

# Exploring the Course with Area and Country-Specific Characteristics Based on the Speech Community Theory: Taking *The Survey of English-Speaking Countries* as A Case Study

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**Abstract:** Targeted at cultivating international talents, courses with area and country-specific characteristics have gained in attention from the circle of foreign languages. However, *The Survey of English-Speaking Countries*, a basic related course, presented negative sides in current teaching, mainly including the fragmented display of cultural knowledge and the isolation between linguistic skills and cultural connotations. Therefore, the present paper takes the course as a case study, and applies Speech Community Theory to guide its content reorganization and teaching innovation in methods. The study shows that regarding English-speaking countries as diverse and interactive speech communities, centering on core community practices, and integrating critical thinking could bridge the disconnect between linguistic forms and cultural implications, thus improving learners' cross-cultural communicative competence. This research is thus a meaningful attempt to demonstrate a feasible reforms of courses with area and country-specific characteristics.

**Keywords:** Speech Community Theory; Area and Country Studies; *The Survey of English-Speaking Countries*; Course Reform

## 1. Introduction

As cross-cultural exchanges has become increasingly frequent, there's a growing demand for talents with strong area and national knowledge, and cross-cultural communication skills. In the context of the year 2022 when the designation of Area and Country Studies was set as a first-level discipline, the foreign language academia actively responded. Dai Dongmei indicates that "French programs, a major component of foreign language disciplines, can serve as direct or indirect sources for exploring academic resources, expanding research perspectives, and

cultivating and supplying core talents for the study of Area and Country Studies with Chinese characteristics" [1].

*The Survey of English-Speaking Countries*, which often falls under the category of "part of the area and national knowledge courses" [2], has become increasingly popular among domestic scholars. In teaching practices, the course is a key way to understand the history, culture, society, and politics of the English-speaking world, but its content is often treated as a static information to be imparted, which results in a disconnect between language skill training and cultural background understanding. This leads to students "knowing" but not "communicating well", making the effective communication in authentic cross-cultural contexts a challenge.

The Speech Community Theory, proposed by sociolinguistics John Joseph Gumperz, emphasizes the close ties between language usage and its embedded sociocultural networks [3], offering a new perspective to handle the challenges mentioned above. Thus the present paper is an attempt to transform *The Survey of English-speaking Countries* from the perspective of Speech Community Theory, in order to provide a working model for courses with area and country-specific characteristics.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

According to Speech Community Theory, people exist as a group. To be specific, they are groups of individuals who share a set of linguistic communicative systems, follow social norms, and have similar cultural cognition [4]. Hereby linguistic communicative systems are more than a communal language; rather they consist of similar pragmatic rules and discourse styles. Social norms are centered on language practices, which make up the hub in constructing and maintaining social relationship, as well as demonstrating identity in groups. And similar cultural cognition arises from specific

sociocultural contexts and interactive circumstances by speaking the same or similar languages.

### **3. Current Status of *The Survey of English-Speaking Countries***

Nowadays, *The Survey of English-Speaking Countries* has exposed two major shortcomings in our teaching. The first one is related to its teaching content. As a basic and vital course within area and country studies, the course is often overwhelmed with an ocean of knowledge, generally covering history, geography, politics, economy, education, media and so on. Not only between countries, even within the country, knowledge is fragmented and thus it is not easy for students to form an overall perspective, not to mention forming robust critical thinking. The other depressing side lies in teaching methods. Students tend to be forced to receive information. Coupled with limited class time, the course is lacking in appeal that students are knee-deep in negative listening, without active engagement and interaction.

Facing the plights mentioned above, the course team applied Speech Community Theory to trigger the following considerations: could the teaching content shift from simply listing facts to discussing the hot topics of a specific speech community? Could the teaching incorporate the social norms and cultural values with language learning, so that the language can be deeply integrated with the culture? Can our teaching team optimize resources to enable students to enhance cultural reflection and avoid cultural stereotypes? Therefore, the following explorations have been conducted from two aspects, that is content and methods in teaching.

