Language learning beyond words: Incorporating body language into classroom activities

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that nonverbal communication plays an important role in second language communicative competence, yet little attention has been given to practical teaching techniques that will help English language teachers incorporate this essential element into their classrooms. This article begins by examining the indispensable role of nonverbal communication in the overall communicative process. It considers the interplay of body language, particularly gesture, facial expression and gaze behavior, among interlocutors and gives special consideration to the second language learner and the obstacles that can be encountered in communicating cross-culturally. Subsequently, specific activities that bring the visual and auditory channels together through video, drama and role play, and interviews are shared with the purpose of stimulating teachers' creativity in producing their own classroom activities to raise students' awareness of how to encode and decode the visual as well as auditory cues in communicative exchanges.

Introduction

Knowing how and what to say to whom is a cornerstone of communicative competence. Our aspiration as teachers of foreign or second languages is to challenge our learners to go beyond the grammaticality of being able to put the subject, verb, and object in the correct syntactic order, and achieve what Canale and Swain (1980) called discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competencies. These communicative abilities, however, demand that learners go beyond the linguistic context and heed the nonverbal cues of their interlocutors. How could the coherence and cohesion necessary for discourse competence be achieved without managing the conversational turn-taking that is often done through the hand gestures that frequently accompany the relinquishing of a turn? Can the mastery of compensatory techniques essential to strategic competence be accomplished without knowing how to incorporate gesture? How could sociolinguistic competence which includes the ability to produce and understand language appropriately, be attained without understanding that an apology is accompanied by a contrite facial expression, or that words of gratitude are spoken with a smile?

Communicative competence is the ability to communicate successfully in a wide variety of circumstances. With the emphasis of language instruction moving

from grammatical accuracy and phonological correctness to making oneself understood, we need to take a closer look at all of the resources at our disposal that enhance mutual intelligibility. Kinesics, or the way gesture, facial expression and gaze behavior is used to communicate messages, is one of those undercapitalized means.

Research suggests that nonverbal behavior plays an important role in the overall communicative process, yet little attention has been given to practical teaching techniques that will help teachers incorporate this essential element into their language classrooms. This article begins by examining the role of nonverbal behavior, particularly kinesic behavior, among interlocutors and gives special consideration to the second language learner. Subsequently, it discusses how teachers can apply this information in their classrooms to enhance the communicative competence of their learners.

We depend heavily on nonverbal communication in our daily lives. A brief look at research calculations supports this. We spend about 70% of our waking time in the presence of others (Perlman & Rook, 1987), but individuals speak for only 10 to 11 minutes a day, each utterance taking about 2.5 seconds (Birdwhistell as cited by Knapp & Hall, 2006). These numbers are testament to the reliance that we have on nonverbal communication to express ourselves and to interpret the unspoken activities of others. The nonverbal channel of communication bears an estimated two thirds of the social meaning load, leaving only one third of all meaning carried via the spoken word (Birdwhistell, 1970). Regardless of the exact numbers concerning how much communication can be attributed to either the verbal or nonverbal channels, few would argue against the notion that nonverbal communication is necessary to effective communication.

Furthermore, if speakers of the same language rely so heavily on nonverbal communication to achieve understanding, one can only imagine its critical role when considering an exchange between second language speakers and their potential language difficulties. According to Singelis (1994, p. 275), "The fact that at least one communicator is working in a second language means the verbal content may not be as clear as it would be in an intracultural interaction. Consequently, the reliance on nonverbal communication may be even greater than normal." Consider the tremendous amount of compensation or communication strategies used by second language (L2) interlocutors as they gesture and use facial expressions to negotiate their interaction.

Definition of Nonverbal Communication

Simply stated, nonverbal communication includes "all communication other than language" (Andersen, 1999, p. 2). Inherent in this definition is that language is solely a human endeavor and that arbitrary symbols are used to convey meaning. DeVito and Hecht (1990, p. 4) describe nonverbal communication as "all of the messages other than words that people exchange." In this definition, messages are seen as symbolic and therefore their use is intentional. For example, if a language learner extends his arm above his head in a stretching motion to relieve

himself of a muscle cramp, this behavior was not intended as communication; however, if this same motion is done to signal his desire to answer a question in class, the movement symbolizes his willingness to volunteer, and would thus be considered nonverbal communication. That is to say, not all behavior leads to communication. The second element of this definition involves "other than words" messages, meaning that nonlinguistic codes such as body language, facial expression, prosodic vocal features, time, touch, space, physical appearance, and environment are used to communicate meaning. Finally, this definition limits nonverbal communication to that which involves an exchange between people, thus eliminating any messages transmitted between animals or *intra*personal communication that occurs when an individual has a thought or "talks" to himself/herself.

This distinction between what is verbal and nonverbal, however, is only in definition. When we communicate, we do not separate the meaning into channels. The verbal and nonverbal messages interact and become integrated into one communicative event (DeVito & Hecht, 1990). For example, when I correct Angelina's error in my ESL class, she will not separate my smile and encouraging voice from my words, "Did you mean to say, 'I walk to school' or 'I walks to school?'" Voice, smile, and words act in harmony to create an overall positive impression.

