

Regulation or Flexible Expression: A Cultural Perspective on Chinese Language Teaching and Learning in Elementary and Middle School in China

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Abstract

This paper introduces regulation expression and flexible expression in Chinese language teaching and learning based on its cultural background. Focusing on essential characteristics for understanding the Chinese language such as meaningful, figurative and extensive, the paper argues that although the essential tools for teaching and learning Chinese normal language are vocabulary, grammar rules of language, teaching textbooks and the application of language, the same important are individuality, aesthetic character, experience and other traits of flexible expression of the language. The paper proposes various methods facilitating language learning: immersion in the Chinese traditional culture; simulation of the classical literature models; free and creative expression.

Keywords: Regulated Expression; Flexible Expression; Chinese culture; Chinese Language; Teaching and Learning

To be successful teachers of the Chinese language, we must become aware of the cultural characteristics of language. Important concepts to consider are: the exploration of language through the prism of culture, the differentiation between regulation and flexible expression, and the tools to bridge the gulf between language and culture. My motivation exploring the relationship between culture and language comes from my research of Chinese language teaching and learning at the elementary and middle school level.

1. The Conflict of Values between Teachers and Students in Learning Chinese Language

To better understand the relationship between culture and language, the following examples of common misunderstanding.

Example 1: A student says, "I hope being snow in the world". The teacher says, "I hope for peace in the world".

Example 2: A student says, "A bird lives bravely."

The teacher says, "A bird flies bravely".

Example 3: The students used the word "knife" in making a vocabulary. A student wrote "flashing with knives and swords", but the teacher thought that was too difficult, and suggested writing "large knife" or "small knife".

These common differences in expression between student and teacher are a result of the differences in the understanding of symbols and how they apply to language. We see that the relation between culture and language is unexpectedly complex. To effectively teach the Chinese language, one must not only understand the basic aspects of learning the Chinese language how the knowledge of Chinese language is stored in the minds of both teachers and students, but also appreciate the differences that occur throughout students' learning stages that might influence how language was expressed. In current teaching methods, the teachers determine how language is taught and the students must follow their rules. Unfortunately, the teachers' regulated languages are the symbols which sometimes have accelerated the demise of students' own languages. We must consider the two important aspects which influence language acquisition in the classroom: one is the regulation language and the other is flexible expression.

2.The Connotation of Regulation and Flexible Expression

2.1 Regulation expression

The two terms, standardization and regulation, are often used interchangeably in teaching language in China. The standard language rules are the unique criteria. The language is consistent with the standard which is normal otherwise is wrong. But the language is alive and the standard is static state, the standardization easily turns into the regulation. In Chinese, characters have been created to serve as an instrument of communication so a standard language in which there is shared agreement of meaning has been developed. In the standard curricula for elementary and middle schools, the goal is clearly stated: the students should correctly understand and use the language of the Motherland. Although this is a simple idea, it is rich in connotation. Language teaching and learning are standardized in order to achieve this goal. Of course, the problem is that some teachers would take standardization as regulation. And regulation often becomes a list of inflexible rules for communication.

2.2 Flexible Expression

Rather than be restricted by regulation and strict rules, flexible expression provides a secondary approach to learning the Chinese language. And it is flexible expression which allows us to express ourselves creatively and without the limitations of strict grammar rules. In contrast to regulation expression, flexible expression allows us to focus on sense, association and meaning as a whole. The flexible expression of language stems from the Chinese language characters. When one reads Chinese, one will understand how the symbol sounds only after realizing what the symbol means. The Chinese symbol directly combines with the concept in the mind. Grammar involves different types of rules, but the Chinese language lacks of morphological rules, and the syntactic rules are relaxed. The Chinese language while interested in the “image”, at the same time focuses on the order of words. For example, in the Chinese language, we might say, “cock crowing hut moon, steps of person bridge frost”(鸡声茅店月, 人迹板桥霜). In this example, which focuses on the “image” and the words order, does not use verbs, subjects and objects to communicate ideas. This structure is difficult to analyze grammatically because there are no verbs, but only six nouns in the line, neither are there. Even without these common grammar structures, we can understand the text’s meaning which describes a landscape on an autumn morning. Thus, the Chinese learner’s task is even more complex and hard. In order to understand the Chinese one must put the texts into context. The Chinese language has developed up to now, the grammar has become increasingly complex: punctuation is commonly used; the lexical distinction is more explicit; conjunctions are more abundant; the sentence structure has become more complex. All these changes can extend the expression function of the Chinese language, and improve the level of specification and abstraction. Traditionally, formalized Chinese language has used images, not formalized morphological rules. When we are reading and writing, the first rule is to express the emotion and not to express the grammar rules. In order to refer to the distinction between the regulation and flexible expression of the Chinese language, we must first state the characteristics of the language.

