



Teaching Nonverbal Differences in English Class: Cross-Cultural Communicative Approach

GUO Mei^{[a],*}; HU Wenhua^[b]

^[a]Lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

Research interests include cross-cultural communication and western culture.

^[b]PH.D candidate, lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

Research interests include Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, intercultural communication & Philosophy of Language.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication is like our words, an essential part of overall human communication process. While nonverbal communication was once considered innate, it is now recognized that nonverbal communication including body movements, facial expressions, gestures, and the study of time and space etc., often varies from culture to culture. In order to help Chinese students to achieve communicative competence in intercultural communication, suggestions are made for teaching nonverbal differences in the English class.

Key words: Nonverbal differences; Cross-cultural; Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is primarily a nonverbal phenomenon because most aspects of one's culture are learned through observation and imitation rather than explicit verbal

instruction or expression. The primary level of culture is communicated implicitly, without awareness, by primarily nonverbal means. Moreover, culture tends to determine the specific nonverbal behavior that represents or symbolizes specific thought, feeling, or state of the communicator. Culture also determines when it is appropriate to display or communicate various thoughts, feelings, or internal states. As culture has a subtle and pervasive influence on nonverbal communication, the communicators come from different cultures have different rules for nonverbal communication.

As people from different cultures use nonverbal codes quite differently, a practical understanding of the knowledge of how specific nonverbal behavior differ helps us to learn how to interact with people from different cultures with whom we do come in contact. There is no doubt that combining cognitive knowledge with actual encounters is the best way to gain communicative competence.

1. WHAT IS NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION?

Nonverbal, quite simply put, means "not words." The definition of the word nonverbal says "It does not pertain to, or is not in the form of, words" (Caputo, Hazel, & McMahon, 1994). Nonverbal communication (NVC) then is the part of the communication process that focuses on the non language or spoken components. Generally, it can be defined as the deliberate or unintentional use of objects, actions, sounds, time and space so as to arouse meanings in others.

Although nonverbal communication can be intentional or unintentional, it normally operates out of the awareness level and unlike verbal behavior it is difficult to manipulate or falsify. As nonverbal signals are visible they are beyond ready concealment or manipulation. Whether you try to send a signal or you stay silent with a neutral expression on your face, a receiver still interprets your uninterrupted stream of behavior. The Communication

takes place in the reception and interpretation of the message. Moreover, when you make a verbal mistake, you can always say “you did not understand what I was trying to say.” On the other hand, it is really difficult to tell someone that your angry face is not angry.

Words are discrete, separate, digital signals that have little or no meaning in part or without being spoken completely: but nonverbal signals are ongoing, visible and often difficult to manipulate. You can choose to stop talking, but you cannot stop behaving. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), stated this communication principle as “we cannot not communicate.” And such principle is particularly revealed in emotions. Nonverbal communication is the primary mode for expressing emotions. Although people talk about their emotions from time to time, they more often express feelings nonverbally. When people ask, “Is something wrong?” “What is the matter?” “Why is he so upset?” and so on, they are generally reacting to nonverbal expressions.

Nonverbal communication also adumbrates social interaction. The word “adumbrate” means to foreshadow or to partially disclose. In social interaction, one characteristic of nonverbal communication is to foreshadow or give cues to what should happen next. When someone reaches out a hand to you, that is usually a cue for you to also reach out, in order to shake hands. The intricate rules for social interaction are laden with nonverbal adumbrative cues. It is important to recognize that adumbrative cues occur at both the interpersonal and small group levels of communication. The success of asking your parents to give some money, negotiation sessions between employer and union, and peace talks between nations depend partially on the ability to recognize adumbrative cues that indicate not only how you should proceed, but -- sometimes more importantly -- also when.

Although some have tried, no one has written a definite dictionary on nonverbal communication, because nonverbal messages are ambiguous --can mean several different things, depending on such factors as culture, context, personality, and so on. Some people get very quiet when they are happy. Others express happiness through smiles, shouts for joy, and even tears. In order to have any success in understanding another’s nonverbal signals, you need to remember the factors of culture, context, and personality. These factors operate through the various nonverbal communication channels of voice, body movements, space and others.

2. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Each culture continually provides its members with input about how the world is structured. Slowly we develop preconceptions about the world. It is the cues derived from these preconceptions that we take most for

granted and that imperceptibly set the limits for our style of communication. Our cues about space and time are among those most significantly influenced by culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are two of the most fundamental nonverbal differences in intercultural communication.

