

Teaching Nonverbal Communication and Cultural Differences in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract: Nonverbal communication plays an important role in interpersonal interactions, but there are obvious differences in the forms of nonverbal communication among people with different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in foreign language courses, teachers should help students understand the differences in culture and nonverbal communication specific to the target language, in addition to covering language-related knowledge. This paper outlines the concept of nonverbal communication, analyzes the cross-cultural differences in nonverbal communication, and studies the foreign language teaching strategies based on the cross-cultural differences in nonverbal communication.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication; Cross-cultural differences; Foreign language teaching

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1. Introduction

Most institutions nowadays only focus on teaching the language itself in foreign language courses and pay little attention to nonverbal communication, which leads to the failure to improve students' communication skills in the target language. To solve this problem, teachers need to change their teaching concepts, pay more attention to nonverbal communication, and explain the target-language culture, so that students can correctly utilize various methods of nonverbal communication in the target language.

2. The concept of nonverbal communication

The concept of nonverbal communication originated in the 1960s. It mainly refers to communicating in ways other than speaking. According to the latest research, nonverbal communication mainly refers to conveying information and expressing specific semantics using nonverbal ways like physical gestures. Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in interpersonal interactions, serving to complement, undermine, or alter verbal expressions, and even substitute for language in conveying nuanced emotions. Nonverbal communication possesses qualities such as spontaneity, warmth, complexity, and nuance, which augment linguistic impact, compensate for linguistic limitations, and facilitate more precise emotional expression ^[1].

3. Cross-cultural differences in nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is an effective way of conveying ideas and exchanging information, and it is also an external manifestation of one's culture. There are big differences in nonverbal communication between people with different cultural backgrounds, so students will need to learn the culture of the target language so that they can communicate in it more effectively.

3.1. Cultural differences in environmental language

Environmental language encompasses spatial information, time information, colors and signs, sounds, lights, architectural design, interior decoration, etc. There are big differences in the way people from different cultural backgrounds use environmental language. Chinese people value personal space, but they often react calmly even if their spaces are violated. Japanese people bow after interpersonal interactions, so both parties often maintain a relatively long distance from each other. In American culture, interpersonal space is categorized into distinct zones: intimate distance, typically less than 45 centimeters and commonly observed among close relationships like couples or family members; personal distance, ranging from 45 to 80 centimeters, prevalent among acquaintances and colleagues; social distance, spanning 80 centimeters to 3 meters, typically maintained with occasional business associates; and public distance, exceeding 3 meters, commonly observed in settings such as classrooms or public addresses ^[2].

3.2. Cultural differences in the object language

Object language mainly refers to clothing, make-up, body odor, etc., and its main role is to describe the personal and cultural characteristics of the communicating parties. Westerners are used to tanning and view dark skin as a symbol of health, while Easterners are relatively introverted and view fair skin as a symbol of beauty. People of different cultures have different dietary habits, and their body odors differ greatly, with Northern Europeans having butter and cheese odors, and Mediterranean people having onion and garlic odors. People tend to be more sensitive to certain body odors depending on their culture. For example, people from English-speaking countries are more sensitive to the odors of poor hygiene, bad breath, and sweaty armpits, so they tend to pay attention to personal and oral hygiene. Additionally, there are significant differences in the perception of beauty and clothing between different cultures [3]. Western countries tend to prefer revealing clothes, while Chinese women tend to be more conservative in terms of clothing, and Arabic countries require women to cover most of their bodies. Chinese people regard double eyelids as beautiful, whereas in Western cultures, single eyelids are often considered more characteristic of Oriental women.

3.3. Paralinguistic cultural differences

Paralanguage encompasses elements such as nonverbal vocalizations, pauses, and shifts in discourse power dynamics. Vocal variations and intonation are crucial to conveying information effectively, often expressing sentiments that conventional language may not fully capture. For instance, English speakers often use filler words like “you know” and “okay” unconsciously to facilitate smoother communication, and employ sounds like “er” and “um” to buy time when grappling with challenging topics. In Eastern culture, silence is perceived more positively, while in Western cultures, it is perceived more negatively. In some cases, Chinese people believe that silence is the best answer, while it is taboo in Western culture ^[4]. In Chinese culture, it's considered impolite for a man to whistle at a woman, whereas in American culture, whistling may signal a positive feeling towards a woman. Moreover, in Chinese communication, the sound “hmmmm” is often used to convey attentive listening without any additional language, while in English-speaking countries, the word “yup” is commonly used to indicate agreement or approval.

3.4. Cultural differences in body language

Body language mainly includes basic courtesy, posture, gestures, etc. Facial expression is an important indicator of a person's thoughts. For instance, scrunching the nose can signify dislike or disagreement, while grimacing may indicate determination or anger. Additionally, frowning can convey various emotions such as deep thought, disappointment, or anger. However, there are notable differences among cultures in the extent to which facial expressions are openly displayed and controlled. Eye contact is also an important aspect of nonverbal communication. Different gazes hold distinct meanings, and the act of making or avoiding eye contact, as well as its duration, carries significant implications in interpersonal communication. In Western culture, mutual eye contact typically signifies respect and sincerity. Conversely, the act of avoiding eye contact may be interpreted as disdain, distraction, fear, guilt, or indifference, potentially leading to misunderstandings between individuals^[5]. In Chinese culture, it is disrespectful and impolite for both parties to look directly at each other for a long time. Apart from facial expressions, gestures also carry diverse meanings across cultures. For instance, in American culture, the "ok" gesture means "very good" or "no problem," whereas in Japanese culture, it symbolizes "money." Conversely, in Arab culture, this gesture may denote hostility, while in French culture, it represents "zero." Similarly, the shrug of the shoulders carries different connotations: in British culture, it signifies uncertainty or disbelief; in Russian culture, it expresses a range of emotions including confusion, disgust, contempt, surprise, incomprehension, denial, or concession. However, in Chinese culture, the shrug of the shoulders holds no specific meaning.

