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A comparative study of nonverbal communication in Chinese and British classrooms from an intercultural perspective: a case study of the BBC documentary Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School

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Abstract. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language and nonverbal communication are two interrelated and mutually reinforcing areas of research. From an intercultural perspective, this study analyzes the BBC documentary Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School as a case study, observing classroom nonverbal behaviors from four dimensions: kinesics, paralanguage, time orientation, and spatial use. It highlights the differences in nonverbal communication between Chinese and British classrooms and explores the deeper cultural reasons behind these differences based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high- and low-context communication theories. On this basis, the paper proposes strategies for cultivating nonverbal communication competence in teachers of Chinese as a foreign language. The study aims to promote the effective use of nonverbal communication in Chinese language classrooms, enhance teachers' intercultural communicative competence, and improve the overall practice of international Chinese language education.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, Teaching Chinese as a foreign language, Sino-British comparison

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, globalization has progressed rapidly, and exchanges among countries have become increasingly frequent. The history of international Chinese language education is a microcosm of this globalization: from the first group of Chinese language teachers traveling to the United States in 1912 to the launch of the Metaverse Confucius Institute in 2023, the teaching paradigm has shifted dramatically—from ocean liner travel to quantum transmission. Fundamentally, teaching Chinese as a foreign language involves the dynamic construction of intercultural communication mechanisms and mutual interaction between Chinese teachers and students from diverse nations and ethnic backgrounds. While language is an indispensable tool in intercultural classroom communication, nonverbal communication often conveys more information than verbal exchanges [1]. American psychologist Albert Mehrabian proposed that the total impact of a message is composed of 7% verbal content, 38% vocal elements, and 55% facial expressions and body language [2]. Thus, relying solely on verbal communication to deliver instructional content in international Chinese classrooms has clear limitations. For a long time, academic research has largely focused on verbal output in Chinese language classrooms while neglecting the role of nonverbal elements. In today's globally integrated educational landscape, integrating research on nonverbal communication with teaching practices in international Chinese language education is essential for enhancing pedagogical effectiveness and fostering deeper intercultural understanding.

This study adopts classroom observation and multimodal discourse analysis to examine the BBC educational documentary Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School. It records and analyzes the nonverbal behaviors of Chinese teachers and British students, employing Zu's framework of nonverbal communication, which categorizes behaviors into kinesics, paralanguage, time orientation, and spatial use. By comparing the differences in nonverbal behaviors between Chinese and British classrooms, the study uncovers the cultural roots of these differences and offers feasible suggestions to address nonverbal communication challenges in the international Chinese classroom.

2. Theoretical overview of nonverbal communication

Scholars at home and abroad have expressed diverse views regarding the definition of nonverbal communication. Samovar and Porter suggest that nonverbal communication encompasses all stimuli—whether intentionally generated by individuals or arising from the environment—that potentially carry implicit information for communicators or recipients within a communicative setting [3]. Ruesch and Kees introduced the concept of "beyond words," asserting that nonverbal communication refers to all interactions excluding language [4]. Malandro and Brake define it as "the process through which individuals emit nonverbal cues that may be interpreted by others as meaningful." [5] Yang states that "nonverbal communication refers to the process of conveying information using methods outside the realm of language." [6] Similarly, Professor Hu Wenzhong argues that all communication activities conducted without language fall under nonverbal communication [7]. Synthesizing the perspectives of domestic and international scholars, a general consensus emerges: any communicative act conducted through means other than spoken or written language qualifies as nonverbal communication. In specific communicative contexts where language use is either impractical or insufficient to convey nuanced emotions and intentions, nonverbal cues serve as a vital complement, allowing for more implicit and tactful expression.

Due to the lack of a universally accepted definition of nonverbal communication, classifications also vary. Ruesch and Kees categorize nonverbal behavior based on its function into gestural language, behavioral language, and object language [4]. M. Knapp classifies it into seven types: body movements and kinesics, physical characteristics, touch behavior, paralanguage, proxemics, use of artifacts, and environmental factors [8]. In China, mainstream classifications are often based on the works of Hu Wenzhong and Bi. Hu emphasizes components such as eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions [7]. Bi, drawing on Western theoretical frameworks, divides nonverbal communication into four broad categories: kinesics, paralanguage, object language, and environmental language [9]. Xue Changming identifies four subsystems: spatiotemporal behavior, bodily behavior (including static and dynamic), vocal behavior, and environmental language [10]. Wu and Yan further distill these into four types: kinesic behavior, spatiotemporal behavior, appearance behavior, and quasi-language behavior [11]. Building on earlier frameworks, Zu provides a more detailed classification into four dimensions: kinesics, paralanguage, time orientation, and spatial use, with specific applications in classroom nonverbal communication [12].

Given the multitude of classification systems, many domestic researchers adopt the models proposed by Hu and Bi. However, these classifications often lack practical operability for analyzing classroom-specific nonverbal behaviors in depth. Therefore, this paper adopts Zu's framework as its analytical foundation, integrating key insights from various scholars to enable a more systematic and targeted study of classroom nonverbal communication.