According to Arndt and Janney (1987, p. 92), "the idea that there are clear boundaries between verbal and nonverbal communication and that it is possible to distinguish sharply between linguistic and nonlinguistic features of conversational events is rooted more in our own logical and methodological assumptions than in the psychological realities of face-to-face communication." They suggest that people create meaning from the entirety of the communicative event, including the verbal, paraverbal and body language, rather than adding them up as isolated signs. The verbal modality, therefore, is only one means of human expression used in face-to-face conversation at any given moment.

Knapp and Hall (2006) discuss several ways that nonverbal messages function in conjunction with the verbal ones. Nonverbal behavior substitutes, complements, accents, regulates, and contradicts the spoken message. Substitution of a nonverbal message occurs when we use a nonverbal cue instead of a verbal one as when a language teacher gives the thumbs up signal to a student for using the correct verb tense. A nonverbal message complements the spoken word when it completes or supplements it as is the case when the words, "good job" are accompanied by the teacher's smile in praising students' group work. Accenting occurs when the speaker stresses a specific word in the message. An emphasis on the word, *small* in the sentence, "Please put yourselves into *small* groups for the next language activity," indicates to the learners that less than four or five students per group is indicated. Nonverbal messages also regulate conversational flow as is the case with the teacher who nods her head as a student is speaking to encourage more talk, or the learner who is working in a group and who leans forward and inhales, signaling that he would like his turn to speak. Lastly, nonverbal cues contradict spoken messages when the verbal and nonverbal interpretations of the message are at odds with each other, as exemplified by the language learner

who says, "I love grammar, Dr. Gregersen!" but whose voice makes me believe it is the last thing they would want to be spending their time on.

To exemplify the importance of the nonverbal channel on the correct interpretation of a verbal message, consider the second language learners who complain about their inability to successfully communicate by telephone. Imagine the language learner on the telephone who does not have the benefit of seeing her telephone interlocutor's furrowed brow complementing his words as he verbally exclaims, "Why did you miss our study session!" Nor does she have the opportunity to see her interlocutor accentuate his message by having his index finger pointing outward rhythmically moving to the beat of his words. When the English language learner tries to explain, she cannot see that her interlocutor has raised his two hands in front of his body to regulate the conversation, so she proceeds anyway. In his consternation, the telephone interlocutor substitutes his desired words with head nodding in disagreement. The conversation ends with the young man rolling his eyes, thus contradicting his spoken message which was sarcastically spoken, "Oh, that's just fine." In this short telephone interlude, the nonverbal functions of complementing, accenting, regulating, substituting and contradicting verbal messages were all evidenced, but lost on the English language learner on the other end of the line; she walked away thinking everything was fine.

Gestures

There are four types of gestures important for effective communication: illustrators, regulators, emblems, and affect displays (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Those behaviors that complement or accentuate the verbal message are called *illustrators* (see Figure 1). For most individuals, these are the natural hand and body gestures that accompany speech, such as gesturing, smiling, frowning, or pointing to illustrate a point. These nonverbal cues convey the same meaning as the verbal message, and either complete or supplement it. For an English language learner, these greatly aid in understanding a speaker's message as they supply extra context clues for determining the meaning of an utterance. When asking for directions to a particular location, the speaker will most likely point in the appropriate direction as the verbal message is communicated. For example, Juanita may not know the meaning of "straight down the hall," but close observation of her interlocutor's illustrator gesture would send her in the correct direction.

Body language cues that serve to control turn-taking and other procedural aspects of interpersonal communication are called *regulators* (see Figure 2). As turn-taking is one of the fundamental organizations of conversation and interaction patterns, it plays a key role in the process through which participants interpret each others' meanings and intentions. A practical requisite of every conversation is the determination of who speaks when, and this is usually done unconsciously and quite smoothly because of regulators like the termination of a gesture, changes in gaze direction, or the speakers' looking way from the hearer as an utterance ends (Duncan, 1972, 1974). Turn-taking in conversations is guided by transition signals. The signals that end an L1 English speaker's contribution

Figure 1
Illustrators

Figure 2
Regulators

Figure 3
Emblems

Figure 4
Affect display

might not be recognized by non-native speakers which may result in unwanted interruptions in communication and confusion among language learners, thus affecting their participation in a conversation.

Emblems (see Figure 3) are nonverbal behaviors that can be translated into words and that are used intentionally to transmit a message. Because these gestures can substitute words, their meaning is widely understood within a culture. The meaning of these emblems, however, can be quite different in another country. English language learners must learn the meaning of the emblems just as surely as they learn the new vocabulary of spoken English. The sideways movement of the head by an Australian indicating a negative response would need to be re-learned by the Turkish English language learner who previously believed that that head movement meant *yes*!

