

A Comparative Study of Chinese and Japanese Body Language and Its Implications for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Xiaoqian Zeng*

Faculty of Social and Humanities, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang, China

**Corresponding author: Xiaoqian Zeng, E-mail: 18779964900@163.com.*

Abstract

As a core component of non-verbal communication, body language plays a crucial role in intercultural interactions. This paper begins by exploring the concept and classification of body language, and then compares the differences between China and Japan in five specific categories: facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, postures, and interpersonal distance. It further analyzes the underlying cultural and social reasons behind these differences, and proposes strategies for incorporating body language into the teaching of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and Chinese characters in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). The goal is to enhance the intuitiveness, engagement, and intercultural communicative effectiveness of TCFL, thereby providing both theoretical support and practical guidance for its development.

Keywords

body language, Sino-Japanese comparison, teaching Chinese as a foreign language

1. Introduction

With China's growing national strength and cultural influence, there has been a global surge of interest in learning the Chinese language. Against this backdrop, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) has become an increasingly important bridge for cultural and linguistic exchange. However, traditional TCFL often places greater emphasis on linguistic knowledge, while giving relatively little attention to non-verbal communication, particularly body language. In reality, body language can supplement verbal communication and serves as an important tool for expressing emotion and intention, making it highly valuable in the context of language instruction.

Japan, as a close neighbor of China, has consistently been at the forefront of Chinese language learning. Numerous Confucius Institutes have been established in Japan, and hundreds of schools offer Chinese language courses to tens of thousands of learners. Therefore, exploring the differences in kinesic behaviors between China and Japan and effectively integrating these insights into TCFL carries significant theoretical and practical value. This paper focuses on the comparative study of body language in Chinese and Japanese cultures, analyzes the reasons behind these differences, and explores how body language can be effectively incorporated into TCFL to enhance teaching efficiency and cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence. The ultimate aim is to contribute to the advancement of Chinese language education for international learners.

2. The Concept and Classification of Body Language

Regarding the definition of body language, scholars differ in emphasis, but their core understanding aligns: body language refers to a symbolic system produced by the human body that conveys emotions and information, forming a vital part of non-verbal communication (Geng, 1988). In interpersonal interactions, its primary function is to assist or substitute spoken language. Through intuitive and vivid physical movements, body language can compensate for the limitations of verbal expression, concretize abstract concepts, and make meaning easier to grasp (Zhou & Li, 1997). At the same time, it transmits additional communicative cues—such as motivations, attitudes, and emotions—that lie beyond the spoken word, helping to coordinate the overall communicative process.

Although classification standards vary among scholars, there is general consensus on the key components of body language. As a form of body language, it typically includes posture, body movement, facial expressions, eye contact, and physical touch. This paper centers on intercultural communication and focuses on conventional kinesic behaviors widely used and socially recognized by group members. For analytical clarity, this study divides body language into five categories: facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, postures, and interpersonal distance. By comparing these elements in Chinese and Japanese contexts, the paper proposes practical strategies for applying body language in TCFL, aiming to facilitate more effective communication and enhance language teaching outcomes.

3. A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Japanese Body Language

As a crucial form of non-verbal communication, body language plays an essential role in intercultural interaction. This section analyzes and compares body language in China and Japan across five dimensions: facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, postures, and interpersonal distance.

3.1 Facial Expressions

Facial expressions refer to the emotional manifestations on the human face and are often a natural reflection of inner feelings. Compared with Westerners who tend to express emotions openly, both Chinese and Japanese people display relatively restrained facial expressions, which can be difficult to interpret directly. However, due to different cultural backgrounds, China and Japan have developed distinct styles of facial expression.

Chinese people tend to wear their hearts on their sleeves. When something is amusing, they laugh aloud without reservation; when they are sad, they cry or show sorrow openly. Emotional expressions are relatively visible, and the Chinese view such emotional disclosure as a natural and acceptable part of human nature.

In contrast, Japanese facial expressions are generally more subdued. In Japanese culture, openly displaying emotions such as pride, anger, or pain—especially if it may inconvenience others—is considered inappropriate (Li & Wei, 2007). As a result, Japanese individuals are skilled at emotional restraint. Their faces rarely reveal intense emotions; instead, they often maintain a gentle, polite smile.

3.2 Eye Contact

The eyes are considered the windows to the soul, the most expressive and emotionally resonant part of the face. Eye contact is especially significant in first encounters, often serving as an important indicator of a person's attitude.

