Telling China's stories in College English Textbooks: A Study of Non-English Major Students' Oral English Development at a Chinese University

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Abstract
College English in China is increasingly expected to support the national goal of "telling China's stories well" in international communication. Many textbook series have therefore added more units on Chinese culture, social change and China's global engagement. However, little is known about how non-English majors and their teachers perceive these elements or how they are used to develop students' oral English. This paper reports a case study at a provincial university in eastern China. Data were generated from textbook analysis and semi-structured interviews with thirty non-English major students and eight College English teachers. The findings show a shared appreciation of China-related content as a resource for cultural confidence, but also reveal a gap between dense, formal texts and students' limited oral resources, as well as constraints from exam-oriented assessment and large classes. Implications are discussed for textbook design, classroom practice and policy support.

Keywords: College English textbooks; telling China's stories; oral English proficiency; non-English major students; Chinese university

1 Introduction

In recent years, Chinese higher education has increasingly emphasised the strategic goal of "telling China's stories" in international communication (Li & Yuan, 2023). This policy discourse highlights the need for Chinese voices to participate more actively in global conversations and for Chinese experiences, values and developments to be expressed in ways that are intelligible and appealing to international audiences (Chen, 2023). Within this broader context, College English, as a compulsory course for most non-English major undergraduates, has been assigned a key role. It is expected not only to develop students' basic linguistic competence, but also to equip them with the ability to introduce Chinese culture, explain Chinese social changes and communicate Chinese perspectives in English (ibid.).

In response to this policy emphasis, many national College English textbook series have increased the presence of China-related content (Liu, 2024). Units on traditional festivals, historical figures, rural revitalisation, technological innovation and China's engagement with the world now coexist with more conventional topics about Anglo-American culture and global issues. These "telling China's stories" elements are intended to strengthen students' cultural confidence and provide authentic topics for cross-cultural communication, thereby linking language learning with the task of representing China to the world (Li & Yuan, 2023). However, the actual impact of these textbook changes on classroom practice and student learning remains underexplored, especially with regard to oral English development.

In most Chinese universities, non-English majors take College English in large classes during their first one or two years. Empirical evidence indicates that, among the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, speaking is often the weakest (Zheng, 2022). Many students are reluctant to speak in class, tend to be passive in pair and group activities, and rarely choose to register for the optional spoken components of high-stakes English tests (Li, 2020). As a result, there is a persistent gap between policy expectations of communicative competence and the reality of "mute English" in many classrooms.

When "telling China's stories" elements are introduced into this already challenging context, new questions arise. On the one hand, China-related topics appear to offer rich, personally meaningful content that could stimulate students' interest and give them more to say in English. On the other hand, if these materials are presented in dense, formal written texts and treated primarily as reading passages, they may further reduce the time and space available for oral practice, or may be experienced as difficult and distant from students' actual communicative needs. It is therefore necessary to investigate how teachers and students perceive the "telling China's stories" elements in current College English textbooks and how these elements are actually used in classroom activities aimed at developing oral English proficiency. This paper therefore reports a case study conducted at a provincial university in eastern China. Focusing on one widely used College English textbook series, it examines teachers' and non-English majors' views of the China-related units and explores how these units are integrated into everyday teaching and learning. The study is guided by two research questions:

1) How do College English teachers and non-English major students perceive the "telling China's stories" elements in current College English textbooks?
2) How are these elements integrated into teaching practices and student learning experiences related to oral English development?

2 Literature Review

A growing body of work has examined "telling China's stories" as a key component of China's external communication and cultural diplomacy (Vickers & Chen, 2024). In this discourse, "China's stories" refers not only to traditional cultural heritage but also to contemporary developments in politics, economy, technology and everyday life (ibid.). The phrase "telling China's stories well" implies more than simple information transmission; it stresses the need for credible, engaging and audience-sensitive narratives that can shape international perceptions of China (Xu & Gong, 2024). Within higher education, this has been interpreted as a call for universities to cultivate graduates who are able to use foreign languages to explain Chinese ideas, present Chinese experiences and engage in cross-cultural dialogue, rather than merely consuming foreign texts (Chen, 2023).

