

Challenges of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages: The Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: With the increasing comprehensive national strength of China and the need for national development, the communication between China and Western English-speaking countries has been thriving. Under this trend, the field of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages has been developing rapidly, with a large number of foreign friends showing great enthusiasm for learning Chinese. The main arguments of this paper are: 1. challenges encountered in teaching Chinese as a second foreign language; 2. Reasons for Chinese intercultural communication errors; 3. strategies of teaching Chinese as a second language in intercultural communication. Therefore, to better promote communication between China and the West, spread Chinese culture, and help foreigners to understand and overcome the difficulties of learning Chinese, this essay demonstrates that Chinese language teachers should focus on cultivating the intercultural communication abilities of communicators. Through learning the basic linguistic knowledge and cultural background of both communicators, it is possible to minimize barriers in intercultural communication, and more amicable international exchanges can be facilitated.

Keywords: intercultural communication, teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages, challenges of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, the ability of intercultural communication, cultural difference

1. Introduction

1.1. Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages

The primary goal of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is not only to spread rich knowledge of Chinese culture but, more importantly, to promote excellent Chinese culture through the teaching of Chinese as a second language. With the rising trend of the "Mandarin craze," teaching Chinese as a foreign language has provided numerous learning channels for foreign friends fond of Chinese. Furthermore, the instruction of Chinese as a second language fosters amiable cultural interchange between China and other nations, enabling diverse cultural communities across the globe to establish stronger bonds and effectively cultivate equitable recognition of various cultures, thereby facilitating seamless intercultural communication.

1.2. The Cultural Reasons for the Differences in Language Teaching between the Chinese and English

Different cultural groups have both similarities and differences in their languages. Teaching Chinese as a second foreign language requires an understanding of the commonalities of language, as well as a focus on the unique characteristics of the Chinese language and culture, to facilitate effective Chinese language instruction for foreign learners [1].

The differences between Western and Chinese language teaching content are mainly reflected in the emphasis on teaching grammar through morphological changes and organizing vocabulary and grammar instruction based on empirical research data in Western language teaching. The teaching sequence starts with letter pronunciation, then moves on to words and sentence patterns, emphasizing word formation and sentence structure training, and next placing importance on group activities, communication, and debate training. In contrast, most Chinese native language teaching follows a teaching sequence that starts with texts and language, then moves on to characters and words, and finally to sentence and paragraph instruction. It focuses on variations in word and phrase combinations (e.g., polyphone and ambiguous characters and rhetorical devices), emphasizes the memorization and application of famous works, and promotes understanding through verbal communication and imitation, emphasizing personal realization. These differences in teaching methods are mainly due to variations in the writing systems, vocabulary systems, and grammatical structures among different languages [1].

Writing system is a form of recording language. Language is a product of cultural development, meaning that language arises from the development of culture, and language development is also influenced and constrained by culture [2]. The renowned linguist Saussure stated in the *Course in General Linguistics* that "language is a system of signs for expressing ideas, and the most important system of signs." [3]. Because language is the carrier of culture, different cultures give rise to different languages through different practices. As a result, variations occur in the methods used for teaching languages.

Therefore, in the context of intercultural communication, it is important to pay attention to the cultural differences between China and the West, as well as the individual differences between different languages, to promote the teaching of Chinese as a second foreign language and facilitate better intercultural communication for Chinese language learners.

2. The challenges faced in teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

2.1. Analyzing Intercultural Communication Errors in Chinese for International Students

2.1.1. Vocabulary Errors

In the process of studying Chinese as a foreign language, it is common for intercultural communication errors to occur. For example, learners often use their native language mindset to understand and use words in the target language, such as "厚," often translated as "thick" in some textbooks. Learners may mistakenly think that everything related to "thick" is also related to "厚," leading to sentences like "there is a thick forest ahead" or "this pen is very thick." However, the former means "dense" or "thickly packed," while the latter means "thick" or "viscous". Chinese often has multiple meanings for a single word, which may not have direct equivalents in the learner's native language [4].

Furthermore, errors in using emotional and stylistic nuances of words in Chinese language learning are also quite common. Chinese has many negative connotations, while English has fewer words with clear positive or negative connotations. For example, the word "恨"(hate) in Chinese carries a strong

emotional connotation, but its English equivalent, "hate," does not have the same level of emotional intensity. Most commonly, it expresses a simple dislike, as in the sentence "she hates fish." However, a foreign student who is just starting to learn Chinese might mistakenly say "她恨吃鱼," which translates to "she hates eating fish," when the correct understanding should be "she never eats fish"[4].

