over 5,000 years. Now it appeals to all Chinese to trust and take pride in their own cultural identity. What China achieved in the 2019 coronavirus pandemic greatly boosted people's cultural confidence and national pride.

Telling Good Stories of China

Good stories need good tellers. Good intercultural communicators are needed to tell the world of good stories about China. The long history and splendid civilization of China provide rich content and plotlines though the heavy culture load can sometimes be too complicated and confusing for those programmed with different cultural mindsets. Stereotype and prejudice are to be guarded against in promoting cooperation in a globalized world. College graduates are expected to be the main propagators of the Chinese culture and those with outstanding English competence are able to shift frame of reference and respond to cultural encounters in a flexible and appropriate manner. They will be the optimum narrators as well as the gauge for stories to be presented and broadcast.

Establishing a Positive Image of China

It has always been a Chinese tradition for the state to maintain a good image. As a big country and second largest economy, China adheres to socialism with Chinese characteristics and peaceful development with an effort to build a human community with shared future. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China defines China in the international community as the constructor of world peace, contributor of global development, and safeguard of international order.

The above three goals all request individuals to reflect upon their cultural origin, examine their cultural journey, and reconsider their role as a representation of the Chinese community. The cultural identity wheel is absolutely in action as to what builds confidence, what makes good stories, and what about China impresses.

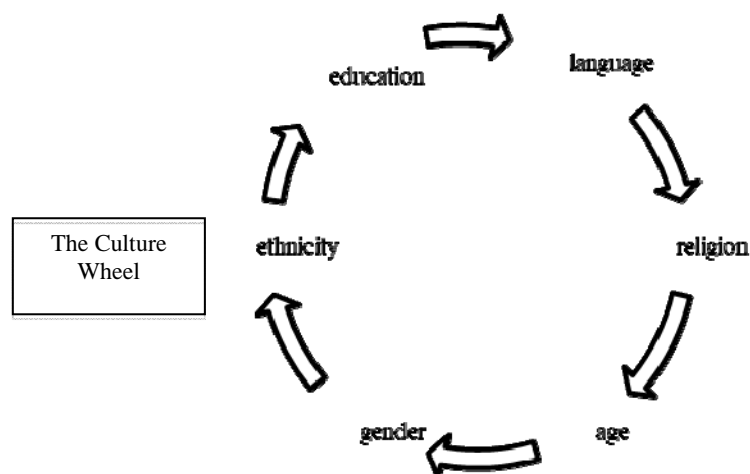


Figure 2. The cultural wheel.

FLTRP Champion—Public Diplomat in the Internet Plus Age

Myron W. Lusting and Jolene Koester, American famous experts on communication, defined “intercultural competence” as “the ability to become effective and appropriate in interacting across cultures”. Competitors for FLTRP Cup are selected among applicants from all over the country. Most of their schools offer public speaking courses; these talents are not only equipped with strong English language skills and public speaking techniques but also adequate intercultural competence. To excel in the final round of competition, contestants need to present their answers in such a manner that appeals to both Chinese and international audiences. It is a test of their motivation, knowledge, and, most importantly, attitudes, namely whether they can shift frame of reference and exercise empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and nonjudgmentalness free of their ethnocentric instinct. In light of the goals incorporated in the college syllabus which aim to nurture “good tellers of Chinese stories”, attention should be paid to the following two aspects throughout the process of intercultural teaching practice.

Intercultural Citizenship vs. Cultural Identity

Byram (2008) forwarded the notion of intercultural citizenship and emphasized that it is a global concern for foreign language teaching as to how to improve intercultural communicative competence of intercultural citizens. The construction of cultural identity directly affects one’s communicative styles and strategies. The ideal communicator across cultures is well aware of the boundaries and margins and is able to adapt adeptly to challenging encounters without compromising his or her cultural integrity.

Martin Jacques, columnist for the Guardian and New Statesman and author of *When China Rules the World* (2011), calls China a civilization state unlike most western countries being political states. As a nation and state, the Chinese people highly value cultural roots and take particular pride in its history and heritage. This past-oriented temporal sense is coupled with collectivistic behavior pattern. The advantage of coming down from such a rich culture is that students are endowed with a deeply rooted cultural identity which helps manage stress and ambivalence when initiating intercultural communication. Yet failure to make contextual changes in this globalized and unprecedentedly diverse world will mean IC disasters since ethnocentric hardheads will either fall victim to narrow-minded self-imprisonment or animosity conspiracy.

Given the ever-changing nature of the outer layers of “the onion”, it is crucial for schools to help the youths to forge a solid core which will serve as a hard rock of support and inspiration for them to explore and sail the rough sea of cultures.

Public Diplomacy in the New Media Age

The main body of public diplomacy in the conventional sense has been governments, institutions, and organizations due to its widespread effects with the aid of mainstream media. The Internet has made it possible for anyone to create news of public diplomacy. The popularity of social media has greatly changed the way public diplomacy is perceived, exercised, and received. It has become an interactive and inclusive affair, in terms of its dynamics and concerned parties. Any individual behavior can be more than a personal affair, rather a public one, or even a diplomatic one. Chinese exchange student Yang Shuping’s commencement address delivered at the University of Maryland in 2017 is a case in point considering the negative media coverage and contemptuous response it received from her Chinese peers.

Conclusion

Chinese educated youth, the Internet generation, are to play a significant role in improving China’s image on the international stage. FLTRP Cup winners boast strong English competence and they are the best candidates for the mission. Willing or not, purposeful or not, when one speaks in a foreign language, he or she will be marked and compared by cultural representation. A self-conscious and self-approved culture identity can help one to stay on course passing the gloomy waters of intercultural communication.

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