3.The characteristics of Chinese language

Chinese characters are words which combine sounds and meanings. As a symbol of meaning, they can relate directly to concepts and ideas. For example, ‘ri’(日), ‘shui’(水), ‘yu’(鱼), like these words, because of ascertain similarity or correlation between what is represented. Even if we haven’t learned formalized rules, we can use our experience to understanding or associating relative objects. In contrast to English characters, for example: ‘sun’, ‘water’, ‘fish’, if someone has never learned and only used vision, and then doesn’t understand or associate relative objects. The Chinese language, as expressed through characters, is rich in meaning. The following are the key characteristics.

3.1 Meaningful

One of the characteristics of Chinese language is its multivalence. The Chinese language not only has a variety of external forms, but it is also rich in internal meaning. Many words have multiple meanings, although the character remains identical. The combination of external forms and internal meanings is dynamic and changing to reflect changes in Chinese culture and society. Context is the key to understanding both the external and internal forms of the Chinese characters. For example, the ‘Ren’, which was highly valued by the great Chinese philosopher Confucius, cannot only translated here to be benevolence, but also as humanity, humaneness, human-heartedness, goodness, and perfect virtues.

Another consideration is that Chinese people are accustomed to focusing on experience and inspiration and put less emphasis on definition and rigorous analytical reasoning. Although we may be able to read and understand each character, we may still be unclear of the meaning as a whole. The true expression of one's ideas is paramount in the Chinese culture, thus the choice of words and ideas can cause confusion. The frustration of not being able to fully express one's feelings and ideas are the phenomena of the unique ideographic features of Chinese. The implication is profound as people image the meaning and not the grammar rules in order to express their ideas. For example, "The lone smoke is rising exactly from the vast desert. The round sun is setting slowly over the long river". (大漠孤烟直长河落日圆) These two sentences not conform to grammar rules and there are no verbs, while describing a beautiful picture in which the desert scenery was spectacular as the sun set, and the poet's mood was vigorous.

3.2 Figurative

The main feature of ideographic words is the figurative language expressed in both external and rich internal forms. The combination of these external forms and internal meaning are the special cultural characteristics of Chinese characters. The ancients placed emphasis on the 'experience' and 'image' when they created written symbols. The Chinese have developed a system of describing objective items as absolutely realistic, using lively and descriptive language based on the shared experiences of people. Vivid words can be used in Chinese writing to describe abstract concepts. For example, there is a poem of Ma Zhiyuan of the Yuan dynasty.

Dry vine, old tree, crows at dust

Low bridge, stream running, cottages

Ancient road, west wind, lean nag

The sun westering, and one with breaking heart at the sky's edge.

There are ten nouns in this poem and no verbs. Every noun creates an image based on noun order. These ten images are put together consciously and express a kind of lonely and sad feeling. It does not conform to the grammar rules but such expressions are more attractive. It is worth noticing that Chinese literary masters have mostly used the characters of figurative language to describe their feelings. The written symbols reflect people's spiritual world. The following table presents examples of Chinese figurative language.

| | Hanyu pinyin | English |
|------|----------------|--|
| 矛盾 | Mao dun | conflict |
| 吹牛 | Chui niu | talk tall |
| 吃醋 | Chi cu | jealousy |
| 干戈 | Gange | war |
| 紧锣密鼓 | Jinluo mi gu | Intense publicity campaign in preparation for some sinister undertaking, etc |
| 滥竽充数 | Lan yuchongshu | make up a number without active work |
| 南柯一梦 | Na keyimeng | daydream |

3. Extensive

The Chinese language values the image, but is not limited by image. The meaning of some Chinese characters is extensive and cannot be understood without context, which shapes the lexical polysemy and the creativity of the language itself. For example, the word "Tao" is often translated into English as 'way' or 'path'. In the English language these words are nouns, and English nouns are sharply distinguished from verbs, items or concepts things from actions. However, in Chinese there is no sharp distinction between nouns and verbs, Thus, when the Chinese speak of the Tao, they have in mind a path and an action, a way and a process, according to which everything is in process and everything is in a state of unceasing transformation. The language also creates self-creation and self-expansion in the context between the text and the reader. The tacit knowledge of the cultural background and individual understanding becomes the intrinsic factor in reading and expressing in Chinese because of the extensive nature of the Chinese language. From the above observation, we could say that Chinese traditional culture focuses on the initialized situation of language. At the same time, the Chinese language works forward a return to the person's inner experience. The Chinese language is unspeakable, but you might know the means of speech. There are characteristics of the Chinese language which function in language teaching and learning.

We must also consider the problem of language communication and culture, namely, the standard language and the flexible expression of language.

