

Why Do Chinese Students Often Deliver Speeches Perceived as Unoriginal at English Competitions? Interviews with Judges from English Speaking Nations and Possible Explanations

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Introduction

This article explores cultural factors which might cause Chinese students in an English speech competition to deliver speeches considered unoriginal by judges from English speaking nations (ESNs). Interviews with some of the judges of last year's China Daily 21st Century-Lenovo Cup (the Cup) revealed that students as a whole recited speeches with very similar subject matter, a small number of personal experiences and a small, poorly chosen set of references. Hall's (1976) cultural factors and primary research from various fields are used to explain these outcomes.

Background

The Cup is an annual English competition in China wherein students deliver speeches. According to Qian Wang of China Daily, in Suzhou in 2013, in Jiangsu Province alone, the Cup drew over 10,000 contestants and across China several other major cities participated (personal communication, April 21, 2014). Although Chinese students up to age 21

competed, only students in junior high school (12-15 years old) are considered in this study, since each judge assessed this age range. The four judges interviewed were all English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in Suzhou from ESNs and their time teaching in China ranged from one year to eight, with a combined total of over 20 years' ESL experience in China. Any university ESL instructor was eligible to judge. All contestants were assessed by a team of two ESN judges and one Chinese judge, and each team judged about 200 students. Contestants recited a speech of about two minutes on the topic of "growing pains." This idiom roughly means "emotional difficulties that occur during adolescence" (The Free Dictionary, 2014). Finally, composite scores were derived from three categories of performance: Speech Content, Language Quality and Delivery (see Table 1).

The scoring guidelines in Table 1 were to be considered holistically. A score out of 40, 40 and 20 was given for each category and judges were trained to score by reading the "Handbook for the Panel of Judges" (China Daily, 2013).

Table 1: Breakdown of the Composite Score

Speech Content (40%)	Language Quality (40%)	Delivery (20%)
persuasiveness	pronunciation	manner
organization	articulation	poise
statement of purpose	stress	eye contact
logical coherence	intonation	facial expression
relevance	fluency	gestures
scope	speech flow	
appropriate use of humour	pause	
appropriate use of examples	clarity	
focus	pitch	

Literature Review and Definitions

Edward Hall's Cultural Factors

Hall (1976) distinguished a spectrum of communication styles. Those with high context dependence (HCC) are more listener-centred,

where communications use fewer words and rely on shared experience, history, and familiar metaphors. Those with low context dependence (LCC) are more speaker centred and do not hinge on vast shared experience. Figure 1 indicates China is highly context dependent, whereas North American and most northern European countries are far less

<- Low Context Communication (LCC) Examples		High context Communication (HCC) Examples ->	
Germany	United States	Saudi Arabia	Japan
Switzerland	Canada	Kuwait	China
Denmark	Australia	Mexico	South Korea
Sweden	United Kingdom	Nigeria	Vietnam

Figure 1: Countries Arranged by Context Dependence (Countries further down a given column are more dependent on context).

Hall (1976) also discovered that context dependence correlates with several cultural factors, as shown in Table 2. Further evidence suggests that all ESNs are roughly the same in terms of context dependence, as are East Asian nations (Schwartz, 2004).

Important dichotomies for the purposes of this paper are conformity/difference, tradition/change, hierarchy/equality, elder/youth and covert/overt communication. Hall (1976) argues

that a high-context culture like China is necessarily conformist, since its language requires a great deal of shared experience to be comprehended fully. This is explained by Kim (2005) who traces the urge for conformity back to Confucius. For Hall (1976), particular traditions are an outcome of conformity, as are how strongly they influence the culture in the country of origin. A strong hierarchy is therefore deemed necessary since it maintains

Table 2: Cultural Differences between East Asian and English Speaking Nations

East Asia High Context	English Speaking Nations Low Context
Conformity encouraged	Difference encouraged
Tradition oriented	Change oriented
Inclined to accept hierarchy/status/rank	Inclined towards equality
Covert/spiral/indirect/implicit communication	Overt/plain/direct/explicit communication
Non-verbal signals highly meaningful	Non-verbal signals have limited meaning
Elder focused	Youth focused
Inheritance/family	Self-help
Cooperative	Competitive
Formality	Informality
Constrain disagreement	Express disagreement
Distinction between in-groups and out-groups	Flexibility between in-groups and out-groups

tradition, the upper echelons being occupied by older people, i.e. they have been involved with those traditions longest and therefore understand them best.

