

# The Spatial Communication Between Chinese Teachers and Students in High-Context Class

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According to Edward T. Hall, communication is the core of culture, and the use of space or distance plays a key role as a significant cultural factor in the interpersonal relationship. However, as a hidden dimension, it is often out of people's awareness. This paper aims to explore how Chinese teachers and students respond to each other and their surroundings in the use of space. In addition, considering that China falls into a typical high-context culture, this paper expects to make out the impacts of high-context culture on the use, perception, and sense of the space in the interaction. The study of classroom space will, to a degree, contribute to establishing the relationship of mutual trust and harmony, which is helpful to the teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* spatial communication, classroom space, high-context culture, teaching

## Introduction

Both Franz Boas and Edward T. Hall hold that “communication constitutes the core of culture and indeed of life itself” (Hall, 1966, p. 1). Physical space can not only locate the objects and events, but can help us recognize the interpersonal relationship, learn about human behavior. As an important but often ignored cultural factor, space can actually “speak”, which honestly conveys the idea or emotion of the persons concerned, and further reflect their personal relationship.

This paper tries to explore the typical Chinese classroom space, expecting to find out what the basic features of classroom space are, and how the teachers/students respond to each other in such classroom space. Based on that, the paper further aims to discuss how the use of space can enhance the sense of trust, create relaxed atmosphere, and promote the class interaction, which could facilitate the communication between teachers and students and improve the teaching quality.

The study of the Chinese classroom space in this paper is based on the intensive English class for English majors in a technological University in Beijing, in which the author serves as the English teacher for many years. Though the class of English majors is relatively smaller (about 26-36 students or so), it can typically represent the Chinese classroom space, for the arrangements of the small classroom and the subjects are similar in the universities of China.

## The Physical Space of Classroom

According to Hall (1990), “Every living thing has a physical boundary that separates it from its external environment ... however, another, non-physical boundary appears that exists outside the physical one ... We

call this the ‘organisms’ territory’ ... In humans, it becomes highly elaborated, as well as being very greatly differentiated from culture to culture” (p. 158). The “organisms’ territory”, as far as I am concerned, is the result of the interaction between the different subjects, which presents itself as psychological and social space characterized by a certain culture.

In China, the typical classroom space is arranged as follows (see Figure 1).

From Figure 1, we can see the whole classroom is divided into two parts: the teacher’s sphere and the student’s sphere. When the teacher stands behind the lectern on the raised rostrum, the blackboard, the lectern, and the rostrum is the scope of the teacher’s activities, off about the distance of 120-180 cm from the lectern to the back wall of the classroom is the students’ sphere of activity. In China, the rostrum has been held as a sacred place, which cannot be easily occupied by the students. If some student is invited to the rostrum or be close enough to the teacher, mostly, he feels restricted. However, when he comes back to their seats, their safe sphere of activity, the nervous feeling will completely disappear. Then why would the students in the classroom like to keep a distance from the teacher?

In high-context culture, the degree of the closeness, to a great extent, influences the dealing of interpersonal space. That is, if the students and the teacher are more familiar to each other, they could be inclined to be closer in physical space, whereas in low-context culture, people who know each other would keep a “bubble” for the respect of privacy (Hall, 1966, p. 12). Then does the students’ conscious alienation from the teacher show they are not familiar to their teacher and do not like him? Obviously, it does not hold the water even if it is partially right. Besides the character factors of the two sides, the author thinks, the high context of teacher/students in China plays a decisive role.

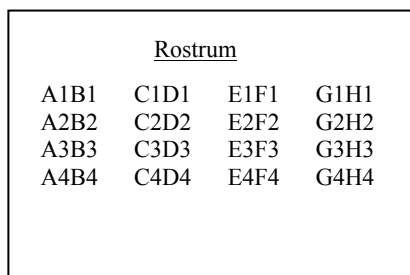


Figure 1. Traditional space arrangement.

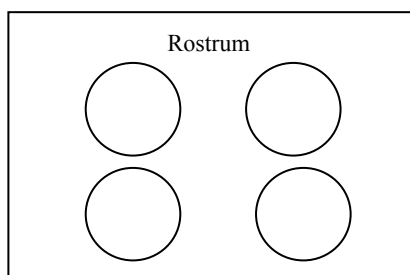


Figure 2. Improved space arrangement.

### The Sense of Classroom Space by the Teacher and the Students

In China, traditionally and generally, the students have been taught to behave in a disciplined way and show enough respect for the teacher since they entered nursery school, thus psychologically it is easy for students to keep a distance from the teacher. And the rostrum, whatever from the height (about 25 cm or much

higher) or position, poses a physical boundary between the teacher and the students. To a degree, the physical space further increases the psychological distance between the teacher and students. Hence, in my view, both psychological distance and physical distance promote a teacher-oriented teaching mode.

