

# Nonverbal Language in Foreign Language Teaching

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**Abstract.** Communication is a combination of verbal and nonverbal languages, which both vary in different cultures. Sometimes they conflict to each other in the teaching of foreign languages. For example it is very common in China that when a teacher is speaking English in classroom, his body language from Chinese culture is unconsciously employed in the meanwhile. The students accept the fact potentially that this body language is a part of foreign language. When they try to express the same body language with a foreigner, misunderstanding takes place as a consequence. From this perspective, body language should be treated as an important portion of foreign language teaching. In this paper, the author addresses and discusses such problems specifically so that some useful advices can be proposed to enhance the future foreign language teaching.

## 1 Verbal and nonverbal language

In human's history of communication, body and verbal language are the first forms of languages. They have been playing an important role in social contact since verbal languages have been created (Darwin, 1872). Chinese ancestors also say that flourish can make up indescribability (“言之不足故……手之舞之，足之蹈之也。”《西汉·毛诗大序》). It is a common knowledge that language, including body language is a carrier of thought. Communication is just a combination of verbal language and nonverbal language (Hole, Rinehart and Winston, 1978). Comparing with verbal language, body language mainly causes the effect of vision, touch and so on, while the former mainly causes the effect of hearing (Weizhang Wu, 1999). Body language includes gestures, postures features, even expression in the eyes. Human can express their feeling with 270 thousand kinds of gestures which are far more than literal words (Levine and Adelman, 1982). Some western philologists have found that body language accounts for 55—65% of the function when information is expressed (Samovar, 1981). Furthermore, both verbal and nonverbal languages vary in different cultures. People from diverse culture backgrounds not only speak different languages, but also use different body languages as well as courtesies of different cultures (Fast, 1970). Sometimes the miscommunications are caused because of such cultural discrepancies.

## 2 The deficiency of nonverbal teaching in China

With the accelerating pace of globalization, the communication fashions and extents among people are greatly enhanced and intensified. From this context, more and more linguists focus on the nonverbal languages in different cultures for the latest decades. As quoted by an American specialist, as culture is not sensitive, nor is nonverbal language. However, it should be paid close attention to the nonverbal language, which is the very thing that can really indicate one's own feeling and point of view, runs through the whole course of communication (Hall, 1959).

The very aim of language teaching is to cultivate the student's communicative competence (Shouren Wang, 2004). In the past Chinese people have few opportunities to speak directly to foreigners. Reading and writing foreign languages become the only practical manners in communication with the outer world. Thereby, many teachers in China have to adopt the so-called Grammar-Translation methodology to improve students' fluency in foreign languages. However,

this would also leads to a dilemma that the language knowledge is put more priority than the languages themselves. In another words, students are taught to strictly follow the language grammar instead of mastering the language as a communication tool.

Situations have been entirely overturned in recent years. Now, face-to-face talking with foreigners is not rare in China any longer. The verbal language skill is therefore put more attentions in class, which in reverse requires the teaching method to adapt this new situation. For instance, a method called Community Counseling Learning is widely adopted. This teaching method alleges the teachers to organize their lectures in a form of mutual communications among students (Liquan Xiao, 2004). Although the students' verbal ability could be enhanced somehow, the correctness of language cannot be fully ensured. The reason is that the most students are from the same culture circle. Their talking topics, thinking fashions, gesture patterns and body language are all highly resembled. In that case it is unlikely that the students would express their meanings either by means of verbal or body language correctly.

### **3 The importance of nonverbal language teaching**

A language belongs to neither the superstructure nor the economic base (Stalin, 1950). It came into being in the course of human's thinking and communication. It serves all the human's activities. It should not be intervened in by some governor authority. A driver should show his or her license to the police when he or she drives a car in the street. But must we show our certificates to foreigners while communicating with them? In fact, some certificates are out of the picture with the communicative competence in foreign languages. And many tests still keep a long distance from the knowledge of using foreign languages. So it cannot improve one's ability whether he or she has got a certain certificate. Certificates are so popular in China, which even become a person's decorations, for one can easily find a job or be promoted to a higher rank if he or she has got enough certificates. Chinese cannot have so many certificates indeed. Maybe that is the character of this country. However, another unique important phenomenon in China is that tests can be a guidance to lead the direction of school teaching. Therefore, it is necessary that body languages should play an important part in every kind of foreign language tests.