Table 1. Zu Xiaomei's classification of nonverbal communication

Category	Content
Kinesics (body language)	Appearance and attire, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, physical touch
Paralanguage	Vocal cues accompanying speech, such as volume and speech rate
Time Orientation	Attitudes and practices regarding punctuality and time management
Spatial Use	Personal space, interpersonal distance, seating arrangements

3. A comparative study of nonverbal communication in Chinese and British classrooms in the BBC documentary Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School

The BBC documentary Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School, released in March 2015, chronicles an educational experiment conducted in the UK. Fifty Year 9 students from Bohunt School—one of Hampshire's top public schools—were selected to participate in a month-long trial of Chinese-style education, led by five teachers from China. Due to significant differences in pedagogical approaches and underlying cultural values, the experiment faced substantial intercultural communication challenges, which ultimately hindered the smooth implementation of the Chinese teaching model. In response, the Chinese teachers introduced cultural education and parent-school collaboration initiatives to help students adapt. The experiment sparked widespread reflection on the differences between Chinese and British educational systems.

Nonverbal communication is inherently shaped by societal norms and cultural conventions; its meanings are acquired through social learning. When cultures differ, the same nonverbal cue may carry distinct, even contradictory, interpretations. In this documentary, stark cultural clashes reveal significant disparities in classroom nonverbal behavior between Chinese and British participants. This section analyzes these differences from four key dimensions: kinesics, paralanguage, time orientation, and spatial use.

3.1. Kinesic differences

Kinesics, or body language, encompasses appearance, gestures, facial expressions, posture, and physical contact. In classroom contexts, appropriate use of kinesics can complement verbal expression and enhance pedagogical effectiveness.

3.1.1. Appearance and attire

Aristocratic traditions have long prevailed in Britain, and "gentlemanly culture" is deeply rooted in the country's social value system. Influenced by this ethos, people strive for dignified and appropriate appearance and attire, with distinct dress codes for different occasions. In the UK, it is customary to wear suits and formal attire not only at banquets but also in professional settings. In the documentary, figures such as Headmaster Neil Strowger and Deputy Head Stewart Vaughn are seen wearing suits at work, maintaining a clean and professional appearance. Through cultural exchange in the 20th century, Western attire such as suits and formalwear gradually entered China and has since become an option for formal interactions. In the documentary, math teacher Zou Hailian typically wears a suit while teaching—an effort to align with British expectations for professional dress. However, he also occasionally wears casual clothing, reflecting the more relaxed Chinese approach to everyday attire. In general, Chinese people prefer clothing that is comfortable and presentable, and teachers are not strictly required to wear suits or business formal outfits. The guiding principle is appropriateness rather than formality. Therefore, it is evident that Chinese and British teachers differ in their expectations regarding dress: British teachers emphasize formality and decorum, whereas Chinese teachers prioritize comfort and appropriateness.

There are also clear differences in student attire between the two countries. British students wear standardized school uniforms: boys typically wear dress shirts and trousers, while girls wear shirts paired with short skirts and tights. In contrast, Chinese students—regardless of gender—wear uniform athletic-style tracksuits, consisting of a top and pants. These are generally loose-fitting, lack design variety, and are not judged for aesthetics. This style discourages vanity and comparison, while allowing for comfort and ease of movement. At the start of the Chinese-style education experiment, British students were required to adopt this uniform dress code. Additionally, British families generally support their children's self-expression through appearance, making hairstyling and makeup common among students. In contrast, Chinese parents tend to discourage excessive attention to appearance during the school years. As a result, most Chinese students dress simply and do not wear makeup during primary and secondary school.

3.1.2. Facial expressions

Facial expressions are outward manifestations of internal emotions and play a crucial role in conveying attitudes. While expressions like "a radiant face" or "glowering eyes" in Chinese idioms reflect the expressive function of facial features, Chinese culture tends toward restraint—"not revealing emotions in facial expressions"—in contrast to the expressiveness common in Western cultures.

In Chinese classrooms, teachers typically maintain a serious facial expression as a means of asserting their authority. Young students, especially those just beginning their education, tend to be lively and inattentive, often lacking a strong sense of discipline or order. To command respect and establish classroom authority, teachers often rely on a stern demeanor to deter misbehavior and maintain control. Over time, however, this practice can create a communication barrier between teachers and students. In episode one of the documentary (at 47:55), teacher Zhao Wei faces a class of unruly and self-willed British students. She attempts to convey the seriousness of the classroom environment through a stern expression, hoping the students would recognize the need for discipline and self-regulation. However, the British students clearly fail to interpret her facial cues and continue to disrupt the class. In contrast, British teachers tend to maintain a friendly and approachable demeanor, often smiling when interacting with students. This reflects a more egalitarian and close teacher-student relationship. For example, when Zou Hailian was teaching trigonometric functions, the students struggled to follow his teaching style and pace, leading to confusion. They subsequently turned to their original math teacher, Jay Bremner, who responded with a smile and patiently explained the content in detail. These examples underscore the significant impact of teachers' facial expressions on classroom dynamics and student-teacher rapport. In Chinese primary and secondary schools, teachers usually present a stern expression to maintain authority, whereas British teachers are more inclined to engage students with encouraging and friendly smiles.