### **4. Exploration of Course Restructuring under the Influence of Speech Community Theory**

According to Speech Community Theory, the course team undertook a comprehensive restructuring of both content and methods. In content, communities with cultural significance and unique language practices were used as units to determine the core content for in-depth analysis. As regards to methods, innovative modes that align with the speech community learning characteristics were employed to guarantee the success of the restructuring.

#### **4.1 Content Restructuring: Employing Speech Communities as Units of Analysis**

The course team has organized modules centered on communities with substantial cultural significance and distinctive language practices. Based on student profiles, four key communities have been identified and summarized as follows. First, there are communities in political arenas, such as UK parliamentary debates and US presidential campaigns. In the UK parliamentary debates, the clear-out parliamentary rules and video recordings of inter-party debates are essential elements for constructing the political community. Second, sociocultural communities include both Australian Indigenous narrative traditions and civil rights movement discourse. As regards as Australian Indigenous narrative traditions, oral literature and themes related to the land are included in the scope of learning and reflection. Third is communities in daily life, such as British pub leisure talk and discussions on academic integrity at North American campuses. In leisure situations, the British conversation topics, humor styles, and class consciousness are clearly apparent. Last but not the least, media communication communities are also dealt with, like BBC news reporting and discussions on political issues on US social media. What is noteworthy is that BBC reporting focuses on constructing objectivity in media broadcasts, which implies the intent and effects of word choices, but its conclusions might be biased [5].

Throughout the exploration, identifying speech communities is just the beginning. To foster profound thinking among students, contents at advanced levels focus on key linguistic elements, sociocultural norms, identity formation and power dynamics. Core linguistic features include specialized vocabulary, grammatical structures, and practical methodologies designed to address specific scenarios. On the topic of sociocultural conventions, this course examines the historical background, social norms, and values that support these language practices. Given the statement that “the sense of identity was in part the result of... the power of society” [6], the concept of identity and power is also considered. On this aspect, course content includes how language reflects and constructs social identity, group boundaries, and power relations, such as dialect ascents and social evaluation. Recognizing that communities are subject to change and diversity, the course content also considers internal diversity and plurality, such as class and ethnic differences, which change over

time in communities.

#### **4.2 Innovation in Methods: Participatory, Contextualized, and Critical Approaches**

The content restructuring described above presents opportunities for learning through authentic language materials. Meanwhile, to create a sense of familiarity and identification among students about the content, the course is organized in participatory, contextualized and critical practices.

At the macro level, project-based learning is a crucial method that integrates throughout the entire course. The method incorporates “content learning and language learning” [7] by employing a learner-centered approach, emphasizing “participatory and constructive learning” [8]. Group members utilize their unique expertise and assume distinct roles. For example, in analyzing Brexit debates, some group members emphasize Theresa May’s repetitive rhetorical strategy of stressing Brexit and securing a good deal, aiming to project certainty and control. Meanwhile, other group members examine Jeremy Corbyn’s adversarial questioning and critical challenges, a discursive practice that solidified his role as the primary political opponent. In small groups, collaborative learning based on projects encourages a dynamic exchange of ideas, while simultaneously gathering collective intelligence, leading to the production of outputs such as research reports or multimedia presentations.

At the meso-level, situational simulation practices are created, like designing role-plays, simulated debates, and cross-cultural communication scenario training, so students can become the main actors in the classroom instead of onlookers, experiencing and applying community conventions. Hereby, it relies on comparison and critical reflection; classroom teaching encourages students to compare various countries or communities within the same country, thereby guiding them to discuss core issues like cultural stereotypes and the effects of globalization local language and culture.