For instance, a Chinese who doesn't know much about nonverbal language in English is invited to dinner by a westerner. After the dinner the guest wants to show that he or she is full. The Chinese gesture to implicate this is to pat the belly with both hands. If this guest is a lady, perhaps the host will 'understand' this gesture as this woman is pregnant. As a result this lady guest may feel embarrassing and confusing by receiving a warm congratulation from the host. If the guest is a man, it is the turn that host gets confused. In another situation, if the guest is an English man, he may put his hand around his neck to indicate that he is full. But the Chinese host would think 'I just hope that you can enjoy the dinner. Why do you think I want to kill you?!' That is because the gesture indicates cutting one's head in Chinese culture.

Another example is most students know how to gesture the sign of 'OK'. But only few of them can tell the trivial difference between 'OK' and 'WC'. Supposedly a foreign teacher is raising a question to his class while a student suddenly puts up his hand with the thumb and the forefinger forming a semicircle with the other fingers stretched. The teacher may ask this student to leave the classroom because he thinks that this student wants to go to the restroom. But what this student truly wants to express is he wants to answer the question. In the end this student may feel hurt because he thinks he is expelled from the class without any reason.

Westerners usually express the victory by raising and parting the index and middle fingers while keeping the other fingers clenched, which is also known as V sign. It is widely adopted by the counterculture as a symbol of peace. It also becomes adopted as a gesture used in photographs in some countries like Japan and China. But sometimes this sign is displayed with the palm inward towards the signer by some Chinese because of certain habits. However, it has long been an offensive or insulting gesture in some Commonwealth nations. Even worse in some courtiers this is regarded as an obscene gesture. It would be really unpleasant when a Chinese man shows a V sign

with palm facing himself while taking a photo with a lady from foreign country.

#### **4 The relations between of nonverbal language and courtesy**

Then how about courtesy? All teachers should not only initiate students into knowledge but also cultivate them to behave with good manners. When people say that a person has good manners, they mean that he or she talks politely and behaves well. But what are good manners? What is the criterion of courtesy? What is the appropriate body language of a certain culture? The problem is that different peoples have different answers.

Courtesies vary with different cultures. However, many Chinese people are not aware of the importance of appropriate courtesies, which also consist of a vital part of the nonverbal communication. There are plenty of protocols involving with profound cultural and social connotations in the formal occasions such as business meeting, banquet dinner, self introduction, name-card exchanging, hand shaking, embracing, greeting and so on. If those are not followed, it is hard to imagine that one would achieve great success in the today's society.

For instance, Westerners usually look at each other's eyes when they are talking. In the West it is believed that the eye communication is the symbol or the base of mutual confidence. While in China the situation is just the opposite. Chinese people insist that it is impolite of a man staring at a lady, or a student staring at a teacher when they are having the conversation. In some conservative area, the eye contact between a young girl with any other people is deemed as an inappropriate behavior.

A Chinese guest always leaves some food or drink to implicate that he or she already has a great meal. While a westerner usually finishes up all drink or food in his/her plate in order to show he or she enjoys the host's cooking very much. Such custom difference may lead to very embarrassing situations provided that the guest are ignorant of the basic table manners in the hosts' culture. Another difference between Chinese and western hospitality is when Chinese people see off their guests, they always walk with their guests with a very long route to show their reluctant departure. However westerners just see their guests off at their front door. This body language is by no means an disrespectful act if one cannot recognize this as a culture difference.

In general, in foreign language class, a good teacher should not only encourage students to speak out, but also need to demonstrate them with a proper body language. The behavior of a teacher should be set as an example to students. In reality, the presentation of a body language would receive a cordial welcome by Chinese students because it serves as a window for them to know the foreign culture and society. Besides its easy learnability, memorability and imitability, the young students are found to be more attractive to the foreign language courses that are previously thought tedious and boring. People will make less misunderstandings if they learn something about body language.

#### **5 Conclusions**

Some linguists consider that communicative competence contain language competence, composition competence and ability of using language. These three parts are not simple relation of juxtaposition but an interactive relation (Runqing Liu, 2000).

In a foreign-language subject, teachers should initiate students into not only the knowledge of a foreign language, but also the culture about that language which includes the knowledge of using foreign languages, the body language and the foreign courtesy. Only in this way, can we regard it as a perfect foreign language course. Tests on language should contain the contents of using language, of course, including body language and courtesy of certain culture.

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