2.1 Chronemics

Chronemics --or the study of meanings, usage, and communication of time--is probably the most discussed and well-researched nonverbal code in the intercultural literature. The analyses suggest that the time frames of various cultures differ so dramatically that even if only chronemic differences existed, intercultural misunderstandings would still be abundant.

2.1.1 Monochronic and Polychronic Time

There are many kinds of time systems in the world, but two are most important to international business. We call them monochronic and polychronic time. Monochronic time means paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time. Polychronic time means being involved with many things at once. Monochronic time or M-time emphasizes schedules, segmentation, and promptness, while polychronic time, or P-time, stresses involvement of people and the completion of transactions rather than strict, preset scheduling. In a monochronic system, the schedule may take priority above all else and be treated as sacred and unalterable. Conversely, people in P-time cultures simply do not allow schedules to get in the way and place the job in a special category much below courtesy, consideration, and kindness to other people.

Monochronic time is an artifact of the industrial revolution in England; factory life required the labor force to be on hand and in place at an appointed hour. In spite of the fact that is learned, monochronic time now appears to be natural and logical. People talk about time as though it were money, as something that can be “spent,” “saved,” “wasted,” and “lost.” It is also used as a classification system for ordering life and setting priorities: “I don’t have time to see him.” Because monochronic time concentrates on one thing at a time, people who are governed by it don’t like to be interrupted. Monochronic time seals people off from one another and as a result, intensifies some relationships while shortchanging others. Time becomes a room which some people are allowed to enter, while others are excluded.

People, more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) are tend to be polychronic. Their time system is characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things and by a great involvement with people. There is more emphasis on completing human transactions than on holding to schedules. For example, two polychronic people conversing on a street corner would likely opt to be late for their next appointment rather than abruptly terminate the conversation before its natural conclusion.

2.1.2 Past- and Future-Oriented

From the moment we are born until the time we die, our cultures instill in us a partly conscious, partly unconscious concept of the passage of time. Many Americans perceive life as unbearably temporal; as a result, they are highly future-oriented. Think of all those “time-saving” devices that have become “essential for Americans to exist,” such as dishwashers, calculators, computers, and microwave ovens. Chinese culture, on the other hand, is less conscious of time and is actually past-oriented--it looks to tradition and the past for their sense of time.

The past-oriented society or culture is one that places a strong emphasis on reliving old times and retelling old stories. These cultures have high regard or respect for their parents and elderly persons in the society. The ancient Chinese culture, in which ancestor worship and family tradition plays strong roles, provides an example of the past orientation of time. Like other past-oriented cultures, Chinese people see events as circular. Past events perpetually recur in the present and, therefore, have relevance for either similar or new situations.

In the future-oriented society, an emphasis is placed on tomorrow--a tomorrow that is bigger and brighter only if one works and saves today. To have a future orientation, the Americans experience the projection of thoughts farther ahead in time (extension), some degree of organization in their future outlook (coherence), an increased amount of speed with which they see themselves moving through time (directionality), perceptions that the future is heavily populated with events (density), and feelings or attitudes about the future (attitudes/affectivity) (Daltrey & Langer, 1984).

2.1.3 Cyclical and Linear Time

Overall, time in traditional China was usually viewed in cyclical rather than in linear terms. Cycles might be as long as four Buddhist Kalpas (each with a duration of more than a billion years) or as short as the common sixty-year and sixty-day cycles of the native Chinese tradition. Even dynastic periods were seen as macrocosms of the natural life cycle of birth, growth, decline, and death--comparable to the fourfold Buddhist cycle of formative growth, organized existence, disintegration, and annihilation. In contrast with the Christian, Islamic and Judaic traditions, the world had no fixed starting point, although in Chinese popular culture human events were sometimes dated in successive years from the accession of the mythical Yellow Emperor in 2698 BC. In American culture, time is experienced and used in a linear way--comparable to a road extending from the past into the future. Time is also divided quite naturally into segments. For Americans, years are divided into months, weeks into days, hours into minutes, seconds into milliseconds. Variations in cultural uses of time may often be a reflection of religious and philosophical differences among people.

As Chinese and American culture view time differently, they exhibit different communication behaviors and actions. However, through a greater understanding of a given culture's rules, we can learn to maximize our potential for communication. Indeed, such understanding is the goal of theory and research in nonverbal communication.