4. Foreign language teaching strategies based on cultural differences in nonverbal communication

Most foreign language teachers nowadays focus on vocabulary, grammar, utterance, and other linguistic knowledge, and neglect nonverbal communication. Consequently, students do not understand the cultural differences in nonverbal communication, which is not conducive to the enhancement of their communication skills in the target language. Therefore, it is necessary to teach cultural differences in nonverbal communication in foreign language courses, so as to improve the comprehensive quality of students.

4.1. Emphasizing the differences in nonverbal communication between different cultures

Foreign language teachers should actively adjust their teaching approaches to emphasize the importance of developing nonverbal communication skills. Teachers need to understand that culture forms the foundation of language mastery. Therefore, besides teaching language basics, they also need to incorporate cultural insights from the countries where the target language is spoken. This helps students grasp the differences in nonverbal communication across cultures, enabling them to avoid misunderstandings or inappropriate behavior. At the same time, teachers need to take the initiative to learn and study foreign customs and cultures, constantly improve their cross-cultural communication skills and cross-cultural awareness, and strive to become communicators and interpreters of different languages^[6].

4.2. Introducing the differences in nonverbal communication between different cultures

In the process of foreign language teaching, teachers need to explain the differences between the nonverbal communication methods of the mother tongue and the target language and guide their students to use the nonverbal communication methods correctly to avoid conflicts with people of other cultures. For example, teachers can start with teaching gestures by creating a scenario to explain the usage of different gestures in different cultures. An example of a scenario can be American tourists dining at a French restaurant. As the meal is served, one of the

American tourists express gratitude to the French waiter by making the “OK” gesture, forming a circle with their thumb and forefinger. However, to the French waiter, this gesture is interpreted as insulting, suggesting “you’re worthless.” Consequently, both parties clash due to this cultural misunderstanding ^[7]. Moreover, foreign language teachers should integrate discussions on nonverbal communication and cultural differences into their vocabulary explanations. For instance, when explaining a word like “glance,” the teacher should not only define its meaning but also highlight the distinction between a “glance” and a “stare.” Furthermore, the teacher can delve into the different interpretations of eye behavior in Eastern and Western cultures, allowing students to understand the cultural nuances of the target language countries. Through this approach, students can achieve a deeper understanding of cultural context, leading to more effective cross-cultural communication.

4.3. Teaching nonverbal communication through case studies

Teachers can utilize the case teaching method to help students grasp the cultural nuances embedded in nonverbal communication through vivid examples. For instance, a teacher could present a scenario involving a hardworking mother who has diligently saved money in the bank over the years. Despite facing current hardships, she is reluctant to withdraw the funds. In a discussion between the mother and her child about this matter, the mother verbally expresses her reluctance to visit the bank. The child, in response, communicates nonverbally by shaking their head. This simple gesture effectively conveys the child’s disagreement or understanding without the need for spoken words, illustrating the power of nonverbal communication in interpersonal interactions. After explaining the scenario, the teacher can then focus on introducing the meaning of shaking one’s head followed by the difference between the Eastern and Western cultures. In English culture, responses to rhetorical statements often involve using negative actions to indicate agreement and affirmative actions to signify denial. Conversely, in Chinese culture, responses are based on affirmation, with affirmative actions signaling agreement and negative actions indicating denial ^[8].

4.4. Teaching nonverbal communication by using modern techniques

In the process of teaching nonverbal communication, teachers need to employ a student-centered mindset instead of traditional spoon-feeding methods. Utilizing interactive techniques and incorporating advanced teaching technologies such as multimedia can enhance students’ understanding. By using videos, pictures, and audio, teachers can effectively convey the intricacies of nonverbal communication, allowing students to grasp its specific applications authentically and appropriately. For example, teachers can play videos of events such as the Grammy Awards or Oscar speeches and explain the nonverbal communication used in the speeches to their students. By doing so, students will be able to recognize the differences between Eastern and Western cultures, and then improve their communication skills in the target language.

4.5. Creating nonverbal communication exercises

Teachers can create nonverbal communication exercises to help them understand the cultural differences of different countries and learn to apply nonverbal communication correctly. Teachers can invite foreigners to conduct special lectures to explain the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and introduce the correct use of nonverbal communication methods. Furthermore, teachers can also organize opportunities for students to engage in foreign activities, such as attending galas or hosting receptions for foreign guests. Collaborative exchanges with international schools can also be arranged, enabling students to interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Through these immersive experiences, students can gain firsthand exposure to various nonverbal communication techniques in real-world settings, enhancing their cross-cultural understanding and communication skills ^[9].

5. Conclusion

Nonverbal communication serves as a crucial aspect of interpersonal interaction, compensating for the limitations of verbal expression. Given the significant disparities in nonverbal communication among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is imperative for teachers to effectively incorporate cultural differences into their lessons. By integrating nonverbal communication into the curriculum, teachers can provide students with practical scenarios to foster the development of their communication skills in the target language. Through such initiatives, students can gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of nonverbal communication across cultures, ultimately enhancing their ability to communicate effectively in diverse settings.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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