In the field of College English, this discourse has led to concrete changes in curriculum design and teaching materials (Li, 2020). Analyses of recent College English textbook series have noted a gradual increase in China-related units, covering themes such as traditional festivals, Confucian values, ecological civilisation, urbanisation, high-speed rail and China's role in international organisations (Yue & Li, 2020). Compared with earlier textbooks that were heavily Anglo-American centred, these newer series present a more balanced cultural representation and explicitly aim to strengthen students' cultural confidence. At the same time, scholars have pointed out that the majority of China-related texts are still written in a relatively formal, expository style, sometimes resembling policy documents or news reports, which may be difficult for average non-English majors to understand deeply or to use as models for spoken communication (Liu, 2024; Seiwert, 2025).

Existing studies have explored how "telling China's stories" can be incorporated into College English teaching through project work, task-based activities or ideological and political education. For example, teachers have designed tasks in which students prepare presentations on local culture for imagined foreign visitors, create bilingual leaflets introducing Chinese tourist sites, or debate issues related to China's development (Yan, 2023). These initiatives suggest that China-related content can provide meaningful and personally relevant topics for oral practice, enabling students to draw on their own experiences and knowledge (Qiao, 2021). However, much of this literature is descriptive or reflective in nature, focusing on individual teachers' innovations rather than systematically investigating how mainstream, nationally adopted textbooks are implemented across classrooms. Additionally, what remains under-researched is how teachers and students actually perceive the "telling China's stories" elements embedded in mainstream College English textbooks and how these elements are integrated into classroom practices aimed at developing oral English proficiency. The present study addresses this gap by examining one university case in detail.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a provincial university in eastern China, here given the pseudonym "Huaxia University". Huaxia University has approximately 18,000 undergraduate students enrolled in a wide range of majors, including engineering, business, humanities and sciences. College English is offered as a compulsory general course for all non-English majors in their first two academic years. The university adopted a nationally used College English textbook series in 2020. This series contains a noticeable proportion of units devoted to Chinese culture, social development and China's global engagement, and these units often include pre-reading tasks, reading passages, vocabulary exercises and some speaking activities. In addition to regular integrated-skills classes, Huaxia University offers separate oral English classes for some cohorts of non-English majors. However, the weight of oral English in overall assessment remains relatively low, and the university's English teaching is still influenced by the need to prepare students for large-scale standardised tests.

Thirty non-English major students and eight College English teachers took part in the study. The thirty students came from three main disciplinary areas: engineering (eleven students), business and economics (ten students), and arts and social sciences (nine students). Fifteen were first-year students and fifteen were in their second year. Their English proficiency ranged from those who had not yet passed the national College English Test Band 4 to those who had passed Band 6. Most had learned English for at least six years before entering university.

The eight teacher participants' teaching experience in College English ranged from four to nineteen years. All held master's degrees in applied linguistics, English language education or related fields, and two had previously studied or trained abroad. At the time of the study, all were teaching integrated College English courses using the same textbook series, and four of them were also responsible for oral English classes. All student and teacher participants were informed of the research purpose and procedures. Written consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were used for all individuals and the institution to protect confidentiality.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected over one semester using two main methods: textbook analysis and semi-structured interviews. First, two volumes of the College English textbook series that were in current use at Huaxia University were systematically analysed. The analysis focused on all units that included explicit "telling China's stories" elements, such as texts on Chinese traditional culture, national development strategies, technological achievements and China's role in global affairs. For

each selected unit, the researcher examined the topics, the representation of China in the texts, the linguistic difficulty of the passages and the design of speaking tasks associated with the China-related content.

Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all eight teachers and thirty students. Each teacher was interviewed individually in Chinese for approximately fifty minutes. The interview guide covered their understanding of "telling China's stories", their perceptions of the China-related units in the current textbook, their goals and priorities in teaching oral English, and their actual practices in using textbook materials for speaking activities. The thirty student interviews lasted about thirty minutes each and were also conducted in Chinese. They focused on students' experiences and feelings about China-related content in College English, their perceived opportunities and difficulties in speaking about China in English, and their evaluation of classroom oral activities. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission.

3.3 Data Analysis

The textbook analysis produced an overview of the number, themes and textual features of China-related units, as well as initial impressions of the types of speaking tasks provided in the textbooks. Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo software and read repeatedly. In the first stage of coding, open coding was used to identify segments of data that related to participants' views of China-related content, their beliefs about the goals of oral English, their descriptions of how they used the textbook in class, and their reported experiences and challenges in speaking about China in English. In the second stage, related codes were grouped into broader categories, such as "perceived value of China stories", "text difficulty and accessibility", "exam orientation", "task design", and "student identity and confidence". In the final stage, patterns across teachers and students were compared, and two overarching themes were developed corresponding to the two research questions: perceptions of textbook-based China stories, and classroom integration and oral development.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher moved back and forth between data and emerging interpretations, constantly checking whether the themes were grounded in the participants' accounts and consistent with the patterns identified in the textbook analysis. For example, teachers' accounts of relying on particular types of speaking activities were compared with the nature of the tasks provided in the textbook units, and students' descriptions of difficulty with China-related texts were considered in light of the texts' length, genre and language features.

4 Findings

4.1 Perceptions of "Telling China's Stories" Elements in College English Textbooks

The first research question explored how College English teachers and non-English major students perceived the "telling China's stories" elements in the current textbooks. Overall, both groups expressed positive attitudes toward the inclusion of China-related content, although they also identified significant issues related to linguistic accessibility and communicative relevance.

Six out of eight teachers regarded the increased proportion of China-related units as an important response to recent educational policy that emphasises China's voice in international communication. Four of them mentioned that, compared with textbooks they used a decade ago, the present series contains more texts on Chinese culture and development and fewer texts that exclusively present Anglo-American topics. One senior teacher commented that this shift "helps students see that our own culture and social changes are also worth talking about in English, not only Western festivals or famous people." Teachers felt that these units were helpful for strengthening students' sense of cultural identity and pride, and some saw them as a natural entry point for integrating ideological and political education into language teaching.

Students' responses were somewhat more varied but still generally favourable. In the interviews, twenty-three of the thirty students said that they appreciated reading about Chinese topics in English. Many contrasted the current textbook with their high school materials, which they described as "mostly about foreign stories". One first-year engineering student remarked that "when we read about things like traditional festivals or the development of high-speed rail, I feel I have something to say because I know these topics from my life." Another student from business noted that "it is more interesting to discuss China's economic changes because it is connected to my major." These comments suggest that China-related content has the potential to increase students' sense of relevance and engagement.

At the same time, both teachers and students pointed out that the China's stories in the textbook are often presented in dense expository passages or official-style essays that are linguistically demanding and cognitively heavy. Teachers reported that in some units they had to spend considerable time explaining background knowledge, complex sentences and low-frequency vocabulary. A mid-career teacher said that "sometimes the texts are written almost in a government report style; the ideas are important, but the language is quite abstract, and there are many long sentences." Students frequently described the China-related texts as "hard to understand fully" and felt that the expressions in the reading passages were "too formal to use in speaking." Over two thirds of the student participants mentioned that they could follow the general meaning of the

Chinese version but were unable to retell the content spontaneously in English.

Teachers' descriptions of their classroom time allocation reflected this difficulty. Three of them explained that, when teaching China-related units, they typically had to devote much of the lesson to text explanation and comprehension checks, which left relatively limited time for oral activities. Thus, although they considered China stories important, they found it challenging to balance text-focused work with the goal of promoting oral English practice.

In summary, both teachers and students recognised the educational value of "telling China's stories" elements in College English textbooks. They considered these materials to be important carriers of cultural and ideological content and sources of topics that relate to students' lives and national identity. However, they also perceived a mismatch between the rich conceptual and ideological content of many China-related texts and students' current language resources, especially for oral production. This perceived mismatch limited the extent to which China stories could be easily transformed into spontaneous spoken communication in the classroom.