3.1.3. Eye contact

Eye contact is a key nonverbal tool for expressing thoughts and maintaining communication. While both Chinese and British teachers use eye contact for classroom management and engagement, cultural differences affect its interpretation.

In China, a stern gaze is often used to admonish misbehavior. Upon receiving such a look, students generally self-correct. In contrast, British students do not always register or respond to this cue. In episode one (20:00), English teacher Li Aiyun remarks, "At my school, if I gave that look to my students, they would listen. But not you—you say sorry, then go back to doing the same

thing." This highlights cultural differences in interpreting nonverbal signals—while Chinese students understand and respond to authoritative eye contact, British students may see it as ineffective.

On the other hand, Chinese students are generally more reserved and tend to be shy about expressing their opinions openly. When a teacher poses a question, they often avoid making eye contact in order to reduce the likelihood of being called upon. In contrast, British students frequently engage in eye contact with teachers, seeking to be noticed and actively expressing their thoughts and opinions. In interpersonal communication, British people are accustomed to looking others in the eye—avoiding eye contact is often considered impolite or insincere. By contrast, Chinese etiquette emphasizes avoiding direct eye contact during conversations; instead, one's gaze typically falls between the chin and chest of the interlocutor. This is particularly true in hierarchical relationships—when a subordinate speaks to a superior, prolonged eye contact can be interpreted as disrespectful or even confrontational. The same applies to teacher-student interactions. In the documentary, when confronted with criticism from her teacher, the British student Sophie looks directly and fearlessly at the teacher, expressing her dissatisfaction and disagreement. In contrast, Chinese students usually respond to criticism with silence, lowering their heads and avoiding eye contact. This contrast illustrates that eye contact between Chinese teachers and students is relatively limited and often reflects hierarchical respect and traditional notions of reverence for teachers. In British classrooms, however, frequent eye contact signifies an egalitarian teacher-student relationship.

3.1.4. Posture

Posture refers to the physical bearing or stance a person adopts—that is, how the body is positioned and moves during communication. In Chinese culture, students are taught to "stand like a pine tree and sit like a bell," reflecting the expectation of maintaining upright, composed posture in class. During lessons, students are expected to sit properly, remain quiet, and refrain from talking or engaging in distracting behaviors. Spontaneous discussions are discouraged, and those who break the rules may be warned or subjected to disciplinary measures such as standing punishment. While the British also value appropriate manners and demeanor, the classroom environment is generally more relaxed and informal. There are fewer restrictions on student posture, and students may talk more freely. In episode one of the documentary (48:55), teacher Li Aiyun notes that student Sophie placed her feet on her chair during class. Although she corrected the behavior after a reminder, she soon reverted to it—indicating a more casual attitude toward classroom posture.

In China, standing as punishment is a common disciplinary tool used to maintain classroom order. When students are asked to stand, the intention is to prompt reflection on their behavior and deter further disruptions. Chinese students often feel ashamed when subjected to this form of punishment, which reinforces self-discipline. However, British students interpret the experience differently. In episode one (33:05), two British students are asked to stand for disrupting the class, but instead of feeling embarrassed, they find the situation amusing. This reveals a cultural gap in the interpretation of disciplinary postures: Chinese students see standing as a form of punishment associated with shame and self-reflection, while British students perceive it as a novelty and do not associate it with personal misconduct.

Chinese etiquette also places high expectations on a teacher's own posture. Teachers are expected to maintain a dignified and restrained demeanor, often lecturing while standing at the podium, with minimal movement and rarely sitting during lessons. A teacher's posture conveys authority and serves as a behavioral model for students. To manage inattentive students, Chinese teachers may approach and lightly tap their desks as a silent reminder to focus. Such movement often helps redirect student attention. In episode one (07:15), teacher Yang Jun walks over to a student and reminds him to adjust his posture—a clear strategy to reinforce classroom discipline. By contrast, British classrooms are more flexible. Teachers may teach while sitting on the desk or even beside students, fostering a sense of approachability. For example, in episode three (14:00), Bohunt School math teacher Pete Whitworth is shown sitting with students and discussing problems with them directly—an approach that helps build rapport and communication bridges. Overall, Chinese teachers are held to stricter standards of professional posture, while British teachers enjoy greater freedom in their teaching stance and positioning.

3.1.5. Physical contact

Physical contact reflects the degree of intimacy and trust in interpersonal relationships. Cultural norms significantly influence what types of touch are considered acceptable. Influenced by Confucian values, Chinese culture tends to be conservative: physical contact is more common among same-gender peers or between elders and juniors, and opposite-gender interactions are typically more restrained. In contrast, British society is more open. Greetings like cheek kissing are common even between men and women, which may feel unfamiliar or inappropriate to Chinese individuals.

Moreover, romantic relationships among minors are generally discouraged in Chinese schools, while such interactions are more normalized in the UK. In episode one (18:35), British male and female students are seen engaging in playful interactions and even public displays of affection. Teacher Yang Jun expresses concern, remarking that the students "are too young for such behavior." This illustrates stark cultural differences in attitudes toward touch and gender interaction—China emphasizes propriety, while Britain tends toward tolerance and acceptance.

