

# CONTRASTIVITY AND MUTUALITY IN SEMINARS ON LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN CHINA

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Teaching as a foreign lecturer in China is a doubly fascinating and challenging educational experience. On the one hand, there is the contrast between cultures that makes us particularly aware of what to say in the classroom, and how to say it. On the other hand, there is our lack of knowledge of the host culture that makes us especially curious and willing to learn. When

**The principles of "contrastivity" and "mutuality"** we teach abroad, the cultural differences may lead to enhanced quality of teaching because abroad it is accompanied more often than at home by asking real questions and is followed by real learning. That is why I suggest taking a closer look at the *principle of contrastivity*. Another principle results from the fact that by asking questions we involve our partners - partners who set out to be learners. By answering our questions, our partners can satisfy our curiosity and teach us what we do not know. In other words, learning from each other is a manifestation of the *principle of mutuality* (Hayhoe, 1987).

In the following, I would like to recount some of my experiences in China and suggest some topics for future intercultural teacher training that may lead to improved results in language teaching.

## Cultural Differences

My Chinese colleagues, post-graduate students, and students at the Guangzhou Foreign Languages Institute (Canton, China) have helped me to understand better the differences between cultures. Our thinking can be summarized as follows: a. We discussed cross-cultural pragmalinguistic knowledge and skills and analyzed some relevant texts. Although in recent years emphasis has been put on the need of teaching cultural differences in China,<sup>1</sup> we found that in some instances the overemphasis on the pragmatic aspects of learning German should be minimized because linguistic structures and grammatical and idiomatic correctness were then often neglected (He et al., 1987).<sup>2</sup>

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b. Due to cultural differences, one should not expect that texts written by students whose mother tongue is not German are comparable to texts by native speakers with respect to rhetoric, inner logic, paragraph organization, or stylistic features (Clyne, 1985).

c. Linguistic and cultural differences lead to problems in developing reading and writing skills. Let's take reading, for example: Linguistic differences in German, such as the constitution of a text through function words, account for difficulties in reading comprehension.

d. Reading habits, the amount and intensity of information processing, and the understanding of what are relevant topics may account for the difficulty which students experience in acquiring academic work habits while using the German language (Liang, 1987).

### Differences in Teaching and Learning a Foreign Language

Discussions in our seminars showed that the following points are either part of convictions or theories underlying present-day teaching in China.

#### Differences in teaching and learning a foreign language in China and the western countries

##### a. Memorization of texts

I observed that students like to take a foreign language text away from class in order to memorize it in its entirety. Memorization seems to be the students' favourite way of getting prepared for the next class. By reading the text out aloud they practise phonetics; reading aloud is also thought to facilitate memorization. The head of the Institute's Spanish Department explained to me:

"Although the question of which method is best is now being discussed in China, it is widely believed that the memorization of texts is important. Memorizing texts may help beginners to become acquainted with the target language which is structurally completely different from their mother tongue. That way the student acquires a model which will serve him later as a point of reference or orientation. At the advanced level, memorization becomes less important" (Chen, 1987).

##### b. Grammar

In one teacher training seminar for the presentation of communicative teaching methods, the prevailing conviction among my Chinese colleagues was that the first didactic step in foreign language teaching must be the explanation of grammar. It was assumed that students want to have an explanation of grammatical structures because they feel uneasy when facing language material that is completely different from everything they have known so far. The acquisition of foreign language skills was considered a rational approach like learning a technique.

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##### c. Imitative learning

According to traditional opinion in China, the second didactic step is the presentation of texts that serve as models for imitation (dialogues, taped material, paragraphs etc.) Learning at this stage is considered imitative, and the teacher is supposed to facilitate it by creating a good classroom atmosphere.

##### d. Practical application

The third didactic step may be labelled application. The student is asked to demonstrate his foreign language skills in situations like writing a letter, participating in a discussion, talking with a native speaker, writing a translation etc.

e. Adapting methods (for example, a communicative methodology)

