

**NONVERBAL FACTORS IN CLASSROOMS
WITH CHINESE AMERICAN STUDENTS:
DISTANCE, SPACE, AND TIME**

by

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INTRODUCTION

This article concerns some nonverbal aspects of communication, behavior, and student response in classrooms with Chinese American children. The articles reflect research in the Chinese Bilingual/Bicultural program of the SFUSD and in a community bilingual preschool and their purpose is to acquaint you with variables that may affect your success as an instructor. The specific information pertains to Chinese American students but the general principles are more widely applicable.

These are preliminary products that do not cover all aspects of the subject. They are being used on pilot basis to help plan a more refined series so any comments or suggestions you might have would be appreciated.

IMPORTANCE OF NONVERBAL VARIABLES IN THE CLASSROOM

Communication must take place in classrooms if the goals of the school and instructor are to be achieved. Nonverbal communication and behavior are important in this setting on at least two levels. First, there is explicit nonverbal communication in and of itself. This may be fairly overt, as in facial expressions or gestures and there may be implicit messages as well, as when an instructor's desk serves form a barrier between instructor and students. Second and often more important, a host of nonverbal factors can shape what communication is possible on a more formal, verbal level. As a simple example, consider the consequences of always talking to a class with your back turned toward them.

Nonverbal variables include the manner in which space is arranged and used in the classroom, the character of interpersonal distance and position, the use of time, the pace or speed of movements and actions, as well as various aspects of movement, gesture, and expression. In the classroom, appropriate choices regarding these can lead to improved attention and participation from students, better comprehension of the

instructor's messages, better classroom management, and fewer behavior problems. Conversely, inappropriate choices can inhibit communication, understanding and participation as well as trigger behavior problems. Additionally, an awareness of nonverbal behavior and variables can provide you with a better understanding of how groups and individual students are responding and may sometimes alert you to difficulties well in advance of the point at which they become evident in students' school work or in the form of overt behavior problems.

Like spoken language, nonverbal communication and behavior are culturally shaped, as are our responses to them. An important characteristic of our "nonverbal culture" is that we are usually unaware that it exists. Consequently, when we encounter difficulties caused by nonverbal factors we frequently cannot identify the source of the problem. Conversely, we may achieve success in a lesson or activity yet be unable to replicate it because we are not aware of all the crucial components that contributed to that success. This combination of being culturally shaped and often out of awareness is one of the reasons that nonverbal variables are so important in cross cultural circumstances, including classrooms.

In the classroom there are variables over which instructors have some direct control and it is with two of these, interpersonal distance and arrangement of space, that we begin this preliminary exploration. Please note that this discussion requires making generalizations that may not hold for every classroom circumstance and that there are situations in which the suggestions will be inappropriate. As instructors you will have to make choices that may vary from recommendations made here, this is as it should be but let those choices be deliberate and not inadvertent.

DISTANCE AND SPACE

How far or how close do you need to be with your students? How close do they need to be to each other? How do you arrange a group? Where do you position yourself relative to students? How do you arrange the tables, chairs, desks in your classroom? These are basic decisions we all make as instructors, whether in preschool or the university, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Interpersonal Distance

Interpersonal distance is the distance between people who are in some form of communication or interaction with each other. In the classroom there are a number of important dimensions of interpersonal distance. There is the minimum instructor/student distance, this being the distance between the instructor and the nearest student. There is maximum instructor/student distance, which is the distance from instructor to the furthest student. Minimum student/student distance is the distance between the closest students, maximum student/student distance is the furthest distance students are from each other.

Interpersonal distance affects how we respond to people, whether we feel comfortable in the interaction, helps define social relationships. In the classroom distance affects student attention span, participation, behavior, and through these student learning and

comprehension. Distance can also help serve to make the student feel the instructor is interested in them or conversely that the instructor does not care about them. It also shapes the nature of students' relationships with each other.

The specifics of interpersonal distance are different for different cultural groups and in different situations within the same cultural group. One of the characteristics of American classrooms is that the spatial customs of the classroom were and are shaped primarily by subcultural groups who tend to operate at greater interpersonal distances than is common for many of the students and, indeed, instructors who are to be found in the classrooms. As a result the distances between instructors and students and among students are often greater than they should be. When this happens, communication in the classroom suffers.