In the classroom, the students tend to listen to their teacher silently and carefully, while taking notes. It's worth noting that silence is well-appreciated in Chinese class. It not only fits our traditional value of "silence is gold" and is assumed to be a proper behavior in class. Silence in class implies that the students are following the teacher and giving attention to the lecture. They rarely challenge the teacher in class even if they have different opinions or questions. If the teacher makes a mistake, out of respect, the students either keep silent or go to the teacher privately. Thus the students would well preserve the teacher's "face" since it seems to be a shame for the teacher to make a mistake before all the students in class. It has been long held that teacher is a sacred occupation, and his remarks and behavior directly influence their students. It cannot be well-accepted for a teacher to make a mistake. Due to the complicated and built-in "high contexts", as with physical space, the students tend to keep a comfortable distance from the teacher as shown above. In addition, from my observations and conscious experiment, it is the same result when the teacher leaves his rostrum and "intrudes" into the students' space without their expectation. That is, the students usually feel a little nervous (Of course, there exists the individual disparity).

On the other hand, the teacher is used to staying on the rostrum when he is lecturing. Given the factor of the convenient operation of PPT, it seems the rostrum is the most appropriate place for him to pay attention to each student and catch the attention of each student. Thus, the rostrum is the centre of the classroom, especially when the teacher is giving the lecture. The spacial arrangement further highlights the role of the teacher in class, as a result, the students would rely more on the teaching and be less motivated. Nowadays, the idea of the student-centered learning or teacher as a facilitator is greatly encouraged; however, the class space arrangement poses an invisible barrier.

Honestly speaking, the arrangement of the space has its advantages. The students are not easily distracted and they could stay focused under the attention of the teacher. Also, both the students and the teacher are used to the status. However, it is less effective in English class where more interaction is needed to enhance the motivation and initiative of the students. Then what could be done to improve the situation? It is not feasible for us to dismantle the rostrum, and the change of seating arrangement does not seem to work. The author once tried to change the seating arrangement as Figure 2, where the whole class is divided into four groups, and the students in the same group sit in a circle. The teacher steps down from the rostrum and gives a lecture strolling around the circles. However, it is disappointing. Such seating arrangement forms different centers in class. The teacher seems to be busy in taking care of more groups instead of one, and feel uneasy by shuttling through the peripheries of the circles; and as with students, it is found that the students in a group are separated from the ones in another group, the communication among different circles is difficult. In fact, it is proved that this arrangement is more suitable for group discussion, but not suitable for lecturing.

### **The Effective Use of Space**

It is assumed that "communication is rule-governed. People expect culturally determined patterns of behavior or rules to govern their interactions. In communication, rules prescribe behavior by establishing appropriate acceptable responses to communication stimuli for various social contexts within the larger culture" (Samovar, 2000, p. 175). Here, the "rule" can be understood as part of the contexts. In a typical Chinese class,

the rule or the context of the classroom is that the students should be well-disciplined, show respect for the teacher, and keep silent if not asked. Plus the arrangement of the class space and the raised rostrum, it is easy to form a distance between the teacher and the students, which is not conducive to the students' motivation and participation. As stated above by Samovar, "rules prescribe the behavior", it seems we cannot change the current situation. Actually, breaking the spacial restriction, i.e., psychologically removing the existing space boundary, can realize a more effective communication between the teacher and the students.

Since the traditional space will not facilitate the interaction, what can we do to break the spacial restriction? The author has tested in her class and finds that breaking the traditional physical space helps bridge the psychological gap of the students and the teacher. Here are some advices. First, the teacher could step down the rostrum and bravely enter the sphere of the students' activities. Of course, it involves some skills. You have to make your "violation" or "intrusion" more natural. For example, when you invite one student to the rostrum, instead of calling his name only, you call his name, walking up to him and making a "please" gesture and accompanying him to the rostrum. At first, the students are not used to it, perhaps they feel nervous to different degrees. After all, it takes some time for them to adapt to your "violation". But each time if you try a litter further off your rostrum by inviting the student, your "violation" can be accepted and even be welcome. The same is true when you ask a student to answer questions or correct his mistakes. Second, the teacher could frequently invite the students to present themselves on the rostrum, let them use PPT, blackboard, and other equipments on the rostrum. At the beginning, they feel less confident and natural, but after several practices, they feel at ease and will not be afraid to communicate with the others, and even eager to speak up. Third, the students and the teacher could exchange the roles. The teacher assigns the students to give a lecture, and the teacher participates as a listener, or one of the students. Thus, the relation between the teacher and the students could overcome the traditional stereotype shaped by the high-context culture, and the students would like to talk more, participate more. Amazingly, the breaking the previous space restrictions draws the distance between the teacher and the students closer, and the classroom atmosphere becomes more relaxed. Also, it is relatively easy to make it, for in high-context culture, people tend to be closer and have more mutual trust.

### Conclusions

Space, as one of the factors in teaching communication, is often ignored. However, based on years of practical teaching experience and tests, the author concludes the proper use of space in high-context-oriented culture can further facilitate the interaction and communication between the students and the teacher, thus improving the teaching effects.

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