Modern communicative classroom methods have been assessed by several Chinese teachers. Gu Yunying (Professor of German at the Shanghai Foreign Languages College) asks: "Kann der kommunikative Ansatz in China wirksam sein?" His answer is "yes," but the best way for improved teaching methods is seen in the combination of the so-called communicative methods of western countries with Chinese teaching practices. That would entail the **Adapting western methods to the Chinese situation** development of a corresponding Chinese methodology. In one of our teacher training seminars some practical demonstrations of communicative teaching methods were given and the contrast between Chinese and foreign teaching practice became evident. This alone would be an insignificant result. What counts, is the fact that our discussions showed the limitations of a simple transfer of classroom methods from one cultural world into the other.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, having learnt from each other, I should say that the principal of mutuality may lead future teacher training seminars beyond the presentation of one specific method or one particular theoretical approach to a common attempt at finding out what is best in view of all relevant scientific research results. Richards and Rodgers (1986) have listed the eight major methodologies of learning and teaching a foreign language today as follows:

- The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching
- The Audiolingual Method
- Communicative Language Teaching
- The Total Physical Response
- The Silent Way
- Community Language Learning
- The Natural Approach, and
- Suggestopedia.

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However, taking the road to modernization in language teaching cannot mean to select only one or the other method. All methods have to be put into perspective, that is, they have to be assessed according to their applicability, effectiveness and scientific foundation, of which the last two are the most important criteria. We must look for teaching approaches that are based on modern scientific research in psycholinguistics, cognition theory, and neuropsychology. It may well be true that there are traditional approaches which are suitable to a specific cultural environment and agree as well with modern ideas; we should feel free to discuss them and to experiment with them. The principle of contrastivity may help when traditional methods and modern approaches are compared.

Since every theory should stand the test of useability, teacher training seminars ought to incorporate micro-teaching sessions. Teachers who are experienced in a particular method should give demonstrations of their teaching skills, and their colleagues should feel free to try them out. Some very encouraging attempts in training seminar in China have shown that such initiatives are fruitful. Here, again, we find the principle of mutuality.

## Some suggestions based on the principles of contrastivity and mutuality

I see good chances for successful cooperation between German and Chinese teachers in

### Opportunities for future work in teacher training in China

several areas:

#### a. Future seminars

In future seminars with Chinese teachers of German, model lessons should be analyzed in order to reveal their underlying approach to language learning and its methodological consequences. Learning and teaching habits should be analyzed and possibly changed through practical exercises. New media like video may be helpful for us.

#### b. Testing and diagnosing

Testing and diagnosing of student progress and teaching success alike may be developed further in order to increase teaching and learning effectiveness. Testing is a form of control; diagnosing in contrast is a means to understanding THE difficulties that students may have in learning. Test materials such as that of the Goethe Institute (e.g., the *Zertifikatsprüfung*) or the German universities' language entrance exam for foreign students (*PNdS*) or the *Deutsches Sprachdiplom der Kultusministerkonferenz* should be helpful in comparing the achievement standards of foreign students.

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#### c. Linguistic and educational research

There are many research topics that are both of linguistic and educational relevance, e.g., the function words play an important role in German texts. How do Chinese students cope with the problem of mastering these structural differences in reading? Or: Is there a language acquisition process typical of Chinese students with a specific interim (= learner's) language?

#### d. Preparation and evaluation of practical job experiences

Since students at the Guangzhou Foreign Languages Institute are given the opportunity to undergo on-the-job experience in their fourth year before graduation, experienced teachers who have served as interpreters in companies should organize a special course in order to prepare and help them assess their practical training period with academic methods.

All the above could be introduced in teacher training seminars. Views of native speakers should be considered. Cooperation on various projects should help to promote the modernization and increase the effectiveness of language teaching so that the needs of an ever more demanding society may be met. The principles of contrastivity and mutuality may help solve problems and shortcomings in the right spirit and pave the way for more intercultural understanding. Thus a better international understanding will be achieved through more sensitive language teaching and learning.

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Hu Wenzhong (1986). "Why bother about Culture in ELT," in *Waiguoyu* (4), 1-5. [Back to document](#)
2. Cf. also Waiyu Jiaoxue Yue Yanjiu (1986). *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 1, 52-56. Cf. also Gerhard Neuner, "Fremdsprachlicher Text und universelle Lebenserfahrungen" in Gerhard Neuner (Ed.). *Kulturkontraste im DaF-Unterricht* (pp. 11-32). Munich, Iudicium. [Back to document](#)
3. Cf. also Hans Jürgen Krumm (1987), "Lehrerfortbildung - Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe oder Methodenexport." In Dietrich Sturm (Ed.), *Deutsch als Fremdsprache weltweit*, Ismaning, Hueber. [Back to document](#)

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