Both China and Japan share the saying “眉目传情” (“conveying emotion through the eyes and brows”), but actual eye contact behaviors differ notably between the two cultures. In China, maintaining eye contact during conversation signals respect and attentiveness. However, Chinese culture also emphasizes the principle of “非礼勿视” (“do not gaze improperly”), meaning prolonged staring can make others uncomfortable and be perceived as rude. Thus, Chinese people strive to balance between respectful gaze and avoiding excessive eye contact.

In contrast, Japanese people generally consider direct eye contact during conversation as impolite or even arrogant. Instead, they often avert their gaze from the other's eyes, directing it naturally toward the other person's necktie area. This avoidance of eye contact is not a sign of disinterest or aloofness, but rather an expression of humility and respect.

3.3 Gestural Language

Gestural language refers to bodily movements frequently used in communication, capable of independently conveying complex ideas and facilitating interaction. In situations where spoken language is inconvenient or ineffective, gestures often serve as a highly effective alternative means of expression. Due to cultural differences, there are significant variations between Chinese and Japanese gestural languages.

The first type includes gestures that are identical in form and meaning. For instance, placing the index finger on the lips signifies "silence" in both China and Japan, and hooking pinky fingers together conveys the meaning of a "promise" in both cultures.

The second type includes gestures that are different in form but share the same meaning. For example, to represent money, Japanese people usually form a circle using the thumb and index finger, while Chinese people commonly raise the thumb, index, and middle fingers and rub the thumb against the other two. For numbers, gestures from one to five are the same in both cultures, but six to ten differ. Japanese people typically show their left palm and use the fingers of the right hand to count from six to ten, whereas Chinese people can express these numbers using just one hand (Yibulayin, 2012).

The third type includes gestures with the same form but different meanings. For example, in China, curling the index finger signifies the number nine, whereas in Japan it refers to a "thief". Raising the thumb in China usually means "great" or "excellent", while in Japan it often symbolizes "a man" or "father".

The fourth category comprises gestures unique to Chinese culture, such as wetting a finger with saliva to count money or flip through books, and clapping hands or slapping the thighs to indicate a decision has been made.

The fifth category includes gestures unique to Japan, such as pressing overlapping fists to the nose to express "smug", or touching the tip of the thumb to the front teeth to signify "embarrass".

3.4 Postures

Postures refer to bodily stances such as nodding, standing, shaking hands, and bowing, all of which serve as important means of conveying information. People often interpret another's personality or manners based on posture, but the appropriateness of a given posture varies across cultures. Consequently, China and Japan exhibit numerous differences in this area.

In China, shaking hands is a common practice when meeting someone for the first time. In Japan, however, handshakes are relatively rare. People usually greet one another by bowing, and the angle of the bow carries different connotations. A 15-degree bow is used for everyday thanks or light greetings; a 30-degree bow shows more sincere gratitude or apology; and a 90-degree bow expresses deep remorse or earnest repentance. In China, bowing also exists as a gesture of politeness or respect—often seen in welcoming guests or giving thanks—but the action is less standardized and does not follow strict rules regarding angle or formality.

Furthermore, Japanese people tend to nod frequently during conversations. However, their nods do not always indicate agreement; rather, they are a habitual response to signal they are listening (Matsui, 2014). The same occurs when talking on the phone: even though the other party cannot see them, Japanese speakers often nod and give verbal affirmations instinctively.

3.5 Interpersonal Distance

Interpersonal distance refers to the use of physical space and interpersonal distance to convey meaning in nonverbal communication. Different cultures interpret proxemics in various ways. Both China and Japan are

traditionally regarded as cultures of etiquette, yet their long historical and cultural evolutions have led to distinct interpretations of spatial behavior in social interactions(Xiang, 2016).

.In general, Chinese people tend to be more open to close physical proximity. When meeting someone, they are often enthusiastic about seeking closeness or familiarity, and maintaining a far physical distance may be interpreted as coldness or social distance. Reducing interpersonal space is seen as a way to bridge emotional distance and foster rapport.

In sharp contrast, Japanese culture is highly sensitive to physical contact.(Wu, 2006) Japanese people typically avoid bodily touch in social interactions and tend to refrain from intimate actions such as hugging or kissing in public. They dislike crowding together in queues and prefer to have private dormitory rooms. In greetings, bowing is often used instead of handshakes, as bowing maintains greater interpersonal space. In public settings, physical contact or close proximity—except with small children or intimate partners—is usually considered impolite or intrusive.