Chinese Communication Style

The style of communication in a high context culture is relatively covert, or indirect. Hall (1976) argued that this follows from high context dependence: a single word or phrase may activate a constellation of other ideas. The language as a system need not be as linear as those in lower context cultures. One rhetorical style in Chinese discourse is *Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He*, which roughly means Introduction-Interpretation-Alternative Interpretation-Conclusion (Tang, 2000, cited in Yang & Yang, 2010). This rhetorical style often omits a specific problem, as opposed to the rhetorical style typical in ESNs (Yang & Yang, 2010). This aligns with the information in Table 2 in so far as disagreements are constrained, since if there is no specific problem noted (only interpretations of a situation), then there is no direct conflict. Hall (1976) also argued that a high context culture omits evidence from

discussions, since the evidence may be redundant: The manner in which a person is traditionally meant to think about a situation is enough – all the speaker or writer needs to do is ‘remind’ a listener or reader of that way of thinking rather than provide a new, empirically supported or deductively sound argument. The suppression of empirical evidence or specific information can be seen even in young Chinese children, as per research by Han, Leichtman and Wang (1998, cited in Wang, 2011). They compared the frequency of personal opinions, preferences and direct sensory data in Chinese and American children under the age of four and found that Chinese children demonstrated significantly less of each.

Originality

For this paper, the definition of "originality" is "freshness or novelty, as of an idea, method, or performance" (The Free Dictionary, 2014). A concept central to originality is difference. Differences in subject matter are a legitimate way for a student to distinguish him or herself from competitors in a speech competition. Differences can come from variety in personal

experiences and second-hand knowledge or from a creative take on the prompt, as well as other ways not covered here.

Methods

Interviews

All interviews were face-to-face or by Skype. The format was semi-structured, with some questions asked in every interview and others

improvised in order to explore answers. Questions pertained mostly to student performance: what impressed them most, and what was underwhelming. Interviews lasted 21 to 52 minutes, averaging 38. The judges were encouraged to speak freely on whatever subject was at hand. Topics such as clothing choices, the timing of the event and favourite students were discussed alongside originality. Table 3 contains the questions which elicited discussions of originality:

Table 3: Interview Questions Related to Originality

After listening to hundreds of speeches, what cultural differences struck you?
What sort of content impressed you most?
Could a student score well with you even if their grammar and pronunciation were flawed?
How did originality affect your scoring?

Results and Analysis

Of all the themes in the interviews, judges were unanimously unhappy with the originality of contestants. Differences in subject matter between speeches were very rare. Most speeches could be classified as students bemoaning their homework and loss of free time, or shirking their homework, being made to feel guilty by their parents and teachers and then applying themselves more diligently. Students resorted to clichés ("no pain, no gain") or pop culture references frequently. References

to the TV series "Growing Pains," which aired from 1985 to 1992 (IMDb, n.d.), struck the judges more as lazy than illustrative, since they thought it unlikely contestants had any first-hand experience of the show. One sardonic judge described the experience as "a mind numbing blur." After hearing "no pain, no gain" enough times, he began keeping a tally which reached over 40 during a single day of judging, and every other interviewee emphasized the "endless repetition" of clichés. Table 4 displays general and particular criticisms judges made about originality.

Table 4: Shared Criticisms of ESN Judges Related to Originality

General Criticisms Related to Originality	Particular Details
Repetition of subject matter	Most contestants complained about school
Lack of particular, personalized details	Personal opinions and sensory descriptions were absent or poorly developed
References were poorly chosen	Clichés and obscure pop culture references

Discussion

This section attempts to explain Table 4 by arguing that cultural factors militate against Chinese students achieving originality. Hall's (1976) work and a range of primary research

offer support.

Table 2 indicates that Chinese culture encourages conformity and maintaining tradition. If a culture encourages conformity, then the parents in that culture enforce and encourage conformity for their children,

especially when the children are young and still financially dependent upon them. It follows that conformist parents will not insert their children in situations that fall outside the lines of tradition, nor encourage them to break tradition. Thus, the variety of first-hand experiences such children as a group would possess might be narrower than those in a less traditional culture. As one example, adolescents from ESNs often seek out part-time work and thus gain experience about the world not available at home or school, but this is rarely the case for Chinese adolescents (People's Daily Online, 2008). Their lives have been described as "three-pointed:" home-school-home (Kristofk, 2011, cited in Kirkpatrick and Zang, 2011). This helps explain why the subject of the speeches delivered by junior high students at the Cup was nearly always the same, as per Table 4. In fact, even if a student did have an unusual collection of first-hand experiences relative to traditional Chinese culture, they might be discouraged from sharing them in any setting, including a speech, especially if they were not told it would be well-received by an ESN judge. In this regard, judges also complained that personal opinions and sensory descriptions were rare, as might be expected following research by Han, Leichtman and Wang (1998, cited in Wang, 2011). Given that no two people sense the world in exactly the same way, this is a subset of subject matter which could have provided difference.

