

# *A Study on the Content and Modes of Cultural Representation in the NMET Reading Comprehension Tests*

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the cultural representation in the reading comprehension test of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China, explores its cultural territory, cultural types and presentation modes, and addresses the problems that exist in the cultural representation. The reference framework of this study is the adapted Framework for Analyzing the Representation of Cultures in English Textbooks. Content analysis is conducted and the cultural entries presented in the reading comprehension test are coded and given weights to derive the intensity of each cultural entry ( $\text{intensity} = \text{weight} \times \text{frequency}$ ) after which comparisons and analyses are carried out. It has been found that: Target Culture, especially the culture of Britain and America, is dominant in the reading comprehension of the NMET, while the representation of the Source Culture features low frequency and low intensity; The NMET reading comprehension test attaches great importance to the representation of cultural products, cultural practices and cultural figures, while the representation of cultural perspectives and cultural communities is insufficient; Target Culture is presented in various modes and complete discourse, while Source Culture is presented in simple modes.

## 1. Introduction

The newly revised English Curriculum for General Senior Secondary Schools in China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, MOE hereafter, 2020)<sup>[1]</sup> emphasizes the cultivation of students' core English literacy, including cultural awareness, which refers to students' understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures and their identification with outstanding cultures. Cultivating and developing students' cultural awareness and enabling them to fully understand and identify with Chinese and foreign cultures is one of the important tasks of foreign language teaching and testing. Therefore, the reading comprehension test, as an important part of the NMET, should test students' understanding and recognition of cultural awareness, which is conducive to the teaching and the cultivation of students' core English literacy.

## 2. Literature Review

As the social role of language becomes more and more prominent, the relationship between

language and culture has gained the attention of many scholars, and many scholars have put forward the necessity of integrating culture into foreign language testing, such as Huang<sup>[2]</sup> and Lan & Zhang<sup>[3]</sup>. Huang<sup>[2]</sup> emphasizes that the introduction of cultural knowledge is strongly advocated in the field of foreign language teaching, and possessing the required cultural background knowledge can, to a certain extent, compensate for the deficiencies of linguistic competence in reading comprehension, so there is a need to effectively introduce cultural factors into foreign language testing.

On the question of “what to test”, different scholars have expressed different views. Valette<sup>[4]</sup> suggests that a culture test should include cultural awareness, social etiquette, cultural differences, cultural values and analysis of the target culture. Lado<sup>[5]</sup> believes that culture tests should measure intercultural understanding, and he suggests comparing the mother tongue and target language cultures to find the differences, which are the objects of culture tests. However, the culture tests mentioned by these two scholars are pure culture tests and lack operability.

In addition to theoretical studies, scholars at home and abroad have also done empirical studies. Faris<sup>[6]</sup> analyzes 24 reading comprehension test texts compiled by English teachers in an Indonesian high school. It was found that overall there was an uneven distribution of target culture (40%), international culture (40%) and source culture (20%). Similarly, Azkiyah & Setiono<sup>[7]</sup> conduct content analysis to analyse the cultural content of the English national examination in Indonesia and find that the same uneven distribution of cultures also exist and that the proportion of source culture (17%) is much lower than that of the target culture (46%).

Table 1: Framework for analyzing the content of cultural representation

Country	Source Culture
	Target Culture
	Other national cultures
	International Culture
Category	Cultural products
	Cultural practices
	Cultural perspectives
	Cultural communities
	Cultural persons

Table 2: Framework for analyzing the modes of cultural representation

Form	Weight	Instruction
The only cultural item fully discussed in a text	5	There is only one cultural item, which is fully discussed throughout the text.
Main cultural item in a text	4	The cultural item takes up the largest proportion of the text.
Evenly distributed cultural items in a text	3	The cultural items are distributed equally.
Minor cultural items in a text	2	The cultural item is subordinate to other items.
Cultural items in exercises that entail understanding of cultures	1	Activities that check students' understanding of cultural items.

To sum up, most of the domestic and foreign studies stay at the theoretical level and focus on fewer types of tests, only the school-based test, the college entrance examination, and the CET 4&6; the existing studies have not paid enough attention to the study of cultural representation in the

NMET, and the study of cultural representation in the NMET reading comprehension test is even more rare; at the same time, the statistical method of existing studies on the proportion of culture is not scientific enough.

Zhang & Li<sup>[8]</sup> construct the Framework for Analyzing the Representation of Cultures in English Textbooks from the dimensions of content and modes. Since the object of this study is the English reading comprehension test of the NMET, which does not involve explicit cultural representation, the adapted frameworks are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Research Questions

This study takes 33 sets of NMET reading comprehension test from 2014-2023 as the object of study, draws on the Framework<sup>[8]</sup> and adapts it to analyse the cultural representation. This study aims to answer the following research questions: 1) What cultural contents have been represented in the NMET reading comprehension tests in the past ten years? 2) What are the characteristics of the form of cultural representation in the NMET reading comprehension tests in the past ten years?

#### 3.2 Research Steps

1) Text coding: the researcher coded each reading text in the 33 sets of NMET; 2) Item identification: the researcher identified the cultural items presented in the reading comprehension test page by page, and coded the cultural items in Excel according to the Framework (see Tables 1 and 2), and at the same time, based on Table 2, assigned each cultural items a “weight” and noted down the frequency; 3) Data analysis: the coding was quantitatively processed and analyzed to derive the strength of all cultural items (strength = weight × frequency), including the strength of different countries, the strength of the cultural categories in each country, and the strength of the representation form.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1 Content of Cultural Representation

The researcher coded 124 cultural items identified in 165 reading texts from 33 sets of NMET reading comprehension tests, with a total coding intensity of 382.