4. The standard Chinese language in teaching and learning

Language is created by people expressing their emotions, their ideas, their desires, etc. In order to communicate, one must follow certain rules. The foundation of communication is standard language. There are special means for teaching and learning Chinese normal language. But sometimes the standard and normal language turns into regulation and becomes the “dead” language. These changes will limit the language development and affect using language.

4.1 Vocabulary teaching is the foundation of language teaching

The basis for language is vocabulary. Functions of the language, including communication, the transfer information and thinking are controlled by vocabulary. Students must have a certain basic vocabulary, in order to subsequently operate listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is commonly believed that the current students are limited by their vocabulary when they want to express their mind. In order to improve the students' language capacity, the teachers focus on teaching vocabulary and take the vocabulary as the core of language teaching.

3.2 Grammar rules of language in teaching and learning are the guarantee

According to the language teaching syllabus for the elementary and middle school, the following are the grammar rules which the students must master.

- 4.2.1 Master the classification of the word: noun, verb, adjective, numeral, quantifiers, preposition, adverb, pronouns, conjunction, auxiliary, modal particle, interjection.
- 4.2.2 Master the structure of the phrase: parataxis, biased-positive formation, subject-predicate form, verb-object structure, completive pattern.
- 4.2.3 Master the simple sentence composition: subject, predicate, object, attribute, adverbial modifier, complement.
- 4.2.4 Master the compound sentences style: compound sentence, progressive sentence, selectable sentence, transitional complex sentence, causal sentence, hypothetical sentence, conditional sentence.
- 4.2.5 Master the figures of speech: metaphor, personification, exaggeration, parallelism, antithesis, repetition, rhetoric question.

By these rules, the common aims are to cultivate good language habits and strengthen the thoughts and feelings of love for the language of the motherland.

3.3 The main medium of language teaching is the textbook

Language is taught generally through literature. Famous literary selections are used as a model for the learning language. A common practice is to give students a piece of literature in which to extract and interpret beautiful words and sentences. These literature extracts become the basis for exam questions. We always say that the texts are examples of language teaching and learning.

3.4 Language teaching emphasizes application

The purpose of language teaching and learning is to practical usage. This is one of the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture. However, often this method focuses on obscure vocabulary which is rarely used. The following table shows the statistics for words which often were in the tests. Utilization rate below 10 represents extremely low usage. An essential component of language is communication, so learning language in order to use appropriately in different social settings. But in elementary and middle school in China, the purpose of testing is to grade students, especially select the characters which are in lower utilization rate to test students, which easily lead to the purpose of learning language is only for test and lose the interesting of learning language.

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Character | 抔 | 涔 | 铤 | 摔 | 皈 | 帙 | 戕 | 殄 |
| utilization | 0.5 | 5.0 | 2.2 | 1.8 | 6.5 | 3.1 | 3.7 | 4.0 |

5. The flexible expression of the Chinese language

The individual, culture, society, and history of a society are immersed in the language. The normative study of the Chinese language is the foundation for communicate, But the vivid expression of language requires more than specific language rules.

The combination of language learning with the aesthetic of culture is essential in order for the language to maintain its vitality. For both native speakers and second language learners, Chinese language learning in the living state is the ultimate goal. The flexible expression of the Chinese language has the following characteristics.

5.1 Individuality

Everyday life is personal, so the language that is closely related to daily life also has a personal nature. The personal languages of different people are special and individualistic, which this particularity is not only the level of voice tone, but also the expression of emotion. Each individual's emotions are different which leads to the style of the expression, its individuality. For example, a student writes a sentence, "The little child made the boat and stole the white lotus" in his writing notebook because this is the poem that he recited recently. The teacher, from the perspective of regulated expression, insists that a complete statement must include one of the four elements: when, where, who or what. The student's creative expression is squelched as he must write down: "One day, the children were playing in a boat in the river". The former sentence is very alive, portraying a scene of a group of children playing happily, and the latter sentence is standard but lacking in vitality.

5.2 Aesthetic character

Tasting language has become a kind of aesthetic of the Chinese traditional culture. All languages serve the practical function of communication, but language is not only a tool for communicating, it is a mirror into the cultural systems of thought and image which have had so large a share in making them what they are. The study of the Chinese language, in many ways, is a study of Chinese philosophy, Chinese worldview and traditional Chinese values. Aesthetic principles and standards are rooted in cultural and philosophical tenets, so we can talk about the characteristics of Chinese language in terms of visual beauty expression and profound meanings. Chinese literature is filled with the beauty and meaning of language. Thus, 'Sun-set glowing clouds and lone goose together fly, one are the autumn water and skies on high' ("落霞与孤鹜齐飞, 秋水共长天一色"). 'White mist heaped up across the river, and the moonlight stretched for into the horizon to merge into the sky.' ("白露横江, 水光接天"). 'Lowering my head I toy with the lotus seeds, look, they are as fresh as the water underneath.' ("低头弄莲子, 莲子清如水"). 'To hold your hand to grow old with you.' ("执子之手, 与子偕老"). From the examples, we would be amazed power of the visual and profound meaning expressed by the expression.