The film records on which this discussion is based indicated that Chinese American elementary students appeared to respond best to rather close instructor/student and student/student distances. Specifically, the most intense and sustained student interest and participation was found in situations where the instructor was within two feet of the nearest student and the students were no more than a foot from each other. This distance factor appeared to operate independent of the form of the activity, holding true for instructor directed, lecture activities, question and answer sessions, and group discussions. As the minimum instructor/student distance increased beyond two feet there was a decline in student attention and participation as well as an increase in disruptive behavior.

Generally speaking, relatively close distance among students appeared to be important even when students were engaged in individual work in the immediate absence of the instructor. An important feature of the findings was that distance from instructors to the furthest students did not seem to be particularly important providing the intervening students were relatively close to each other. It appears that if the instructor is close to a few students and those students are in turn close to other students a chain or network is formed that extends to the more distant students. The students pick up from each other subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) behavior clues that both express interest in the process and encourage it. These behavioral clues include direction of visual attention, postural orientation toward the instructor or activity, as well as synchronized movements related to the center of attention.

The positive response of Chinese Americans to closer interpersonal distances probably reflects the role of nonverbal behavioral patterns in defining and triggering appropriate behavior and interactions for public, social, personal, and intimate communication. There is evidence that suggests that the nonverbal culture of many Chinese Americans involves relatively closer interpersonal distances than is the case for most Anglo middle class Americans. If this is the case Chinese American children may feel less compulsion to pay close attention at some of the distances common in many classrooms nor will they exhibit the behavior associated with that higher level of involvement. Such a response would not be surprising, in as much as classroom distances are commonly somewhat distant even in terms of Anglo middle class cultural patterns.

A possible added factor regarding distance when working with Chinese American students is that they tend to be sensitive to the volume of a person's voice. There appears to be some tendency to associate anger or disapproval with increases in volume.

As the distance increases between instructor and students the instructor frequently must raise their voice in order to reach everyone and a number of instructors and students have suggested that this may be a factor in the apparent preference of the students for closer distance.

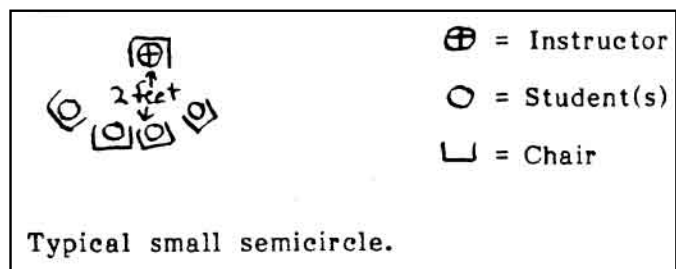
The implication is that you will do well to move your students closer together for many if not all the activities in your classroom. You should also be closer to the students whenever possible. The manner by which this can be done involves the use and arrangement of space in the classroom, which is the topic of the next section of the writing. If you remain distant from your students and keep them distant from each other you will be in the unenviable position of having to teach some 30 individuals. No instructor can teach 30 different individuals day after day. But if the class is a series of inter-connected groups then you have only to directly involve a few children who will then through their behavior and proximity to other students pull them into your lesson or activity as well. Deliberate and creative use of distance can help use deal with our classroom realities, at whatever level we teach.

You will recognize that the distances described are closer than is the norm for many classrooms where the tendency, except in small group sessions, is to spread students apart. Indeed, the design of much of the furniture to be found in schools makes it difficult to have people as close together as described without problems related to the furniture not to mention critical comments from administrators or supervisors regarding “sloppy” classrooms. The distances are not, however, as close as you might think. Good teaching is usually the result of good personal relations and the distances defined here are only somewhat closer than “personal” distance among middle class adult Anglos in the Midwest as determined by studies in “proxemics” (the study of social space.)