2.1.2. Social Errors

Professor Lu Jianyi provided an analysis of a social etiquette mistake. He gave an example of a Chinese language teacher who was sent to teach in a country in Western Europe. The students addressed him by his last name, "Wang," before and after class. The teacher suspected that the students were disrespecting him and even got angry about it. This confused his foreign colleagues and students. This incident highlighted the inherent cultural disparities between China and certain Western nations. In Western culture, it is customary to show respect by using someone's last name when addressing them. However, in Chinese culture, it is considered inappropriate to use an elder's last name when addressing them. Therefore, when Chinese students address their teachers, they must call him as "Teacher Wang" [5,6].

Regarding farewell expressions, there are also obvious differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Chinese people often use phrases like "慢走!" which means "take care!" or "走好!" which means "have a good journey!" to express politeness when saying goodbye. This can make foreigners not understand and not know how to respond.

2.2. Reasons for Chinese Intercultural Communication Errors

2.2.1. Intercultural Communication Errors in Chinese for International Students

The above examples of vocabulary errors are common errors caused by the influence of native language culture in the intercultural communication of Chinese language learners. Each culture has its characteristics and differences in thinking patterns, which inevitably lead to errors in communication between the parties involved. The differences in values and ways of thinking between individuals are closely related to their cultural backgrounds [5]. The pragmatic rules and cultural factors of students' native language are acquired from a young age, and these factors can conflict with the Chinese language when they are learning it, causing interference [6].

In the analysis of reasons for social communication errors, there are differences in group thinking and perspectives on observing things due to different cultures. Taking the example of calling the teacher "Wang," social pragmatic errors like this not only go against the Chinese language habits but also lead to errors in expression and understanding, causing psychological confusion in communication [6].

2.2.2. Negative Influences in Cultural Stereotypes in Chinese Intercultural Communication

The concept of stereotypes was initially proposed by American sociologist Lippmann in his book "Public Opinion," which was published in 1922. He pointed out that the environment in which people live, whether the natural environment or the social environment, is too complex to allow them to personally experience and understand every person and everything in the world. To save time, people use a simplified cognitive approach to shape a certain image of a group of people or a nationality or race that shares similar characteristics [7].

Stereotypes are one of the most visible barriers to intercultural communication, according to another perspective of ethnocentrism. Under this circumstance, stereotypes are defined by Samovar and Porter as "the perception or beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions or attitudes." [8]. As this definition suggests, stereotypes do crucially harm

intercultural communication in some cases [9]. Cultural stereotypes do not emerge overnight but rather develop gradually over an extended time within human societies.

Moreover, this mindset disregards the variations within a group and pays no attention to the presence of both universality and particularity. Using the examples of Katz and Braly in 1933, who tested 100 Princeton students and asked them to choose the most suitable words from 84 adjectives for different nationalities, such as African Americans and Germans. The test results showed that 79% of people considered Jews as "clever," and 79% of people believed Germans to have scientific minds, showing clear discriminatory notions towards people of color. Such experimental result demonstrates that the negative effects of cultural stereotypes can easily create biases in different cultural groups and hinder intercultural communication.

To make intercultural communication harmonious and effective, communicators should possess knowledge about the language and cultural differences of the other party and objectively view the cultural traditions and behavioral norms of other ethnic groups [10]. This way, both communicators can consciously adjust their attitudes and actively cooperate with each other to complete intercultural communication, thereby deepening the results of communication.

To better promote Chinese culture and facilitate communication and exchange between China and other countries, it is necessary for us to enhance the intercultural communication awareness of both communicators and avoid conflicts during communication. For example, in a communication error in business cooperation, the mayor suddenly visited a Sino-German joint venture, and the German general manager did not understand this behavior. In Germany, government officials visiting companies always require prior appointments, and they do not consider it an honor. Indeed, the company has the right to refuse, but in Chinese culture, a visit from the mayor is a great honor. Germans are accustomed to making appointments for everything, sometimes even planning a year in advance [11].