3.2. Differences in paralanguage

Paralanguage refers to the nonverbal vocal elements that accompany speech but do not carry specific lexical meaning. It includes features such as pitch, volume, speech rate, intonation, and vocal pauses. As a key complement to verbal expression, paralanguage is present throughout the entire communicative process and plays a critical role in classroom interactions.

3.2.1. Volume

Teachers can modulate their vocal volume to express emotion and capture student attention. In Chinese classrooms, where student numbers are typically large and classrooms are spacious, teachers often raise their voices to ensure audibility. When voice projection is inadequate, they may rely on amplification devices. A louder voice in this context not only improves clarity but also serves as a cue for students to focus.

In contrast, British classrooms generally have fewer students and smaller teaching spaces. Teachers tend to maintain a moderate speaking volume, reflecting the cultural norm that excessive loudness in social settings is impolite. Therefore, British teachers rarely raise their voices to regain control of the class.

In episode two (46:20), teacher Yang Jun raises her voice to urge student Phoebe to pay attention. While the student understands the teacher's intent, she appears unbothered. This scenario highlights differing classroom norms between the two cultures. Moreover, the cultural tolerance for vocal volume varies: what is normal for Chinese students may feel overwhelming to British students. For example, British student Josh describes Yang Jun's voice as "sharp," indicating that the higher volume caused discomfort. In sum, while Chinese teachers commonly raise their voices as a disciplinary or organizational strategy, British classrooms favor more moderate and restrained vocal delivery. In international Chinese language instruction, it is therefore crucial for teachers to adjust their vocal volume to students' cultural expectations and comfort levels.

3.2.2. Speech rate

Speech rate affects how emotions and intentions are perceived and understood. In episode one (32:20), during a science lesson, Yang Jun pauses instruction to address classroom disruptions caused by student Sophie and others talking loudly. She deliberately slows her speech and increases pauses, repeating "I'm still waiting" three times to signal her dissatisfaction and assert control. However, the British students fail to grasp the intended emotional message behind this shift in tempo. Sophie even questions the teacher's approach, reflecting a mismatch in communication styles. Speech rate is also closely tied to the pacing of instruction. In China, where educational demands are high and curriculum content dense, teachers often speak quickly to cover more material in limited time. This fast pace, however, may overwhelm students from different educational systems. In episode one (34:50), Zou Hailian teaches the topic of trigonometric functions in just 15 minutes—a subject that, according to Bohunt School's syllabus, would normally be spread over an entire week. The accelerated delivery confuses the British students, many of whom seek clarification from their original teacher afterward. Further, in episode three (31:00), student Rosie remarks that Zou "just keeps talking" without considering whether all students are keeping up. This highlights that speech rate and instructional tempo significantly impact comprehension and learning effectiveness. Chinese teachers often speak faster and move quickly through material, while British teachers tend to moderate their pace. In international Chinese classrooms, educators should be mindful of cultural expectations and adjust speech rate and teaching rhythm accordingly to ensure effective instruction.

3.3. Differences in time orientation

Time orientation reflects a society's values and attitudes toward time—how it is perceived, structured, and utilized. Cultural differences in time perception significantly influence behaviors in classroom settings and broader intercultural communication. This section explores three aspects: general time values, monochronic vs. polychronic orientation, and punctuality.

3.3.1. General time values

While the phrase "time is money" holds universal resonance, cultures differ in how they manage and prioritize time. Chinese educational philosophy emphasizes the maximized use of time, especially for academic purposes. Students are expected to dedicate long hours to study, often starting early in the morning and continuing late into the evening, with weekends and free time frequently occupied by supplemental lessons. Leisure is viewed as secondary to educational achievement. In contrast, the British system stresses a balance between study and rest. Excessive academic pressure is believed to be detrimental to student well-being and personal development.

This distinction is evident in the documentary: although the Bohunt students are middle schoolers, they are required to follow a Chinese-style schedule during the experiment—starting lessons at 7 a.m. and attending two hours of evening self-study after dinner. Meanwhile, their British peers return home in the evening to enjoy leisure activities. This leads to confusion and

resistance among the experimental group. In episode three (18:00), some students even skip class in protest. On average, Chinese students spend nearly twice as much time on academic activities as their British counterparts, revealing stark contrasts in how each culture values and structures educational time.

3.3.2. Monochronic vs. polychronic orientation

Edward Hall's theory divides time cultures into two main types: monochronic (M-time) and polychronic (P-time) [12]. Countries in Northern and Western Europe, as well as North America, are typically characterized by monochronic time cultures. In such cultures, time is perceived as linear, divided into discrete segments, with each segment dedicated to a single task. Time is managed through careful planning and scheduling, and there is a strong emphasis on punctuality and timely task completion. By contrast, polychronic time cultures—common in regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—approach time more flexibly. China is generally considered a polychronic culture. In these societies, people are accustomed to handling multiple tasks simultaneously. Plans and schedules are often adjusted in response to external factors, and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships takes precedence over strict adherence to timetables.