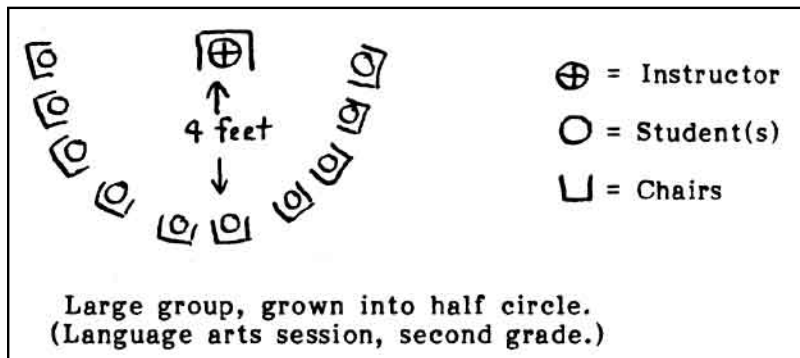
Use and Arrangement of Space

Interpersonal distance in the classroom is part of the larger issue of use and arrangement of space. On a nonverbal level communication is largely shaped by the relative position of people to each other with regard to distance, as discussed, and location (behind, in front, to the side, etc.). The ideal situation is one in which distances are appropriate and people are positioned so that they can comfortably pick up each others nonverbal behavior through visual, and sometimes tactile contact. This section examines some common arrangements found in classrooms with a focus those involving groups of students with a instructor. I begin with semicircular arrangements, often perceived as the best arrangement for good classroom discussion and participation.

Single row semicircles promise a clear line of sight between instructor and students and often encouraged in instructor training for that reason. However, semicircles can have problems and thought should be given to when and how they are used. The effectiveness of a single row semicircle is related to the number of students and the the interpersonal distances set up or allowed.



With a small number of students (2-5), a single row semicircle can be arranged, as illustrated, with the students in front of and close to the instructor. The instructor is within touching distance and every student can easily see the instructor. The students are close to each other and can respond readily to behavioral signs from either the instructor or the other students. But as students increase in number it becomes necessary for instructors to increase their distance from the students if they are to maintain a single row in which all students are in easy line of sight. Consequently, students begin to be

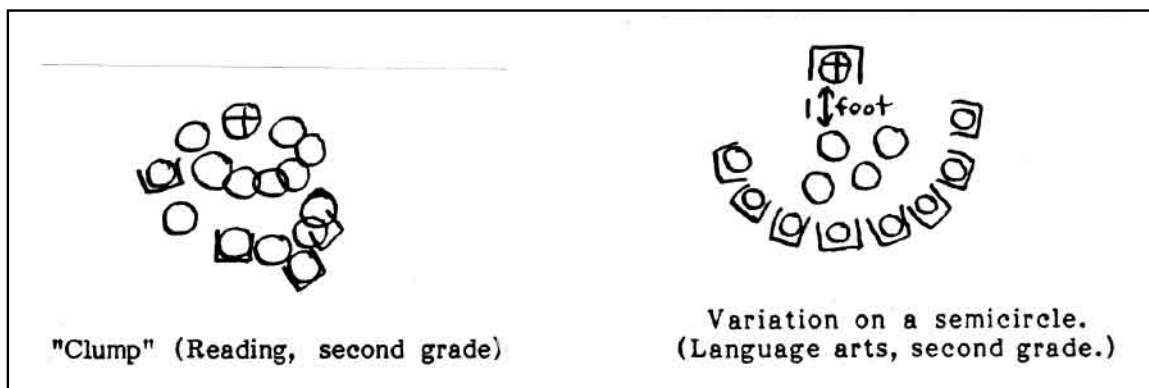


farther from the instructor than the optimum distances described earlier and, frequently, their involvement drops. In the film study it was clear that instructors often felt uncomfortable increasing the distance much beyond four feet because at this distance increase in numbers was usually handled

by extending the semicircle into a half circle rather than by increasing the distance of students from the instructor.

In a half circle arrangement it is difficult for the students at the ends to readily follow the instructor. This difficulty is often reflected in attempts to move to a better position and by a tendency for their attention to drift more than those students in the center. At the same time the distance from instructor to students generally is too great so that even the students in the center tend not to show as consistent involvement as in some other arrangements. Large single row seating arrangements also make it difficult for students to clue in on each other because their close neighbors are in the periphery of their vision and the classmate who they can see well are too distant. The net result is a collection of individuals rather than a group, making the instructor's job that much harder.