4. Analysis of the Causes Behind Differences in Chinese and Japanese Body Language

As a core medium of nonverbal communication, body language is influenced by a range of sociocultural and environmental factors. Although China and Japan both belong to the East Asian cultural sphere, their body language practices diverge significantly due to differences in geography, religious beliefs, social structures, and other cultural foundations.

4.1 Geographical Location

China, with its vast territory, favorable natural conditions, and abundant resources, has historically attracted pilgrims and envoys from many neighboring countries. This has fostered a culture characterized by openness and inclusivity. Such cultural openness has, in turn, encouraged habits of close physical proximity in social interactions. In public spaces, people in China often maintain relatively small interpersonal distances; they may lean forward when conversing as a sign of attentiveness and generally accept a moderate level of physical contact even among acquaintances.

In contrast, Japan is an island nation surrounded by the sea on all sides. Its frequent exposure to natural disasters has shaped a culture of collective survival that emphasizes precise spatial awareness and coordination. As a result, Japanese people tend to be cautious and reserved in social interactions, often avoiding direct physical contact. Additionally, due to the country's limited land area and high population density, many Japanese believe they are likely to encounter the same people repeatedly in future contexts, whether socially or professionally. This belief encourages individuals to maintain a consistently composed and restrained demeanor, avoiding overt emotional expression. Such cultural conditioning has given rise to behavioral patterns that emphasize self-restraint and outward conformity in interpersonal relations.

4.2 Social Structure

Chinese society is centered around the individual and forms flexible interpersonal networks based on varying degrees of closeness. Within intimate circles, emotional expression tends to be direct and outward. Close physical proximity and moderate bodily contact are not only accepted but often encouraged as ways to build trust and convey warmth. Therefore, individuals in China generally enjoy greater freedom and flexibility in emotional expression and behavioral norms compared to Japan.

Japan, as an island nation surrounded by the sea, refers to itself as a homogeneous nation, which facilitates the cultivation of shared values and the formation of collectivism. Individual behavior is constantly regulated by consideration of its impact on the group. Influenced by collectivism, Japan places strong emphasis on a rigid social hierarchy, which profoundly shapes interpersonal interactions. Daily social exchanges often reflect clearly defined status differences. People demonstrate social rank through the angle and duration of their bows; deeper and longer bows explicitly express respect, apology, or submission to those of higher status. This ritualized body language serves as a physical manifestation of the hierarchical order.

5. Application of Body Language in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Body language plays a pivotal role in communication; therefore, integrating body language into Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness (Wang, 2010). This section discusses the application of body language in TCFL from four perspectives: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and Chinese characters.

5.1 Application of Body Language in Pronunciation Teaching in TCFL

Pronunciation teaching is crucial in TCFL. If teachers effectively utilize body language in the classroom, it can greatly promote the quality of pronunciation instruction and substantially improve teaching efficiency. Tones are often a major challenge for most international students learning Chinese. However, by skillfully employing gestures, teachers can greatly enhance the intuitiveness of tone learning. For example, a teacher can face the students and draw a long horizontal line from left to right to represent the level first tone; an ascending diagonal line from left to right upwards to indicate the rising second tone; a line moving downward then upward to symbolize the dipping third tone; and a long descending diagonal line from left to right downwards to represent the falling fourth tone. Such visual aids are more vivid and easier to understand than simply repeating tonal pronunciations.

In addition, teachers can use exaggerated mouth shapes in class to assist students with pronunciation training. Taking Japanese learners' difficulties with retroflex sounds as an example: since the Japanese phonetic system lacks the concept of retroflex consonants, teachers can employ corresponding body language to better assist students' articulation. Teachers may first clearly demonstrate the tongue tip touching the back of the lower teeth while pronouncing sounds like /z/, /c/, /s/, then slowly and exaggeratedly curl the tongue tip upward toward the front part of the hard palate, allowing students to visually grasp the tongue position changes involved in producing sounds like /zh/, /ch/, and /sh/.

5.2 Application of Body Language in Vocabulary Teaching in TCFL

Vocabulary teaching runs throughout all stages of Chinese language instruction, but relying solely on verbal explanations often makes it difficult for international students to fully grasp word meanings. The incorporation of body language can support teaching by providing direct and concrete representations of word meanings, effectively compensating for the limitations of purely linguistic explanations. This deepens students' understanding and memory of vocabulary.