5.3 Experience

Language is an expression of one's life experience, so it's also intuitive that reappear the things thus the language has vitality. The following sentence expresses is an example of expressive student writing. "Listen, the wind is talking to the leaves". The spring personifies the wind and the leaves making them active and alive. Unfortunately, the teacher thought that the sentence was wrong, because it didn't abide by the grammar rules. For the teacher, the standard grammar rules will turn into regulation. The regulation dictates that this sentence should be corrected, to "The leaves are green because spring is coming". Comparing these two sentences, obviously the former was more vivid. Although the latter was a full sentence, it was very inflexible. Of course, standardization and flexible expression of language are not mutually exclusive. The purpose of teaching language is to let students develop their own creative expression through standardized language learning.

6. The path of teaching and learning the Chinese language leads from regulation to flexible expression

In order to improve the effectiveness of Chinese teaching and learning in elementary and middle school in China, we will consider the following strategies.

6.1 Immersion into the Chinese traditional culture

As stated above, a study of the Chinese language cannot be separated from its philosophy, worldview and traditional values. There is an old Chinese poem in it said, a person whose hometown accent did not change but his black hair has turned white. This poem illustrates this is not only about one's accent but also about the culture of language, so learners would absorb the Chinese culture. When the spirit of Chinese culture becomes a vital part of the language classroom, the teachers and the students then embark upon the task of acquiring the meaning of language which is not only like a tool and the learner can not only stay at the level of the conventional level.

6.2 Simulating the classical literature models

The simulation of Chinese classical literature models is at the base of Chinese language instruction. Traditional Chinese training methods have always put a strong emphasis on imitation. There is an old saying “He who has read three hundred poems of the Tang Dynasty also can write poems”. The Chinese language was developed about four thousand years ago, and soon after, the classics of Chinese literature were written. Written language is a reflection of culture. In the process of language teaching and learning, classical literary texts are an important imitative model. Through the study of these classical texts, students gain an understanding of beautiful writing and write beautifully by themselves. Ultimately, students cannot rely imitating text alone, they must learn to express themselves through their own language. The role of teacher is to guide the students to understand the external form and spirit of the classical works, and then guide them to express themselves, using their own words. Then the spirit of the language will penetrate the student’s mind. Working with language influence sand regulates the behavior, thought patterns and language habits of each individual.

6.3 Free and creative expression

All the people in the world, no matter where they are from, who have the ability to make sense of the native language. Despite the many ways in which the lives of person around the world vary, the major milestones of language using are remarkably similar. Our language teaching aims to awaken students to their innate language ability and help it develop. Language development is a challenging topic but it is an important thing which has relevance in all of our lives. In ancient China, making an image to express connotation was the pursuit of ancient Chinese philosophers. Breaking the rules of language and dissolving the limits of grammar helped them liberate the free energy of the language. That is saying that we would get amazing results from the vivid language. There have new elements are found in flexible language. Through free and creative expression, students can enrich their content and develop their own language styles. The sensitivity and mastery of language should also be one of the important criteria for measuring a person’s spiritual qualities. All too often, A three-step procedure is followed to help learners gain more and more control gradually, from understanding the Chinese traditional culture to execution following a model, and finally to free and creative expression. Although the languages are manipulated following the rules of the grammar, they also are affected by the social norms of language or pragmatic rules which based on the culture. Our culture would shape our ideas, our values, our ideology, so when we are using the language, the culture will affect tacitly our language.

Conclusion

Language is not merely a tool for people to pick up and drop once they learn the structures, but it is a life. In this paper, we present the relationship between languages and culture, especially detailed the characteristics of Chinese language. To understand the characteristics of language and grasp the paths to learn language, one must not only understand the basic language rules that are learned and how regulation language is stored in memory but also appreciate the alive language that occurs throughout the life development that might influence how language is learned and processed. Expression in Chinese is very vivid and very delicate, although there are grammar rule, the ideographic nature of the Chinese language lends creative elements to a person’s every use of language. Language textbooks have many examples of unlimited use of the ‘grammar and logic’ of language. The normative nature of language is relatively static, but the expressiveness is dynamic. According to different contexts, aesthetic meaning, and cultural significance, the expression cannot be the same. People would be rounded by the language and the language would affect spirit of people. Language expression is a productive process which begins by projecting an image of the end product in the mind, knowing the creative steps which lead to that end product and then, using learned language skills to faithfully expressing that end product. The more alive, the more flexible is the expression of language. The mind leads the language, that is, the mind knows what to express.

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