All this evidence indicates that single row semicircles are best used only with small groups in which close interpersonal distance can be maintained in conjunction with good face to face positions between instructor and students. But what is to be done when the group is too large to do this easily? The most successful solutions found in the classroom films were clumps and various modifications of the semicircular arrange-



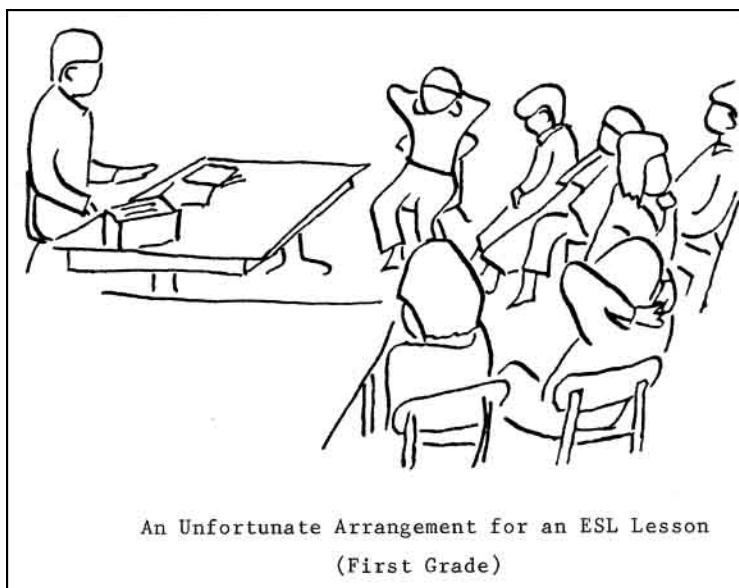
ment. Two examples, both drawn directly from film footage are shown here.

Clumps are frequently a form of multiple row semicircle in which students crowd together around the instructor, as seen in the diagram. Initially such arrangements may appear disorganized but usually after a period of adjustment students settle down into more focused attention and participation than in large, single row semicircles. The dynamic process in clumps is that the front students are usually quite close to the instructor and their interest and communication with the instructor is then mirrored and repeated by students behind them. Interpersonal distance between students is usually significantly less in clumps than in other arrangements and this serves to increase the nonverbal unity of the group.

Clumps do have some potential problems, the most important is the occasional tendency for them to fragment in a manner which isolates students to the rear of the group. The instructor has to be aware of the importance of keeping close intervening distances within the clump. This is particularly an issue when working with large groups in conjunction with an aide. Aides will often place themselves well to the rear or the side in order not to impose on the activities of the instructor but quite commonly a number of students may be drawn off (inadvertently) around the aide and away from the group as a whole. The best solution is to place aides not at the rear of the group but in the middle, this pulls students in closer to the instructor. If the aide then also pays close attention to the instructor many students will mirror that behavior, increasing general participation.

More formal variations on the semicircle are also possible, as illustrated by the arrangement labeled "modified semicircle". In that case the instructor formed a semicircle but then placed some student inside it, effectively decreasing the interpersonal distances in the group. This type of arrangement proved quite effective in the various forms it was recorded.

A not uncommon arrangement that is probably best avoided is illustrated below. In this example the instructor placed a table between herself and a small widely spaced semicircle of students. The distance between instructor and students was already



too great and the location of the desk compounded the problem. Student behavior was correspondingly fragmented, as can be seen. On other occasions the same instructor avoided the problems inherent in this example by sitting along side or in front of the desk on which she placed her materials, and considerably closer to the students.

The basic principle in arranging space in the classroom is not so much the exact form but its characteristics with regard to interpersonal distance

and positions. Arrangements that isolate students through distance, intervening furniture, or locations that make it hard to follow of lessons or activities will cause difficulty in the long run. Conversely, arrangements that decrease interpersonal distance and do not isolate students will usually produce a gradual if not always immediate increase in student attention and participation. In the right circumstances even formal rows can work well if these criteria are met.

