

1. Introduction

Teaching a foreign language in a country where people do not speak this language, is a special task for a native speaker. The main purpose of the teacher is to motivate students to study a foreign language, to awaken their interest to a new culture and literature. This is the reason why foreign teachers abroad always get at teaching spoken language, literature and culturalogy.

Foreign teachers are considered to be representatives of another culture, different mentality and different way of life. In this article we would like to discuss the question of the methods and techniques used by Russian and French teachers in the Chinese classroom.

On one hand, foreign teachers should keep in mind the national characteristics of their students, and on the other hand they use methodologies that reflect their cultural background and individual preferences in teaching.

2. The Chinese academic environment for foreign languages studying

Text content has a huge importance in China – it is the main medium of learning and communication. Its importance is very obvious in the Chinese educational system. For Chinese students, reading means learning. This also affects language classes as languages are mainly studied through the text and focusing on a descriptive approach of the language's structure. Students get an intensive training during the two first years, mainly given by local teachers. Language activities are split into small units that are very specialized: grammar class, reading class, listening class and speaking class. Outside of the speaking class, students have few chances to speak. Students therefore lack oral practice and are quite unconfident about it. When they speak, it is usually in order to give “the right answer” to a question; they don't have discursive habits. Students are also shy about speaking in class because they don't want to lose face in front of their classmates and they hardly ask questions to the teacher, as

it is understood as a lack of respect for the teacher. They also usually prefer to ask questions in private after class.

Foreign teachers usually intervene only from the 2nd or 3rd year on and mainly for the teaching of very specific topics that don't have much to do with the acquisition of the bases of the language: literature, theatre, writing, press reading... In this educational community, foreign teachers get students who already should master quite well the language but who have a strong tendency to communicate by translating what they would say in their own language. Though the structure can be right, the message is not always accessible for a foreign listener. Doing so, they also find it difficult to understand a foreign speaker, as they lose their cultural reference and lack the ability to understand what is inherent to the message. The tone of a conversation (sarcasm or humor for an example) usually doesn't reach its target.

3. Some characteristics of Chinese students

Chinese can be the best listeners. Students can listen carefully to explanations given during lesson. Of course, lectures on intercultural communication or literature are more interesting for the students than lectures on linguistics. Unfortunately, the characteristic of Chinese as attentive listeners does not mean that Chinese students have a higher capacity for understanding foreign languages than other peoples. There is also a polite way of pretending to listen in order to save the teacher's face.

According to Goh, listening in a foreign language is one of the most difficult types of speech activity, because 26% of students are quick to forget what they heard, 22% did not recognize the words they know, 21% understand the words, but do not understand what the speaker has in mind, 17% of students are losing part of the message, thinking of the previous section, and 11% cannot understand the general idea (Goh, 2000, p.60).

Another characteristic of the Chinese is the attention to detail. This may be the reason why it is much more difficult for Chinese students to understand the main idea of a text than the details. They actually like to translate word by word instead

of accepting to understand globally without understanding every word; they therefore lose the general meaning.

Therefore, the main task is to focus on the listening skills to guess the meaning of new words and to understand globally the meaning a whole text, despite unfamiliar words. Of course, the preliminary work on vocabulary removes some difficulty in understanding. In addition, it is traditional for Chinese students to read a text during listening lectures, and teachers are asked to give the students a printed version of the lecture before the lesson in order to pre-read it with a dictionary. We don't believe that this should be done at every lesson, it would be better if the full text was available to students after a lecture. But before the lecture, the teacher must give the students an assignment they will complete during the listening lectures. This may be help, filling gaps or doing other tasks; anyway it is necessary to do pre-listening activities because it increases the attention of the listeners.

If we consider the interpersonal relationships, it may be noted that Chinese students are more focused on the group. Collectivism is their predominant feature. This can be easily seen in the behavior of Chinese students: they are always ready to help each other, can easily give their textbook to others; students like to answer in chorus.