At the micro level, the discourse analysis is exploited. Taken into consideration the framework of communication studies [9], the course team has combed thematic explorations within the speech communities. In making an analysis of the post-Brexit negotiation, the conflict framework was employed to stand out oppositions in political stance. Students are thus

encouraged to be involved in critical thinking. As to economic recession or natural disasters, the human interest frame was used to focus on personal stories, delineating their struggles, losses, and resilience, thus arousing empathy of audiences. In terms of public health crises, the responsibility framework was used to assign accountability. Regarding social issues like euthanasia, the morality framework was employed to place the discussion against the contexts of justice, rights, and traditional values, thus prompting deep value-based reflections. About new climate policies or international trade agreements, the economic consequences frame was used to analyze issues from the perspective of economic impact, making students have access to complex policies in economy. By guiding students to recognize the applications of these frames in particular scenarios, this method enables them to delve into how media speech communities construct reality, influence public perception, and wield discursive influence through strategic linguistic choices.

#### **5. The Challenges and Reflections on Preliminary Outcomes**

The growing demands for China’s external communication and exchanges have placed higher requirements on students. In response to the changes of the times, *The Survey of English-speaking Countries* is also constantly evolving. There is no doubt that the exploration of course restructuring under the guidance of Speech Community Theory is confronted various challenges. The first challenge is teachers’ adaption to the change of roles. As Hu Jiasheng et al. said, teachers who teach foreign languages “must replace their roles and functions in the classroom” [10]. Besides being proficient in such five skills as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, teachers need to be armed with sociolinguistics and cross-cultural communication theory, and discourse analysis capabilities. Affected by AI technology, technical competency is a must. In terms of textbooks, the majority of existing textbooks are compiled in such sections such as history, geography, politics, economy and education. A relatively systematic collection, organization, and evaluation of authentic language corpora that are suitable for both teaching and reflecting speech communities is lacking. This requires a collaborative effort and a continuous commitment to updating. For the

assessment system, effectively assessing students' understanding of community practices, critical thinking, and practical application abilities needs further refinement.

In the exploration of *The Survey of English-speaking Countries*, it has been observed that there is a positive preliminary finding from the perspective of Speech Community Theory. Students' motivation has improved significantly compared to traditional teaching, partly due to the use of authentic materials and situational tasks, which make learning more engaging and relatable, directly linked to real-world scenarios. In post-test assessments, students demonstrated improved comprehension: their understanding of cultural phenomena transcended superficial levels, enabling them to grasp the sociocultural principles and power dynamics underlying language use. Also, students showed stronger contextual awareness, a better understanding of pragmatic appropriateness, and improved perspective-taking skills in simulated tasks. Moreover, their exploration on cultural discrepancies became more reflective and dialectical, rather than just single narratives.

## 6. Conclusion and Outlook

Speech Community Theory provides a vital theoretical framework and practical model for the reform of area and nation-specific courses, like *The Survey of English-Speaking Countries*. It motivates a shift in the educational approach, moving from merely transmitting knowledge about the subject to an exploration of how it operates and the rationale behind its effectiveness, thereby transcending mere listing of cultural facts to grasp the intricate interplay between language, culture, and society. To further bridge the gap between linguistic forms and cultural contexts, language practices, social norms, identity construction, and power mechanism are integrated into the exploration of distinct speech communities. Besides, the classroom teaching is designed in the way that encourages students to engage and enquiry in a contextually grounded space.

In the future, course team will focus on the following aspects. More graded corpora will be developed to ensure the smooth progress of teaching. A more scientific assessment scale for cross-cultural competence will be compiled. The assessment scale ranges from intercultural linguistic competence, to intercultural awareness, and intercultural skills. The AI era also brings

empowerment to courses: by applying AI technology, the teaching assessment could be made more precise; by AI-based adaptive learning system, more customized learning content will be provided based on students' learning pace and individual ability level; by AI intelligent matching and allocating, cross-regional sharing and promotion will become possible. In a nutshell, these efforts are designed to align with the evolving demands of contemporary development and enhance the quality of talent cultivation.

## Acknowledgments

This paper is funded by the Fujian Provincial Educational Scientific Research Project for Mid-career and Young Teachers (Project Number: JSZW22055).

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