The prerequisite for successful intercultural communication is that communicators should consciously understand each other's cultural background to avoid inappropriate situations during communication. It is important for people to recognize that China is playing an increasingly prominent role on the global platform and is actively participating in interactions with different nations. Therefore, it is necessary to take on the responsibility of assisting foreigners in comprehending and valuing Chinese culture. By consciously understanding the cultural background of others, people are more likely to enhance their awareness of intercultural communication.

3. Strategies of Teaching Chinese to Foreigners in Intercultural Communication

3.1. Develop Intercultural Communication Skills for Teachers Teaching Chinese to Foreigners

The development of intercultural communication skills for foreign language teachers should include the following aspects: 1). Theoretical ability in language learning: proficient in a foreign language, well-versed in comparative linguistics, and capable of applying knowledge of sociolinguistics in communication. 2). Communicative ability in language. 3). Ability to engage in effective communication: grasp knowledge of different communication styles and identify these styles in interactive communication to reduce uncertainty, such as categorizing the personality of the communicative partner and forming stereotypes. 4). Ability to understand both native and foreign cultures, willing to reflect on one's cultural perspective as a given while also being open to understanding the differences between various cultures and developing the ability to accept perspectives from different cultural backgrounds [12].

3.2. Enhance the Intercultural Communication Awareness of International Students and Improve their Intercultural Adaptability

After analyzing the examples of intercultural communication errors among international students, it is important for Chinese language teachers to assist these students in enhancing their understanding of Chinese culture. This will help reduce cultural conflicts and biases caused by their native culture. In practical teaching, it is encouraged for students to speak more and increase their level of interaction. By actively speaking in Chinese, international students can identify cultural differences and proactively eliminate communication problems caused by their cultural conflicts.

In addition, some practical methods could be practiced. For example, it is suggested to increase the number of intercultural courses and offer culture-specific courses based on the cultural backgrounds of the Chinese teachers and the students they teach. Additionally, if possible, universities or local governments should provide opportunities for teachers to visit the students' home countries for research and observation to strengthen their intercultural communication abilities.

3.3. Encourage International Students to Actively Explore Chinese Culture

In daily teaching, Chinese language teachers should use more situational teaching methods to enhance the interest of international students in Chinese culture and inspire them to actively think about cultural differences. Emphasis should be placed on life-like and Chinese-oriented questioning and answering while also ensuring depth and breadth so that students can clearly understand the application scope of the knowledge they have learned. This approach not only meets their learning goals but also conforms to the inevitable requirements of the times[5].

4. The Importance of Developing the Ability of Intercultural Communication

According to American scholar Roland Robertson, globalization refers to the increasing uniformity of patterns of human activities (including economic, political, and cultural) on a global scale, as well as the interconnectedness of activities in different spaces, forming a whole. Globalization in today's world is accelerating, making it particularly important to develop intercultural communication skills for communicators. As a major promoter of intercultural communication in Chinese, not only should Chinese language teachers cultivate intercultural communication awareness but also actively encourage and assist foreigners in actively learning and using Chinese culture, weaken cultural biases, and promote smooth intercultural communication in Chinese.

5. Conclusion

In the context of the accelerating globalization process, the importance of intercultural communication has become increasingly prominent. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language is no longer just about imparting knowledge of the language but rather a form of communication language teaching that focuses on cultivating intercultural communication skills.

To effectively and successfully implement teaching Chinese as a foreign language, it is necessary to first cultivate the intercultural communication abilities of Chinese language teachers. Only by acquiring this ability can they successfully organize teaching and effectively impart this skill to students. In intercultural communication, the rich and close connection between culture and language cannot be ignored.

Chinese teachers in intercultural communication should have the ability to understand the cultures of other countries. Facing various factors that hinder the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, intercultural communication teachers should strive to enhance their soft power.

As also recommended above, future research should focus on enhancing the intercultural communication abilities of Chinese language teachers. In future research, the researchers should concentrate on researching Chinese language teaching textbooks and improve the curriculum by incorporating more practical and current topics, as well as providing a larger number of pragmatic materials. Further studies also should figure out how to promote interaction between domestic and international students, fostering similar exchanges. This could help international students better adapt to local life and develop their intercultural communication abilities.

At the same time, regardless of teaching mode or content, it is advised to actively learn from the excellent aspects of foreign countries and construct a more flexible system for teaching Chinese as a foreign language based on Chinese language teaching and the unique linguistic and cultural background of Chinese. This will promote the development of intercultural communication skills and cultivating exceptional talents for Sino-foreign exchanges and collaboration.

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