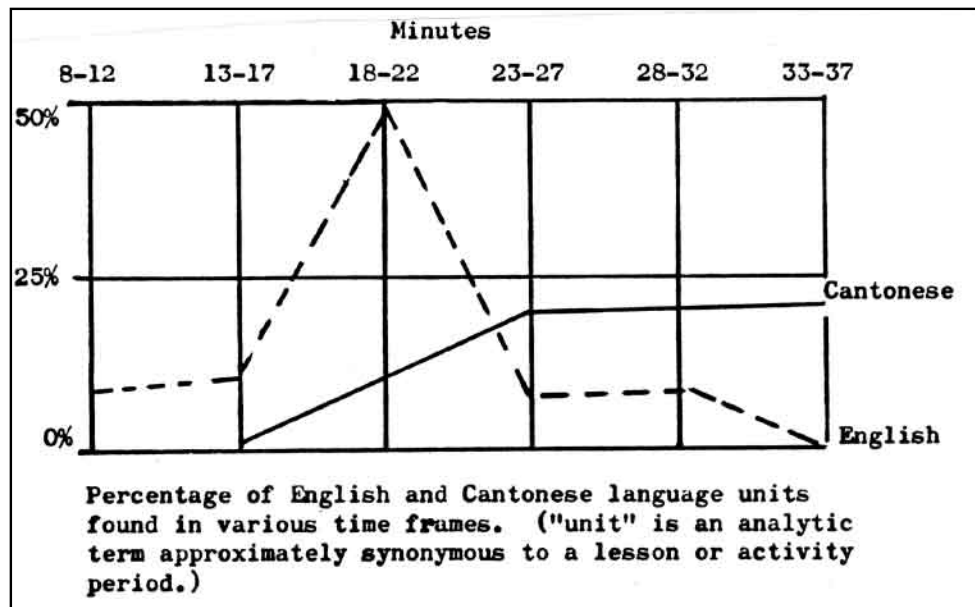
TIME IN THE CLASSROOM

Concepts of time and the use of time are shaped by cultural patterns and communication in cross cultural circumstances is be affected by differing cultural patterns regarding time. But, as with many other aspects of culture, people are frequently unaware of how they use time or how their use of time affects their relationships with others. Time is therefore an important element in the cross cultural classroom and there have been a number of investigations which confirm its importance.

Time is a constant concern for teachers. Our activities must fit within administrative time schedules of periods, days, and the school year or semester. We may take our formal schedule so seriously that time periods may become dominant over all other concerns. Too often we fit our activities to pre-set time frames with little real thought as to the effect or appropriateness of this cookie cutter approach. An example of this cavalier approach to the real importance of time is the use in teacher training of "micro-teaching" units in which the trainee prepares a mini lesson, usually no more than twelve minutes long. This lesson is then used with a group of students and the session is observed or videotaped by the teacher trainer, after which the lesson is evaluated with the trainee. It is assumed that the short time interval has no effect on the nature of the lesson or the response of the students. Evidence does not support this assumption.

Over the formally defined time frames of the administrative day we have little control but within them we can frequently make our own decisions regarding time, though we may not always realize it. It is with these smaller units of time, particularly with the time frame of a lesson or an activity, that this article is concerned.

The film study of the Chinese Bilingual/Bicultural classrooms revealed some incongruity between the dominant time frame in the classrooms and the time frames in which Chinese American students operated most effectively. The most common time frame for lessons and activities was twenty minutes, this period being encouraged not only by administrative factors but also by standardized curriculum and the training the teachers had received. However, the Chinese American students' response and participation was routinely better in activities and lessons that lasted twenty five minutes or longer. Conversely, a very high proportion of the sessions with time durations of twenty minutes or less had less than good response or participation on the part of the students. These patterns did not appear to be particularly affected by grade level in a study that covered classrooms from first through sixth grade.



Time and Lesson Structure

The evidence also indicated relationships between different time frames and both language of instruction and the internal structure of lessons. Activities conducted in Cantonese or bilingually were routinely longer than most sessions conducted only in English. Some were much longer. The structure of longer sessions were also different than shorter sessions. Short lessons (twenty minutes or less) had relatively short introductory and whole group activities were rapidly followed by either individual desk work or individual turn taking for the duration of the session. Longer lessons, particularly those conducted in Cantonese, were typified by extensive introductory, contexting, and whole group activities that only much later in the session might shift to requirements for individual performance. Experienced teachers will recognize the dynamic involved here; only in a longer lesson will there be time for extensive "preliminary" activities before getting to the "main" business of the lesson. In a short lesson these stages must be brief or the other activities will never get done. The important feature here is that the Chinese American students did not respond well to lessons and activities whose time frame did not allow for such contextual components.