As per subject matter itself, Table 4 indicates that nearly every speech was about struggling with school. Table 2 shows that China focuses on elders and is inclined to accept hierarchy. It follows that children would tend to obey their parents to a larger extent in such a culture than in a less context-dependent one. Indeed, Nickerson and Kritsonis (2006) demonstrated how, at the behest of their parents, Chinese students spent much more time on their studies than other ethnic groups. It is therefore no surprise that competitors on the whole fixated on their education at the exclusion of other facets of life.

Second-hand knowledge gleaned from books, television, conversation and other means was another potential source of difference. As per Table 4, students resorted to clichés and proverbs very often in their speeches, which may be explained again by the emphasis on conformity and tradition in Chinese culture as per Table 2. It stands to reason that such a

culture would reinforce its conformity through institutions such as public education. Indeed, Chinese education emphasizes rote memorization over critical analysis and does not typically afford students choices in the courses they take or the materials they study (Pierik, 2003; Liu & Littlewood, 1997, cited in Zhenhui, 2001). In junior high school then, Chinese students might be unlikely to possess the skill necessary to recognize poignant secondary sources and apply them to their own autobiographical speeches.

The last source of difference which could have furnished originality in the subject matter was creativity. Creative interpretations of the prompt might have involved enlarging or shrinking its scope, e.g. the growth of the nation, or perhaps the growth of just their attitudes toward a concept or idea; they might have involved combining their personal growth with that of their parents, who were also aging alongside them; they might have reversed their growing pains, imagining their future if their attitudes became less mature with time. Students might have given elaborate metaphors for growth, such as a geyser building pressure and erupting. The possibilities were endless, but the reality was rather one-dimensional from the judges' perspectives in Table 4.

Table 2 shows that conformity characterizes Chinese culture. If breaking from a pattern is creativity (de Bono, 1990) then conformity is necessary, though not sufficient, for a creative act (Harman & Bohemia, 2007). Rather, creativity is a conscious choice that people make in response to situations, which is influenced by culture: research shows that conformist cultures like China fare less well than less conformist cultures in measures of creativity (Niu and Sternberg, 2001; Hu, Lin & Shen, 2003, cited in Qian, 2007; Goncalo & Staw, 2006; Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). A conformist culture would perhaps produce students unlikely to make a creative effort if not prompted to do so, thus explaining Table 4.

Alternatively, it might be argued that diverging rhetorical styles caused Chinese contestants' speeches to be seen as unoriginal. There are significant differences between argument structure in China and in ESNs. The vagueness of Chinese rhetoric, with its lack of evidence, might lead to a lack of personal detail in an autobiographical speech. Perhaps if a single Chinese student using the *Qi-Cheng-*

Zhuang-He style were transplanted into an ESN speech competition, the student would gain in originality in contrast with her competitors. However, had all the students in the Cup met the criteria under Speech Content in Table 1, thus adopting a style native to ESNs, but were all very similar in subject matter, they would still be seen as unoriginal. Since context plays a large part in the perception of originality, rhetorical style *per se* cannot guarantee it.

Lastly, all judges admitted that when a student was original by not engendering all the complaints in Table 4, they scored very well, but that when students were unoriginal, it would detract from their scores substantially, even in other subsections.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Without recourse to a wide variety of first-hand experience and second-hand knowledge, nor a proclivity for creativity, competitors at the Cup had little at their disposal to lend them originality. Since each ESN judge assessed about 200 students, it seems reasonable to conclude that a lack of originality might have been a problem for the vast majority of all the Cup's competitors. However, recent research (Talhelm et al., 2014) has uncovered large-scale psychological differences between the Chinese living north and south of the Yangtze River, likely owing to cultural differences stemming from rice versus wheat cultivation. Since all the competitors judged in the present study were from Jiangsu, at best a tentative conclusion about the originality of south Chinese competitors can be drawn. Future studies might compare outcomes of originality across this variable.

Equally, it would also be difficult to generalize about the ESN judges, since only four were interviewed. Moreover, differences in context dependence exist within ESNs, as seen in Figure 1. It could be the case that if all the ESN judges for the Cup were British, for example, the competitors would have garnered a more favourable opinion. It should be noted that the most tolerant judge in this study in terms of how negatively a lack of originality impacted his perception of students, was in fact from Northern Ireland whereas the rest were from ESNs outside the UK. Future research might seek out the impact of the country of origin of the ESN judge on the perception of originality in

Chinese speeches, as well as the factors affecting the perception of originality in general. While the judges were not the focus of this study, it might be noted that according to the official rules of the Cup, speech content was to be scored in terms of logical coherence, organization, persuasiveness and several other criteria, *without* mention of originality. The rules were clearly printed for judges to see, yet originality heavily influenced their scoring, and without Chinese contestants being prompted to be original, most of them failed to meet this expectation. Ironically, the Cup exposed cultural differences by failing to make them explicit. Future research might investigate how explicitly discouraging ESN judges from considering originality or explicitly encouraging Chinese students to consider originality might influence judgment outcomes.

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