4.2 Classroom Integration of China Stories and Students' Oral English Development

The second research question examined how "telling China's stories" elements were integrated into teaching practices and how students experienced related oral activities in terms of their oral English development. The interview data suggest that, although teachers tried to use the textbook content as a basis for speaking practice, their efforts were significantly constrained by exam-oriented assessment, large class sizes and limited time. Students' experiences of China-related oral tasks were mixed and closely tied to their perceptions of English learning and their own identities.

Five teachers agreed that developing students' oral English proficiency was important, especially in view of increasing opportunities for international exchange and professional communication. At the same time, they felt caught between this oral communication goal and the reality of assessment systems that still prioritise written exams and CET-style testing. Three teachers noted that the spoken component accounted for only about twenty percent of the overall course grade, and that there was considerable institutional pressure to prepare students for standardised reading and listening tasks. One relatively young teacher described the situation as "a constant struggle between finishing the textbook, preparing for exams and finding time for meaningful speaking activities."

As a result, the predominant way of integrating China stories into oral practice, as reported by teachers and students, was through group presentations. In many classes, teachers asked student groups to prepare presentations on China-related topics from the textbook, such as traditional

festivals, poverty alleviation or technological innovation. On the day of presentation, each group selected one or two representatives to deliver a prepared talk at the front of the class, often reading from notes or slides. The rest of the students listened and sometimes asked a short question if prompted by the teacher. Teachers admitted that presentations were a convenient way to ensure that every student spoke at least once during the semester, but several also acknowledged that such tasks tended to be monologic and heavily scripted rather than interactive.

Students' accounts of these presentation tasks were ambivalent. Eleven students recognised that preparing a group presentation forced them to search for additional information, organise their ideas and practise speaking. They reported that presenting about familiar Chinese topics in English made them feel proud and gave them a sense of achievement. At the same time, more than half of the students felt that presentations did not substantially improve their spontaneous speaking ability. They described rehearsing their parts repeatedly before class, memorising sentences and worrying about pronunciation and grammar. During other groups' presentations, they often felt bored or distracted, and several admitted that they paid more attention to the slides than to the spoken language.

Two out of eight teachers reported experimenting with more interactive tasks based on China stories. They described asking students to work in small groups to role-play situations such as introducing a Chinese festival to foreign friends, explaining a Chinese invention at an international fair, or comparing Chinese and Western views of family. According to both teachers and students, these tasks tended to increase participation and reduce anxiety, because students could draw on their own experiences and share responsibility within the group. Students who had taken part in such activities generally evaluated them positively in the interviews, commenting that it "feels more like real communication" and that "it is easier to say something when we talk about our own city or family." However, the two teachers also emphasised that they did not use these tasks very frequently, because of the extra time required to prepare, explain and manage them within large classes.

Students' perceptions of the relevance of speaking about China in English to their own goals further shaped their engagement. About one third of the students, especially those in humanities and business, believed that being able to tell China's stories in English was important for future work in international companies, tourism, or academic exchange. They reported that China-related oral tasks motivated them to expand their vocabulary and practise speaking. Another group of students, mainly from engineering majors, considered English primarily as a tool for reading technical literature or passing exams. They appreciated learning about Chinese topics in the mother tongue but were less enthusiastic about practising oral English on these topics, seeing it as peripheral to their career path.

Across the data, a recurring theme was students' anxiety and lack of confidence when speaking about China in English. Sixteen students worried that their limited vocabulary and grammar would lead to inaccurate or incomplete representations of Chinese culture and society. One student commented that "Chinese culture is so rich and complex; I feel my English is too simple to express it properly." Others were concerned about being judged by classmates for mistakes, particularly when speaking in front of large classes. This sense of linguistic inadequacy and performance pressure sometimes discouraged students from volunteering in class, even when they found the topics interesting.