In the documentary, Chinese teachers apply traditional Chinese instructional methods, which follow a teacher-centered model: the teacher lectures while students listen. Additionally, the Chinese proverb "a good memory is not as reliable as a worn-out pen" reflects the cultural emphasis on note-taking. Teachers often organize the key points of a lesson and instruct students to write them down for later review. In this model, students are expected to listen and take notes at the same time, a practice that is second nature to Chinese learners. However, in episode two (10:45), when teacher Yang Jun presents new material and simultaneously asks students to record the slide content, British student Josh comments, "It's hard to take notes and listen at the same time." This illustrates a fundamental cultural difference: Britain aligns with monochronic time orientation, where people tend to focus on one task at a time, whereas Chinese students—shaped by a polychronic orientation—are more adept at multitasking. Therefore, when teaching students from different time cultures, educators should adjust their instructional methods accordingly. Understanding and respecting these time orientations can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

3.3.3. Punctuality

In modern society, the concept of punctuality is widely valued, but interpretations of punctuality differ across cultures. In some Western countries, the importance of being on time depends on the context and occasion. For formal settings—such as work-related events or appointments—punctuality is essential; arriving late is perceived as a sign of disrespect. However, for informal social invitations, such as visiting a friend's home, arriving exactly on time is not expected and may even be considered impolite. In such cases, guests are often expected to arrive 15 to 30 minutes late to give the host adequate time to prepare. In contrast, when Chinese people visit others—especially elders or superiors—they tend to arrive early to engage in polite small talk. Being late to such occasions may be seen as rude or arrogant.

The concept of punctuality is equally important in classroom settings. In most countries, both teachers and students are expected to arrive on time for lessons. In Chinese primary and secondary schools, if a student arrives late, they must "report" to the teacher—formally ask for permission—before entering the classroom. University settings in China tend to be more relaxed; late students typically enter quietly without disrupting the class. In British classrooms, however, students are not required to seek permission when arriving late—as long as their entry does not interfere with teaching, they may enter freely. In episode three of the documentary (08:55), teacher Li Aiyun is preparing to begin class when several British students enter without explanation or permission. Li addresses the issue directly, telling the students that simply saying "sorry" after being late is not enough; if they are late again, they will be required to stay in during lunch break for 10 minutes. This episode illustrates the cultural differences between China and the UK in terms of punctuality expectations and how tardiness is handled.

Cultural differences regarding punctuality also extend to adherence to scheduled time. In Chinese classrooms, it is relatively common for teachers to go over the allotted time—known as "overrunning"—in order to finish the day's lesson. While students may find this inconvenient, they usually tolerate it. In contrast, British culture places a high value on keeping to the formal schedule. Meetings, speeches, and class sessions are expected to end as planned, without exceeding the allotted time.

This contrast is evident in episode two (16:45), when teacher Zou Hailian is assigning homework at the end of a lesson. Although class time has officially ended, he insists on finishing his instructions. A student reminds him that the class is over, but Zou responds that he will finish first before dismissing the class. The student reacts with visible dissatisfaction, reflecting the British expectation for classes to conclude on time and the general intolerance toward overrunning.

3.4. Differences in spatial use

Spatial use, or proxemics, concerns how people perceive and utilize physical space in interpersonal communication. It includes perceptions of personal space, physical distance, and seating arrangements—all of which reflect cultural norms and social relationships. Differences in spatial use can lead to misinterpretation and discomfort in cross-cultural interactions.

3.4.1. Personal space

Personal space refers to the invisible boundary individuals maintain to feel safe and unthreatened. The size of this space depends on interpersonal relationships, social roles, and cultural background. Western cultures—especially those rooted in individualism—highly value personal privacy and autonomy, regarding personal space as inviolable. In contrast, collectivist cultures like China place a greater emphasis on communal living and shared space, resulting in less sensitivity to physical proximity. In Chinese classrooms, teachers often walk around during class, both to monitor student behavior and to increase engagement. Students typically accept this without discomfort. However, British students, accustomed to stronger personal boundaries, may interpret such actions as intrusive or distrustful.

In episode one (43:45), Yang Jun walks around the classroom during a test, stopping to observe students' progress. This makes some British students uncomfortable, reflecting their higher sensitivity to perceived invasions of personal space. Such responses highlight the need for Chinese language teachers to be aware of varying comfort zones when interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds.

3.4.2. Seating arrangements

Classroom seating arrangements reflect underlying educational philosophies and the nature of teacher-student relationships. Different layouts influence both the dynamics of instruction and the effectiveness of communication. While factors such as class size and room layout naturally affect seating design, cultural influences also play a significant role. Common seating arrangements include the traditional row layout, the horseshoe (U-shape) layout, and the circular layout.