2.2 Proxemics

A second nonverbal code that has attracted considerable attention is proxemics, the communication of interpersonal space and distance. While members of all cultures engage in the claiming of space for self or collective effort, the experience of spaciousness and crowdedness and the perception of space-violation and space-respect vary from one culture to the next. From infancy, the child is influenced by social associations that are characteristics for his or her social group. These associations act as a frame of reference for the individual in subsequent social interactions. Thus, as with other nonverbal behavior, proxemic or spatial behavior corresponds to the experiences and cultural traditions with which we have lived. Research has documented that cultures differ substantially in their use of personal space, the distances they maintain, and their regard for territory, as well as the meanings they assign to proxemic behavior.

There is expansiveness to the American character that is undoubtedly related to the geographical size of the country and to the lively frontier spirit that runs through American history. The separate bedrooms Americans provide for each of their children and the other special rooms set aside for adult use often surprise Chinese and attest to the value Americans place on individuality and personal privacy. In China, population density and crowded environmental conditions make it virtually impossible for members to manipulate the concrete environment to maintain personal privacy. Furthermore, personal privacy might not be as major a concern for Chinese as it is for Americans. Members of individualistic America tend to engage in environmental control to assert their unique identity and to claim private space. Whereas in collectivistic China, individuals do not necessarily manipulate the environment to ensure individual privacy; they compensate by monitoring their self-disclosure process more judiciously and cautiously. Moreover, Americans establish temporary territorial rights in public places, but Chinese do not consider that people have such rights, for example, to the seat they are sitting on. Individualistic Americans tend to take an active, aggressive stance when their space is violated, while collectivistic Chinese tend to assume a passive, withdrawal stance when their personal space is intruded. However, there are also cultural differences in definitions of what is considered to be an appropriate interaction distance. Researchers find that Americans have larger interaction distances than Chinese. A Chinese might feel he was left

out in the cold when he was kept eight to ten feet away from others, but an American would not feel lost even if he was over ten feet away from others. Therefore when an American and a Chinese meet, it would be expected that the American would move backwards, turning in a backwards spiral, closely followed by the Chinese. That is why, Americans often find Chinese to be intrusive and pushy, while to us they may seem “cold” and “distant.”

2.3 Facial Expression, Eye Contact and Touch

As early as the year 1872, with the research of Charles Darwin, the idea of universal facial behaviors for different emotions was existent. There were, on the other hand, researchers who argued against universal facial expressions and maintained that facial expressions were “culture bound.” There is today, however, considerable research revealing some evidence of universality of facial expressions, but with the stipulation that culture defines how and when they may be expressed. With this understanding, perhaps the best place to turn for a discussion of cultural differences is to display rules.

The different ways that emotions are expressed in a culture are said to be governed by display rules, a concept originally developed by Klineberg (1940). “Display rules are culturally learned and tell members of a culture what emotional expressions are acceptable under what circumstances. Display rules dictate whether an emotion should be qualified (have another expression added to it), modulated (intensified or deintensified) or falsified (replaced by an unfelt emotion)” (Kitao, 1989). The display rules for American culture allow Americans to express their emotions in public more than Chinese do, though, of course, there are sex differences, and not all emotions are acceptable for American to express. The Chinese have a tendency to hide their emotions, especially negative emotions, usually through falsification.

In conjunction with facial expressions, nonverbal differences in eye behavior are very important aspects for the study of facial movements. Eye contact is important as a regulator in conversations. However, Americans and Chinese have different conventions related to eye contact. Americans learn to maintain eye contact during conversations. Avoiding eye contact can be interpreted as insincerity or a sign of weakness. Chinese do not maintain eye contact as much as Americans; they only feel comfortable with mutual gaze in relationships of strong mutual reliance. This indicates that Americans not familiar with the Chinese conventions related to eye contact may consider Chinese who do not maintain eye contact unfriendly, disrespectful, and impolite. Between Americans, eye contact may be decreased in an attempt to terminate a conversation. Since Chinese use less eye contact than Americans, Americans may interpret the lack of eye contact, among other things, as a desire to terminate the conversation.