5 Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study resonate with and extend previous research on non-English majors' oral English development in College English classes (e.g. Li, 2020; Li & Yuan, 2023). The interview data indicate that teachers welcome China-related content as a way to align College English with national expectations and to strengthen students' cultural confidence. Students also tend to view China-related units as more relevant to their lives than purely foreign topics. However, many China stories in the textbooks are written in dense, formal prose that is difficult for average non-English majors to process. Teachers report spending substantial time explaining texts, and both teachers and students see a gap between the sophisticated language of the readings and the simpler language they can use in spontaneous speech. This gap makes it challenging to transform China stories into accessible, conversational tasks that invite participation from students at different proficiency levels.

The findings also highlight the role of identity and perceived communicative needs in shaping students' responses to China-related oral tasks. Students who imagine themselves working in international or cross-cultural environments are more motivated to participate in telling China's stories in English. Others, who see English primarily as an academic requirement or reading tool, are less engaged and more anxious about performing culturally loaded tasks in a foreign language. Many students feel a responsibility to "represent" China accurately but doubt their own linguistic abilities, which can paradoxically further inhibit their willingness to speak. This suggests that "telling China's stories" should be framed not as a rigid duty to repeat fixed narratives, but as an evolving process in which students explore and articulate their own perspectives on Chinese experiences at a level of complexity that matches their current English resources.

This study offers several implications for stakeholders involved in College English education who wish to make more effective use of "telling China's stories" elements in textbooks to support non-English majors' oral English development. For textbook writers and curriculum designers, the

findings suggest that China-related content should be presented in forms that are compatible with oral communication. Long, expository essays written in formal language may be appropriate for reading, but they are difficult for students to convert into spontaneous speech. More narrative, dialogic and conversational genres, such as interviews, personal stories and case studies, could provide models that students can more readily adapt when speaking. It would also be helpful if each China-related unit offered a clear progression from receptive activities to guided practice and freer production, with explicit linguistic scaffolding for key expressions, sentence patterns and discourse markers needed to tell similar stories in oral English.

For College English teachers, the study highlights the need to rethink oral pedagogy within the constraints of large classes and exam preparation. While group presentations are practical, teachers can gradually diversify the forms of oral activities around China stories. Pair and small-group discussions, information-gap tasks, problem-solving activities and role plays based on textbook topics can be incorporated alongside presentations, so that more students have actual speaking time. Blended learning approaches may also be used to extend oral practice beyond class time, for example by asking students to record short videos or audio messages introducing a local custom or commenting on a China-related issue, which can then be shared on an online platform for peer feedback.

Finally, the findings suggest that students' identities and perceived needs should be actively considered in task design. Teachers can invite students to choose China-related topics that connect with their own disciplinary interests, family backgrounds or local communities, rather than only assigning grand national themes. This can make oral tasks feel more authentic and less intimidating. Creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, where errors are treated as a natural part of learning rather than as sources of embarrassment, is equally important in encouraging students to experiment with telling China's stories in English.

6 Conclusion

This study has investigated how non-English major students and College English teachers at a Chinese university perceive and integrate "telling China's stories" elements in current textbooks and how these elements relate to the cultivation of students' oral English proficiency. Based on textbook analysis and interviews, the study has shown that both groups generally value China-related content as an important resource for cultural confidence and ideological education. At the same time, they experience a significant gap between the dense, formal language of many China-related texts and students' limited oral resources, as well as strong constraints from exam-oriented assessment, large classes and limited teaching time. These findings suggest that, to make better use of "telling China's

stories" elements in College English textbooks, changes in content need to be accompanied by coherent adjustments in pedagogy, assessment and institutional support. Textbooks can provide more accessible models for oral storytelling; teachers can design a richer variety of speaking tasks; and institutions can recognise oral performance more fully in evaluation. Future research could extend this case study design to multiple universities and textbook series, and could combine qualitative and quantitative methods to examine how different types of China-story-based tasks affect students' oral performance, confidence and attitudes over time.

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