Among Chinese vocabulary, verbs are particularly well suited to kinesic-assisted teaching. When teaching the verb “偷” (to steal), the teacher might look around furtively, then quickly bend over and reach out as if grabbing something, swiftly hiding a student's book or water bottle behind their back, with a facial expression showing slight nervousness or cunning. When teaching “举手” (to raise a hand), the teacher can raise one arm straight up with the palm naturally open. Additionally, when explaining “举手”, the teacher can demonstrate the action to make the meaning clear. For “鼓掌” (to applaud), the teacher might smile approvingly, clearly and rhythmically clap their hands together to produce sound, and then invite the whole class to applaud a student who has answered a question.

Similarly, when teaching abstract taste-related words like “酸甜苦辣咸” (sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, salty), teachers can vividly perform corresponding facial expressions and bodily movements. Without much verbal explanation, students can intuitively perceive the strong emotional connotations of these words. This method not only transforms the emotional experiences embedded in vocabulary into perceivable visual signals—lowering the threshold for comprehension and activating students' concrete cognition—but also enlivens the classroom atmosphere, allowing word meanings to be naturally internalized through authentic interaction.

5.3 Application of Body Language in Grammar Teaching in TCFL

Due to the abstract nature of Chinese grammar rules, teachers need to go beyond verbal explanations and combine students' real situations and classroom resources to create vivid and concrete contexts that facilitate

understanding. body language, as a limited yet effective tool for creating such contexts, can transform abstract grammatical theories into intuitive student experiences.

When teaching the “把” construction, teachers can supplement oral explanations with kinesic demonstrations. They might use large, directionally clear gestures to illustrate the main verb along with its directional or resultative complement, emphasizing how the action is applied to the object and causes a change or movement. For example, using both hands to mimic holding a book and then opening it, while saying the complete sentence “我把书打开” (“I open the book”); making a grabbing gesture toward a cup and pulling it toward oneself while saying “把杯子拿过来” (“Bring the cup over”); or using an arm to push or pull a door while saying “把门关上” (“Close the door”).

Additionally, teachers can involve students by having one perform an action while others describe the process immediately using the “把” sentence structure they have learned. This practical exercise helps students grasp the content through active engagement, deepens classroom memory, and converts abstract syntactic rules into perceivable, actionable procedures. It ultimately promotes internalization of language knowledge and effective use of the target structure.

5.4 Application of Body Language in Teaching Chinese Characters in TCFL

Chinese characters are the written symbols used to record the Chinese language. They have a complex square structure with numerous strokes, making the learning of Chinese characters a particularly challenging aspect of TCFL. In this teaching challenge, body language, as an important form of nonverbal communication, offers new ideas and methods for character instruction.

Pictographic characters, which form the basis of Chinese character formation, closely resemble real-world objects and are especially suitable for kinesic teaching. Teachers can use their bodies to mimic the shapes of characters, transforming static text into dynamic demonstrations that help students build vivid visual memories. For example, when teaching the character “人” (person), the teacher can stand with legs apart and arms close to the body to display the side profile of a human figure. Extending from “人”, two students standing front and back can form the character “从” (to follow), and three students arranged in a triangular shape can represent “众” (crowd). Such dynamic enactments allow students to intuitively grasp the logic of character composition through active participation.

For more complex characters, teachers can break down and demonstrate each component to aid student comprehension and memorization. For instance, when explaining the character “安” (peace), the teacher can first point to the roof radical “宀,” then demonstrate the classical seated posture of a woman to represent the “女” (female) component, symbolizing the image of a woman inside a house and thereby conveying the meaning of stability and safety.

On the other hand, for visually similar and easily confused characters, teachers can design contrasting kinesic demonstrations to highlight differences. For example, when distinguishing between “鸟” (bird) and “乌” (crow), after demonstrating the character “鸟,” the teacher can cover their eyes to indicate that a crow is entirely black and its eyes are not visible, implying “少一点” (less a little).

6. Conclusion

This paper began with the definition and classification of body language, and compared Chinese and Japanese body language from five aspects: facial expressions, eye language, gestures, postures, and interpersonal distance. It revealed the differences between the two cultures in their kinesic behaviors and further analyzed the underlying causes of these differences. These research findings provide direct implications for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). Based on this, the paper proposed specific application strategies for integrating body language into the teaching of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and Chinese characters, thus bridging theory and practice.

In summary, body language, as an important carrier of intercultural communication, not only reflects the cultural connotations and values of different countries but also affects the quality of cross-cultural communication and the effectiveness of TCFL(Sun, 2004). Therefore, strengthening research on body language and other nonverbal behaviors will greatly promote the development of international Chinese education toward greater depth and breadth.

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