In the documentary, the classroom adopts the traditional row-style seating commonly seen in Chinese schools, also referred to as the "rice-paddy" layout. In this setup, students' desks are arranged in neat, straight lines, resembling rows of rice seedlings. A podium is placed at the front of the classroom. This layout emphasizes the teacher's authority and dominant role in instruction. It reflects a teacher-centered educational model, highlighting hierarchy and discipline. However, it limits interaction among students and inhibits the development of equal and harmonious teacher-student relationships. As such, it contrasts with modern educational approaches that prioritize student-centered learning. In contrast, British schools in the documentary employ a circular seating arrangement, which is more suited to small-class teaching. Students are divided into small groups with desks arranged in circular or clustered formations. This layout facilitates communication among students, fostering an environment of mutual support and collaborative learning. In this setting, the teacher transitions from a knowledge transmitter to a learning facilitator, embodying a learner-centered philosophy that emphasizes humanistic values and student autonomy. Therefore, in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, there is a need to shift away from the traditional row-style arrangement and adopt more student-centered seating such as the circular layout. Doing so can enhance interaction, improve learning outcomes, and better align with the goals of personalized and humanistic education.

3.4.3. Interpersonal distance

In interpersonal communication, people generally maintain a certain physical distance from one another. The preferred interpersonal distance is influenced by the nature of the relationship and cultural background. Edward Hall identified four types of interpersonal distance: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance [12]. However, perceptions of physical distance vary significantly across cultures, making it difficult for communicators to determine appropriate spacing. Therefore, in intercultural communication, it is important to consider how interpersonal distance influences interactions. In individualistic cultures such as the UK, Germany, and North America, privacy and personal space are highly valued. People in these societies are sensitive to intrusions into their personal space and tend to maintain a larger physical distance during conversations. These countries typically have low population density, which allows for more spacious environments and reinforces greater interpersonal distance. As a result, people have a lower tolerance for crowded or cramped conditions. In contrast, collectivism is a deeply rooted value in Chinese society. Individuals rely on each other within a collective framework, sharing life and learning experiences. Interpersonal distance is generally closer, and due to China's high population density and cultural appreciation for liveliness and social activity, people exhibit a higher tolerance for crowding.

In episode one of the documentary (06:58), a new class is formed based on typical Chinese school standards, consisting of 50 students. By comparison, class sizes at Bohunt School are generally around 30 students—significantly smaller than the norm in China. In such a densely packed classroom, interpersonal distance is reduced, which proves challenging for British students who are accustomed to more personal space and may feel discomfort in crowded settings. This contrast highlights the cultural difference: British individuals prefer greater interpersonal distance and are less tolerant of crowding, whereas Chinese individuals are more comfortable with close proximity and denser environments. In the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, instructors should be mindful of students' spatial preferences and strive to maintain an appropriate interpersonal distance to ensure comfort and effective communication.

In summary, there are considerable differences in nonverbal communication between Chinese and British classrooms. The specific contrasts are organized in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Differences in nonverbal communication behaviors between Chinese and British classrooms

		Chinese Classroom	British Classroom
Kinesics	Appearance and Attire	Teachers dress for comfort and neatness; students wear uniform tracksuits	Teachers wear formal professional suits; students wear standard school uniforms
	Facial Expressions	Teachers typically maintain a serious expression	Teachers show expressive facial cues and often smile at students
	Eye Contact	Teachers use eye contact to prompt or encourage; students often avoid prolonged gaze	Verbal communication is primary; students frequently engage in direct eye contact
	Posture	Teachers maintain upright, dignified posture; standing punishment is common	Teachers adopt relaxed postures; standing punishment is rarely used
	Physical Contact	Physical contact between male and female students is minimal	Physical contact between male and female students is more common
Paralanguage	Volume	Teachers tend to speak loudly	Teachers generally maintain a moderate speaking volume
	Speech Rate	Teachers often speak quickly	Teachers speak at a moderate and measured pace
Time Orientation	Value of Time	Emphasizes full utilization of study time; little leisure time for students	Emphasizes balance between study and leisure; respects students' free time
	Mono-/Polychronic	Students are accustomed to multitasking during learning	Students prefer to focus on one task at a time
	Punctuality	Strict rules for punctuality; tardiness is punished; overtime teaching is common	More flexible attitude toward punctuality; lateness is tolerated; classes end on time
Spatial Use	Personal Space	Weak sense of privacy; personal space is often shared	Strong sense of personal privacy; emphasis on personal space boundaries
	Seating Arrangement	Desks arranged in straight rows (traditional layout)	Desks arranged in circular or group formations
	Interpersonal Distance	Close interpersonal distance; high tolerance for crowding	Wider interpersonal distance; low tolerance for crowding

4. Cultural causes of nonverbal communication differences between Chinese and British classrooms

Nonverbal communication behaviors in the classroom are not isolated phenomena; they are deeply embedded in broader cultural frameworks. When cultural differences exceed a communicative threshold, misunderstandings or conflicts can arise—especially in cross-cultural educational contexts like the Chinese classroom portrayed in Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School. This section explores three fundamental cultural dimensions that contribute to the divergence in classroom nonverbal communication: value orientation, power distance, and contextual culture.

4.1. Differences in value orientation

At the heart of intercultural communication lies cultural difference, and core values form the foundation of any culture. The four dimensions of nonverbal communication—kinesics, paralanguage, time orientation, and spatial use—are all closely linked to individual value systems. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, China is characterized as a collectivist culture, which emphasizes that individuals are part of a larger group and that collective interests take precedence over individual ones, promoting cooperation within the group. Collectivism forms the core of China's social value system. In contrast, the United Kingdom is a highly individualistic society, where individuals are seen as independent entities whose rights and interests are inviolable, and where personal autonomy is prioritized above collective concerns [13].