##### 4.1.1 Country

In terms of country of cultural representation (see Table 3), the Target Culture is the first in terms of intensity (60.73%), which is dominant, with the cultures of the United States and the United Kingdom dominating, with the two accounting for a total of 86.2% of the cultural intensity of the Target Culture. International Culture and other national cultures had comparable percentages of intensity, ranking second (19.63%) and third (17.28%), respectively. The culture with the lowest percentage of cultural intensity (2.36%) is the Source Culture, i.e. Chinese culture.

Generally speaking, the cultures presented in the NMET reading comprehension tests in the past ten years covered a wide range of regions and 22 countries, which helps students to compare, appreciate, criticize and reflect on different cultures, so as to broaden their international perspective and form correct values. However, there is an extreme imbalance in the geographical distribution and the representation of Target Culture is much higher than the representation of Source Culture, a finding that is in line with Faris<sup>[6]</sup> and Azkiyah & Setiono<sup>[7]</sup>. First of all, it is indisputable that the

test attaches importance to the representation of Target Culture. The overall goal of the NMET is to test students' comprehensive application of the English language, which not only tests students' mastery of English language knowledge, but also their understanding of the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries. Secondly, the test presents a comparable proportion of International Culture and other national cultures, which can help students expand their cross-cultural understanding and help to improve cross-cultural communication and comprehension skills. Furthermore, the under-representation of Source Culture in the test may lead to students' under-appreciation of Chinese culture, thus leading to the phenomenon of "Aphasia of Chinese Culture"<sup>[9]</sup>.

Table 3: Country

Category of country	Country	Intensity	Percentage
Target Culture	United States	130	60.73%
	United Kingdom	70	
	Australia	20	
	Canada	9	
	Ireland	3	
International Culture	-	75	19.63%
Other national cultures	France	13	17.28%
	Italy	10	
	Thailand	7	
	Netherlands	6	
	Zimbabwe	5	
	Mexico	4	
	Uzbekistan	4	
	Swiss	4	
	Japan	3	
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Source Culture	China	9	2.36%

#### 4.1.2 Category

In terms of the types of cultural representation (see Table 4), overall, the NMET reading comprehension tests of the last ten years have placed the most importance on the representation of cultural products (33.25%) and cultural practices (30.37%), followed by cultural persons (20.94%), with the least importance placed on cultural perspectives (12.04%) and cultural communities (3.40%).

In the dimension of types of cultural representation, cultural products and cultural practices predominate, probably because cultural products are the most easily recognizable material forms of culture and are the most direct content of cultural teaching<sup>[10]</sup>. At the same time, cultural practices involve the concrete embodiment of culture in real life, such as social activities, traditional customs and daily life styles, etc. Presenting cultural practices in the reading comprehension test can comprehensively test students' practical understanding and application of culture. Cultural persons also occupy a certain proportion in the reading test. Cultural persons are representative figures in a specific cultural context, and their words, deeds and thoughts usually represent certain aspects of a specific culture, and presenting cultural persons in the test enables students to realize the

importance of individuals in the construction and inheritance of national culture<sup>[11]</sup>. The reason why cultural perspectives and cultural communities are rarely presented in reading tests may be because they are both deep culture, which may be difficult for native Chinese students to understand and explain.

Table 4: Types of cultural representation

	Target Culture	International Culture	Other national cultures	Source Culture	Total intensity	Percentage
Cultural products	89	19	19	0	127	33.25 %
Cultural practices	58	30	28	0	116	30.37 %
Cultural perspectives	17	23	6	0	46	12.04 %
Cultural persons	62	0	10	8	80	20.94 %
Cultural communities	6	3	3	1	13	3.40 %

## 4.2 Forms of Cultural Representation

Table 5: Forms of cultural representation

	Target Culture	International Culture	Other national cultures	Source Culture	Total intensity	Percentage
The only cultural item fully discussed in a text	70	35	20	5	130	34.03 %
Main cultural item in a text	44	12	8	0	64	16.75 %
Evenly distributed cultural items in a text	63	15	21	3	102	26.70 %
Minor cultural items in a text	52	6	16	0	74	19.37 %
Cultural items in exercises that entail understanding of cultures	3	7	1	1	12	3.14 %

In terms of the forms of cultural representation (see Table 5), most texts usually cover a variety of cultures. Target Culture is presented in a variety of forms, mainly in the form of “the only cultural item fully discussed in a text” and “evenly distributed cultural items in a text”. International Culture is also mainly presented in the form of “the only cultural item fully discussed in a text”. Other national cultures are also presented in a variety of forms. But Source Culture is presented in only three forms, and the intensity of the representation is not very high. It can be seen that the Target Culture is not only presented frequently and intensively, but also in complete text; while the Source Culture is presented less frequently and intensively, and in a single form.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the Framework, the researcher coded and analyzed the content of culture representation in NMET reading comprehension test in China in the past ten years, and the findings are as follows: 1) From the viewpoint of cultural country, the NMET reading comprehension test in the past ten years has focused on the representation of the Target Culture, with International Culture and the other national cultures coming next, and the least representation of the Source Culture; 2) From the viewpoint of cultural types, the proportion of cultural products and cultural practices is the highest, followed by cultural persons, and cultural perspectives and cultural communities accounted for a relatively low proportion; 3) from the viewpoint of the forms of cultural representation, most of the texts present a variety of cultures, the Target Culture is presented in a variety of forms, and most of them are presented in complete texts, while the Source Culture is presented in a single form.

Admittedly, this study has some limitations in that the process of assigning weights to each cultural item is affected by subjective factors, and future studies could have multiple raters assign weights to the cultural items and then conduct reliability and validity tests to increase the objectivity and scientific validity of the study.

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