They like to prepare together for classes and exams. Sometimes it brings some weaknesses. The students whisper answers which prevents the weak students to answer by themselves; they don't learn because they just repeat what is whispered to them. Classmates will always defend friends, saying that he/she is absent from school for a positive reason, and not because he/she was sleeping. The teacher can use the advantages of this cultural feature by using these collective practices: work in small groups and pairs, brainstorming, preparation of group projects, presentations, control tasks for a group of students – all these tasks can easily be used when working with Chinese students.

4. Culturally different communication

When learning a foreign language, students discover a new reference system, new values and new cultural angles. One can learn a foreign language on the basis of its structure but the one will be limited in the understanding of what is underlying in a message.

Moreover, foreign teachers “import” their education systems to China and confront their students learning habits.

We therefore want to focus on the confrontation of values, inherent to communication and the bias it generates in order to explore the possibilities of helping the students get the necessary skills to communicate in the cultural context of the language they study.

4.1. To manage cultural differences in communicating in a foreign language is an important objective apart from academic objectives

Let’s examine a recurrent problem met by Chinese students and their French interlocutors – the French-Chinese interview.

Most students of French have to pass interviews in French for employment or French universities selection (with Campus France). These interviews imply a good knowledge of French and an even better knowledge of the messages that French interviewer gives to the students.

Nowadays, Chinese students are torn between traditional community values and new values of the new China. Strong traditional community values (solidarity, group activities, traditional family values, respect) are contradicted by the strong new values of the new China (be a winner, be talented, be competitive, be the best, get rich.) As they have little choice of their life, they don’t give much thought to the reasons why they chose their field of studies or to their professional objective. Moreover, in a culture where gaining face is very important, they have a strong

tendency to flatter the interviewer. They also think that patriotism is a mark of good will and good education.

During an interview, students will generally display all these values: they will not as much focus on their project and the reasons of their choice as on achievements and rewards; the interviewer will observe impersonal, unvarying patterns of circumstantial sentences that are considered to show good will and good intentions. But a French interviewer will be expecting a realistic discourse that focuses on concrete well thought objectives, research and creativity – or originality – and will take in a negative way any “decorative” or seductive speech, as well as anything understood as a display of out of place patriotism whatever good feelings there are behind as it will most of the time not be understood the way the student meant it. For a French interviewer planned objectives are more important than past achievements and good feelings. French interviewers will therefore give a priority not so much to those who speak perfectly French but are very impersonal, but to those who have a good mastering of the language and are concrete and realistic.

It is obvious here that the way of passing the message and understanding it is biased by cultural values. Students need to understand what will be understood of what they are saying to adapt their speech. So, how can one transmit these cultural notions that go beyond language learning?

4.2. “Don’t stand up and discuss the question”

Stephanie Amaudruz tells, “In Xi’an Jiaoda I had to teach French literature to my 3rd years and intercultural communication to my 4th years. I decided to focus on cultural interpretation and confrontation of values and truths in all my classes. I taught French literature in a historical perspective that led to a better understanding of the evolution of the French school of thought while I focused on implicit communication and misunderstanding in the intercultural communication class.

As I had only a term for each class – which is not enough to anchor communicative habits, I chose to propose case studies in the intercultural communication class that allowed them to enter ways of thinking that were unfamiliar to them and forced them to step back from their own understanding and values, to “wear other people’s shoes” – students had to discuss the cases, give their interpretation and get confronted to their pairs’ interpretations. It was essential, when students emitted opinions, that they justify and defend them, as they had a strong tendency to “repeat” a commonly accepted opinion without giving thoughts to it.

The main problem in this class was that it depended a lot on students contributions, they didn’t easily enter the dynamic of the class. They mainly expected the usual frontal class where the teacher asks questions and a student stands up to give the right answer – that has been previously taught in a theoretical lecture. It was difficult to make them come out of their habit of copying a model, giving the “good answer” or speaking the “Truth” (as given by the teacher), they often kept repeating examples or other students answers. Besides, their main objective was not so much to acquire competences than get good marks at the exams. In this perspective, a class based on discussion is very uncomfortable.