Influenced by Confucianism, collectivist ideology is deeply ingrained in the Chinese mindset. At the beginning of the documentary and again in episode two (39:04), Chinese teachers organize a flag-raising ceremony, morning exercises, and collective classroom cleaning activities to instill a sense of group identity and cooperation among students. A contrasting example is seen in episode two (41:10), where British student Josh brings a personal water bottle into the classroom, asserting that it is his individual right to do so—highlighting the strong personal autonomy valued in British culture. In terms of educational philosophy, Chinese teachers, shaped by collectivist values, are highly conscious of how their behavior may influence students and society at large. They strive to serve as moral exemplars, paying close attention to their posture, demeanor, and the level of distance maintained in teacher-student interactions. British teachers, by contrast, value freedom and

equality in the classroom, and their teaching behavior tends to be more relaxed and informal. This contrast in attitudes reflects the fundamental difference between collectivism and individualism. Moreover, collectivism in China promotes the concept of sharing—not only of resources but also of space. Social resources and personal items are often shared among individuals, and interpersonal bonds are typically close. As a result, the concept of personal space is less emphasized, and people tend to have a higher tolerance for crowded environments and limited privacy. Chinese students are therefore accustomed to crowded dormitories and large class sizes. Conversely, in British culture, personal privacy is highly valued. People tend to be more sensitive to crowding and have a lower tolerance for it, which is reflected in smaller class sizes and greater awareness of personal space.

4.2. Differences in power distance

Power distance refers to the extent to which individuals in a society accept and expect unequal distributions of power. Based on this concept, cultures can be classified as having either high or low power distance indexes. High power distance cultures tend to value authority, emphasize hierarchy and seniority, and accept pronounced status differences. In contrast, low power distance cultures prioritize equality, personal freedom, and flatter social structures [7].

China has a higher power distance index than the UK. These differing attitudes toward power and hierarchy have a significant impact on nonverbal communication behaviors. In Chinese society, teachers are viewed as highly authoritative figures whose positions are not to be challenged. Students are not expected to interrupt the teacher or question their authority, and the dominant classroom norm is obedience. In contrast, British classrooms are characterized by a more egalitarian atmosphere. The teacher-student relationship is friendly and informal, and students are often encouraged to challenge or question the teacher. This cultural gap is clearly illustrated in the documentary, where British students frequently come into conflict with Chinese teachers, openly challenging their authority. Students often respond passively or dismissively to instructions, and in some cases, they completely ignore the teacher's directives. These moments reveal deep differences in how power and authority are perceived, which in turn create barriers to effective communication and classroom management across cultures.

4.3. Differences in contextual culture

Edward Hall categorized cultures into high-context and low-context cultures, based on the degree to which communication relies on environmental or situational context. In high-context cultures, information is often implicit and embedded within the context, and much can be understood through intuition or shared experience—meaning is not always explicitly stated. In contrast, low-context cultures rely heavily on direct, explicit verbal communication to convey meaning clearly and avoid misunderstanding [14]. According to Gudykunst (1984), China is a typical high-context culture, whereas most Western countries fall under the low-context category [15].

Rooted in Confucianism, Chinese culture places great emphasis on harmonious interpersonal relationships and tends to favor indirect, nuanced communication. People often rely on nonverbal cues to convey their true thoughts and feelings. Over time, certain nonverbal behaviors have gained widely shared social meaning. For example, silence is commonly interpreted as a signal to end a conversation. In the classroom, a teacher's silence can serve as an effective strategy to manage discipline. By contrast, British people prefer verbal expression, explicitly stating their thoughts and attitudes to avoid ambiguity or miscommunication. In the documentary, one of the most prominent conflicts caused by differences in contextual culture is in eye contact between teachers and students. In China, a stern look from the teacher is usually enough to signal students to quiet down. However, in the UK, teachers must verbally and directly instruct students to stop talking in order to restore order. The vastly different responses from Chinese and British students to the same nonverbal cue reflect how contextual cultural differences can cause breakdowns in communication. Thus, in cross-cultural teaching environments, it is crucial to be aware of these contextual mismatches to avoid misunderstandings and improve classroom interactions.

5. Recommendations for cultivating nonverbal communication competence in teachers of Chinese as a foreign language

In the classroom—an inherently communicative environment—nonverbal communication plays a vital role due to its embodied, immediate, and metaphorical nature. It has unique advantages that help transcend language barriers. Based on the comparative analysis of nonverbal communication differences between Chinese and British classrooms, this section outlines three practical strategies for improving the nonverbal communication competence of teachers of Chinese as a foreign language.