What is necessary or essential to a lesson or activity? If the immediate goal of the lesson is to acquaint students with the difference between ducks and chickens or with a new set of Chinese characters is it sufficient to immediately drill the students in recognition and production or is it more effective to spend time placing these new items in a larger context? The study clearly indicated that Chinese American students rapidly lost interest in lessons or activities that did not include a significant introductory or contexting phase, although they would usually continue to dutifully carry out the activity. Intense involvement and vocal, voluntary participation was highest when there was "preliminary" preparation.

"Preliminary" has been put in quotation marks because our American tendency to label such activities as preliminary reflects a cultural bias toward "getting to the

point". Probably any group of students would respond better to inclusion of more contexting information into lessons but it appears to be particularly important for Chinese American students, probably for cultural reasons. This supposition is supported by the association between use of Cantonese and longer time frame activities involving introductory and contexting processes. The "preliminary" aspect were not preliminary but rather they were integral parts of the core. The question with regard to time then becomes "what are the time requirements for my lesson if I am going to include these other elements"

Time and Interpersonal Communication

Time is not important only for its relationship to lesson content, structure, and sequence. Just as there are space and distance requirements for the establishment of good interpersonal communication so too are there time requirements. Examination of the classroom films also indicated that short time frames did not provide Chinese American students with sufficient time to adjust to and make connections with each other and the instructor.

While such connections are not important in every activity or lesson they frequently are essential. When students and instructors reflect a variety of cultural backgrounds, as is usually the case in San Francisco, these adjustments can be expected to take longer. Short activities do not allow sufficient time for such adjustments and the instructor must keep things moving rapidly if the activity is to be completed on schedule. When examined on film or video the time pressure on instructors can frequently be seen to lead them to cut across and disrupt developing connections with and among the students that in a more extended activity might actually help create the intense involvements found in many of the longer lessons.

Practical Implications

While most activities in classrooms are probably too short in duration longer is not necessarily better. There are long activities that do not work just as there are short ones that do. An extension of the standard ESL lesson to 30 minutes is not likely to result in improvement, there are simply some things that do not deserve a long session. It is the combination of time with other variables that is important.

In the context of this caution a number of practical suggestions can be made. The most basic is that the time duration of a lesson should be flexible to fit the lesson, not the reverse. While it is true that absolute flexibility of time is not possible there is considerably more flexibility than most teachers make use of. There is certainly nothing magic about twenty minutes that justifies its popularity in the school setting. More specifically, when working with Chinese American students it will be profitable to include more contextual and introductory time into activities, as well as more whole group processes before moving to individual performances. Doing so will require that the lessons be somewhat longer but this does not mean that you will have to take more total time to cover the same materials. To the extent that the students are more involved you will find that more is learned with less review. Two half hour sessions can cover as much material as

three twenty minutes sessions and probably more effectively.

Longer duration for activities will be most important when there is a requirement for active interaction and participation by the students. Nobody in the study, which included in excess of 150 different lessons or activities, was able to get good interaction and participation from students in short time frames. Time may not be as important when doing individual math problems or other paperwork assignments but it is important in group activities and discussions that require the students to think and express themselves. In these circumstances all aspects of interpersonal communication become crucial to the success of the activity.

Longer time frames have an additional advantage in that they require fewer transition periods. An hour divided into three twenty minute units typically involves some fifteen minutes taken up by transitions between activities as compared to ten minutes for two half hour sessions. This can add up; some studies of suburban classrooms have indicated that close to half the classroom day is spent in transitions.

The subject of transitions is not unrelated to the attention spans of students, if students always have fifteen to twenty minute activities soon they will have fifteen or twenty minute attention spans. The film of the bilingual classrooms gives no support for the idea that elementary school children necessarily have short attention spans, which is one of the justifications for the twenty minute time frame for lessons. The evidence shows that Chinese American students have long attention spans with interesting activities and short attention spans with boring ones. Making things interesting clearly included introducing things properly, putting them in a context, and allowing time for students to become involved.

The main message of this article is that you be more conscious of time and be less automatic in your choice of how long activities should be. As with other nonverbal aspects of your classroom the important goal is to be flexible, trying different time periods with different activities until you know which combinations of time and activity work best with your class.