Most researches on tactile communication say that we receive different kinds, amounts, and duration of touch from our parents as infants and that we reflect these differences as adults. According to LaBarre, the Chinese people often have a strong aversion to being touched or slapped on the back; they even dislike shaking hands. The American culture also may be classified as nontactile cultures, but perhaps not to the extent of the Chinese. Although many Americans have certain prohibitions concerning interpersonal (tactile) contact in public, the effects of these cultural restrictions are usually restricted to spatial separation in public. Other forms of body movement such as emblems, greetings, body position, posture, and dance are also culturally bound. In fact, each culture has its own characteristic movements, body positions, and inherited meanings for interpreting them. It is important to remember that within each culture, many subcultural differences as well as individual differences exist. Thus a description of a culture only serves as a generalization and will not always apply to the individual members of that culture.

2.4 Silence

While the basic form of silence may be universal, its functions and interpretations vary among cultures. For a newcomer to a foreign culture, a general knowledge of when and where to keep silent may be a basic social requirement, just as a little knowledge of verbal communication is.

According to Wayne, the US interpretations of silence are: sorrow, critique, obligation, regret, and embarrassment (Samovar & Porter, 1994). Thus the American tradition is relatively negative in its attitude toward silence, especially in social and public relations. But for Chinese, Lao Tsu’s simple statement, “To talk little is natural,” is obviously and experientially descriptive. Chinese are more comfortable with silence and believe that they can communicate in silence. For Americans, this silence may be uncomfortable or may seem to indicate a lack of comprehension. Instead of watching for nonverbal cues that would indicate what the Chinese person is trying to communicate, or cues that would indicate that he/she is formulating a verbal answer, Americans tend to try to explain the point or ask the question again. Moreover Chinese create silence more frequently than Americans. Americans like to ask questions and force others to talk to fill interpersonal silence.

In contrast to the American significance of eloquence and self-assertion, the general attitude of Chinese toward language and verbalization is that fewer words are better than more words. Most Chinese agree with the saying, “Out of the mouth comes all evil.” Actually, Chinese tend to be taciturn, considering it a virtue to say little and rely on nonlinguistic means to convey the rest. They assume that the other fellow understand without their saying it. This makes nonverbal communication particularly important.

It would be foolish for us to try to examine all of the elements that constitute nonverbal behavior because of the tremendous range of activity included in this form of human activity. The above examples will enable us to understand some of the main differences in nonverbal communication between Chinese and Americans.

3. TEACHING NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

In recent years, language teachers are coming to realize that efforts to achieve communicative competence must include nonverbal competence in the target language. Supposing we wish to provide nonverbal education in classrooms, the question which arises next is how to do it. Here are some suggested procedures:

One important step in learning about nonverbal communication is having an understanding of the target culture itself. While not all nonverbal communication is a logical outgrowth of the culture where it developed, some of it is. Thus understanding the culture will help us to understand nonverbal communication. For example, understanding something about the individualistic nature of Americans would give a Chinese some understanding of the conventions related to Proxemics, Chronemics, and etc.

At its best it will be necessary for the student to live in a particular culture for many years. This, however, is not a feasible way to teach a large number of students. Thus, experiential exposure to other cultures utilizing "controlled" or laboratory situations is used by some culture-trainers. Other methods which can more easily be employed by language class involve nonverbal information teaching, and behavior.

The method of teaching nonverbal behaviors emphasizes informational aspects of learning. The teachers could provide information about different time and space patterns. As for kinesic behaviors, the priority might be to teach kinesic behaviors that have a negative meaning in the American culture. For example, A Chinese student may avoid eye contact to show respect, but such a behavior might be interpreted negatively by an American professor. The second step might be to teach more positive kinesic behaviors, emphasizing which behaviors are similar to the ones Americans use and which ones are different. Another way is to assign readings including nonverbal codes. Teachers could teach common

parts of the kinesic code, so that students will recognize them and understand them when they encounter them. Understanding the kinesic code in reading assignments will increase the students' understanding of the text.

Another method is through behavior. This method will entail reinforcing the individual for producing behavioral patterns which are commonly found in American culture, and discouraging behavior which is inappropriate to the culture. The aim should not be to change behaviors per se, but rather to teach individuals about another culture. For example, teachers can give students various concepts on slips of paper (e.g. "come here," "go away," "be quiet") and have students act them out, using gestures, body, head and eye movements, and facial expressions. Role plays may be the most widely used behavior in language teaching. The role plays that a teacher already uses might be expanded to include various areas of nonverbal communication. For example, students could demonstrate greetings and leave-takings for different situations, such as the first greeting between two strangers.

It is hoped that teaching nonverbal behavior in language class will add flexibility and richness to the students' experience, and make them aware that there are many ways of behaving and perceiving the world.

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