5.1. Proactively learn nonverbal communication conventions of target cultures

One of the most common pitfalls in cross-cultural communication is the assumption that others share the same cultural norms. Such assumptions can lead to misunderstandings, interpersonal conflict, or even communication breakdown. In teaching Chinese

as a foreign language, teachers may inadvertently apply Chinese educational methods to foreign learners without considering cultural appropriateness. For instance, a disciplinary method like standing punishment, which is effective in Chinese classrooms, may be counterproductive or even offensive to British students. Therefore, Chinese language teachers should take the initiative to understand the nonverbal communication customs of their students' cultures. Doing so not only prevents classroom miscommunication but also signals respect for learners' cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging and trust. Teachers can enrich their cultural knowledge through books, documentaries, and interactions with local educators and students. Frequent and sincere communication also strengthens teacher-student and peer relationships and contributes to a harmonious learning environment.

5.2. Standardize the use of nonverbal strategies in the classroom

Beyond awareness, teachers should consciously and systematically incorporate nonverbal communication strategies into all aspects of instruction to enhance classroom effectiveness. Several specific recommendations include:

Teachers should not only learn about the cultural aspects of nonverbal communication but also integrate and standardize its application throughout every stage of Chinese language teaching. The effective and appropriate use of nonverbal communication strategies can significantly enhance classroom outcomes.

Teachers should standardize their use of kinesics. In teaching Chinese as a foreign language, kinesics can compensate for limitations in verbal explanation by visually representing abstract concepts. For example, when teacher Zhao Wei teaches the concepts of year, month, and day, merely having students mechanically repeat phrases does little to aid comprehension. Alongside verbal instruction, the teacher can use gestures to illustrate time intervals, helping students grasp meanings more quickly. Eye contact is another crucial component of kinesics. Teachers should monitor each student's state through eye contact—offering encouraging looks to those who appear insecure, and slowing down the pace when students display confusion. For instance, when math teacher Zou Hailian faced a struggling student, Luca, he combined verbal encouragement with caring eye contact to convey trust and support. When Luca correctly answered questions, Zou reinforced the praise with approving eye contact. These nonverbal behaviors boost student confidence and thereby enhance learning motivation.

Teachers should standardize their use of paralanguage. Speech rate, tone, and volume are three essential elements of verbal instruction. In Chinese classrooms for foreign learners, teachers should adjust these parameters based on student feedback to maintain proper classroom rhythm. For example, Zou Hailian covered a week's worth of trigonometry material in just 15 minutes at Bohunt School. Besides the gap in students' mathematical foundation, the teacher's fast speech and rapid pacing were key reasons for the poor comprehension. A too-fast pace leaves little time for reflection, limiting learning effectiveness. Similarly, volume affects the classroom atmosphere: excessive loudness may cause discomfort, while too-soft speech fails to convey content and reduces student attention, resulting in a dull learning environment. Therefore, teachers should carefully modulate paralanguage in response to real-time student reactions to maintain an effective pace and engagement.

Teachers should standardize their concept of time management. Different cultures perceive time differently. Teachers must strengthen classroom management to cultivate students' punctuality and prevent lateness, which can disrupt learning and teaching progress. At the same time, teachers should plan lessons carefully to allocate teaching content reasonably and avoid overrunning class time.

Teachers should standardize their spatial use. Interpersonal distance is a critical factor in spatial arrangement: distances that are too close can cause student anxiety, while distances that are too far may lead to estrangement and communication barriers between teachers and students. Maintaining an appropriate interpersonal distance helps create a comfortable communication environment. Seating arrangement also requires attention. In small-class teaching for Chinese language learners, seating should be organized according to students' learning styles and needs. Circular desk arrangements are recommended, with stronger and weaker students seated together to facilitate peer support and cooperation, thereby improving learning outcomes.

5.3. Enhance cultural tolerance and openness

Teachers should cultivate a mindset of cultural inclusiveness. As the documentary shows, both teachers and students experience "cultural shock": teachers may suffer emotional burnout, while students develop resistance. These tensions undermine the teaching process. To prevent such situations, educators must move beyond ethnocentric perspectives and immerse themselves in learners' sociocultural realities. For example, when teaching British students, teachers should adopt a more student-centered approach, encourage open discussion, and allow classroom interaction. Teachers should also respect students' tendencies to question authority and respond with openness and understanding. Likewise, when students exhibit casual or nontraditional body language (e.g., relaxed posture), teachers should balance discipline with tolerance to maintain a respectful yet adaptable classroom atmosphere.

6. Conclusion

This paper, based on observations from the BBC documentary Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School, explores the cultural differences in nonverbal communication between Chinese and British classrooms across four dimensions: kinesics, paralanguage, time orientation, and spatial use. On this basis, it reveals the fundamental reasons behind these differences: disparities in value orientation, power distance, and contextual culture. Among these, value orientation is the core factor governing people's thoughts and actions; the cultural differences in nonverbal communication between China and the UK stem primarily from their differing value systems. Finally, the paper proposes three recommendations for cultivating nonverbal communication competence in teachers of Chinese as a foreign language: first, to proactively learn about nonverbal communication culture; second, to standardize the use of nonverbal communication strategies in the classroom; and third, to enhance cultural tolerance and openness. By appropriately applying nonverbal communication methods, teachers can manage classrooms more effectively, foster a positive learning environment, and facilitate the smooth development of international Chinese language education.

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