As for the French literature class, the situation was very different. The class focused on the evolution of the French schools of thought from the Middle Ages to the revolution – so that the students could understand nowadays French values and ways of thinking. Students were mostly confronted to the questioning emitted by the studied authors and had to discuss them before studying the texts – discovering questions they sometimes never asked themselves and stepping back from some of their most deep rooted convictions (approaching Descartes after having doubted their own existence for an example). In this class, the relativity of truth and “the good answer” was even more enhanced but didn’t impede its dynamic. Because of special conditions, this class was taught in small groups outside of the classroom. Extracted from the context of the class and in the intimacy of the small group,

students lost the notion of teacher-class relationships and were more participative and less inhibited in taking part in discussions. Spontaneously, they used the language without thinking of its structure in a genuine communication context. They also had pleasure attending the class, which is an extremely important learning factor. I do think that these students, through these interactions, learnt much more about how to interact in an intercultural context than their pairs in the “intercultural communication class”.

5. Teaching Russian language to Chinese students

Russian teachers who begin to work in China also get a cultural shock. Some surprises are related to the differences in the etiquette rules in both cultures.

- Calling a teacher only by the name or surname is not well perceived by Russians. Russians traditionally use a name and a patronymic for the reference in the official situation, for example, Lyubov Aleksandrovna.
- Students should not stand up to greet the teacher or to answer as it is typical only for Russian school.
- For Russians, it is considered unethical to talk about the physiological problems, such as diarrhea or to ask the opposite sex about the toilets.
- In the Russian culture, students cannot call a teacher between 9 pm to 9 am, especially on weekends.
- It is not polite to eat and drink during the lessons.

5.1. The influence of Russian background on the methodology of teaching Chinese students

Russian teachers use a rating system that is popular in the Russian education system. In this assessment 2 = "bad", 3 = "satisfactory", 4 = "good", and 5 = "excellent". In addition, an oral response to the exam is always preferable to written test. Russian teachers use a test only to evaluate grammar.

The conversation with the student allows the teacher to check the ability to describe the facts, to construct logically sentences, to justify their answer and to illustrate it with examples.

There is a tradition of teacher-students partnership kind of relationship in the Russian educational system. The role of the teacher is to create conditions for students' active joint activities.

The Communicative approach type activity is very popular in the modern teaching of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) (Passov E.I., Leontyev A.A., Zimnyaya I.A). This approach is based on some psychological and methodological ideas:

- to consider at its maximum the individual psychology, age, national characteristics of the students;
- the use of speech activities in all its forms: listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- to create the need for communication in the classroom;
- to develop the communicative competences;
- to mobilize speech mental reserves and previous experience of speech;
- information should be communicatively, culturally and professionally relevant.

The Russian teacher wants to see a partner in the student. This means that initiative and individual interpretation of the material by students in the classroom are very important. It is very difficult for Chinese students to take the initiative in the classroom; they are always waiting to be asked, or to be given a task. The best way is to create the conditions for several small groups and work with them.

Another obstacle for students is that Russian teachers refuse to use Chinese textbooks, because the texts don't correspond to the reality of the modern life of the Russian society. In addition, the leading methodology of these textbooks is the grammar-translation method. In the Russian educational system it is not important

to use all the tasks of textbooks one by one. The teachers have the right to choose an activity, which they consider necessary, the sequence of tasks may also vary.

6. Conclusion and advices

Considering the language as a communication tool instead of a material of studies is a first step towards an ability to communicate efficiently in a foreign language. The best way to learn the language without translating ideas from the mother tongue to the target language would be a language immersion type of teaching with a foreign teacher or a local teacher that has a very strong understanding of the target language cultural habits of communication. With this approach, students have to use the new language directly, without transiting through their own language. They learn to communicate the way a French speaker or a Russian speaker would.

But if they can't, then teaching ought to focus on speaking first, not in a teacher-questioning-student-answering way but in discussions that involve the whole group and create a context where the students lose their inhibitions and feel confident enough to interact.

There is a huge difference between learning a language and studying it. Students who can get as much as possible in communicative situations will learn to behave in the cultural context of the target language through observation, imitation and acquisition of speaking habits. They will acquire an unconscious understanding that will help them more than a theoretical short time descriptive course on intercultural communication. The objectives of this course can be achieved by habits acquired all along their courses in university through classes that promote discussion. Let the students speak!

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