Finally, *affect displays* (see Figure 4) are another type of body language necessary for language learners to process. These are behaviors that express emotion. Most commonly, these displays are communicated through facial expression, like smiling, laughing or crying. Posture is also a conduit through which emotion can be communicated. The norms for expressing emotion differ among cultures. Russian students studying in the U.S. often complain that their professors smile too much, and professors teaching Russian students sometimes believe that their Russian students do not enjoy their classes! Miscommunication of emotional states can result when affect displays (or lack thereof) are not understood in cross-cultural interactions.

Tammy S. Gregersen

Facial expression

Facial expressions are also a form of kinesics used to nonverbally transmit messages. According to Knapp and Hall (2006, p. 260),

> The face is rich in communicative potential. It is the primary site for communication of emotional states, it reflects interpersonal attitudes; it provides nonverbal feedback on the comments of others; and some scholars say it is the primary source of information next to human speech. For these reasons, and because of the face's visibility, we pay a great deal of attention to the messages we receive from the faces of others.

The face is a primary means of managing interaction, complementing a response, and replacing speech. Through facial expression, we can open and close channels of communication. For example, in turn-taking, interlocutors will open their mouths in anticipation of their words, signaling readiness (see Figure 5). Smiles and flashes of the brow are used in greetings (see Figure 6), and although the smile is usually perceived in the communication of happiness, it is also associated with signaling attentiveness and involvement in the conversation, similar to the head nod, facilitating and encouraging the interlocutor to continue. The face also complements or qualifies a message. When as a speaker or a listener we want to emphasize, diminish or support the spoken word, a flick of the eyebrow or the lips curling into a smile may temper an otherwise negative message (see Figure 7). In terms of replacing speech, the face can function similarly to the emblem gesture where there is a general understanding of what the display means. The conspiratorial wink of the eye (see Figure 8), the wrinkling of the nose in disgust, or the eyebrows meeting in the middle communicating "what?" (see Figure 9) are all facial displays that replace a spoken word and will usually be interpreted consistently and correctly (Knapp & Hall, 2006).

Although the examples just given may have some cultural variation, Ekman and Friesen (1975) created a list of six emotions that they contend are innate and universal. That is to say, no matter where one travels on the planet, these six emotions will be expressed and interpreted in a consistent way. They include happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise (see Figures 10-15). Research with blind children has demonstrated that the same facial expressions are used to communicate the same emotions as sighted children, thus supporting the notion that these six basic expressions are not learned, but part of an innate

Figure 5
Signals readiness

Figure 6
Smiles and flashes used in greetings

Figure 7
Smiles temper a negative message

Figure 8
Conspiratorial wink

Figure 9
Eyebrows meet to communicate confusion

Figure 10
Happiness

Figure 11
Sadness

Figure 12
Fear

Figure 13
Anger

Figure 14
Disgust

Figure 15
Surprised

Figure 16
Face simulates emotion

Figure 17
Face intensifies emotion

Figure 18
Face neutralizes emotion

communication system (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1972). Initial interest in the communication of emotion through facial expression, its universality and its innateness began with Charles Darwin who in 1872, published his book, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals.* In it, he made a case for his evolutionary ideas, positing that the ability to communicate nonverbally had followed an evolutionary process similar to that of the brain and body in humankind.

What are culture specific, however, are the learned "display rules" that govern when and how emotional displays are considered socially and situationally appropriate. Every culture has different norms that dictate how much emotion can be displayed under certain circumstances. Individuals manage their facial emotions through simulation, intensification, neutralization, de-intensification, and masking (Ekman, 1978). For example, the language learner who *simulates* facial affect (see Figure 16), or shows feelings when he really has none, is seen in David, who is really quite ambivalent about the fieldtrip to the supermarket, but who feigns happiness at the prospect in order to not let his enthusiastic language teacher down. The language learner who *intensifies* (see Figure 17) his facial expression, or wants to appear as having more feelings than he really does, is content with his classmate's oral performance but smiles from ear to ear as he wildly applauds in order to really encourage his friend. The *neutralizer* (see Figure 18), or the individual who demonstrates feeling when in reality nothing is felt, can be seen in Marco who stands stoically stone-faced in front of his teacher not wanting to reveal his surprised, innermost joy at having received an A, because he wants to give the impression that he had expected it all along. *De-intensification* (see Figure 19) of emotion, or giving the appearance of feeling less than what is

Figure 19
Face de-intensifies emotion

Figure 20
Face masks emotion

real, is exemplified by Olga's half smile. She really wanted to leap for joy at having heard she had just won $2,000 as the recipient of the Modern Language Department Graduate Student Award of Excellence. Finally, those individuals who *mask* (see Figure 20) their emotions are those who cover a feeling by expressing another. This display rule is accomplished by Emma who thought that she would win the award, and is actually quite angry, but instead of her face communicating her discontent, she smiles broadly and congratulates her classmate. Although not innate, these display rules are learned early in childhood and are defined differently by individual cultures (Andersen, 1999).

Gaze behavior

"Eyes are the window to the soul." This may be one of the reasons why interlocutors focus so much of their attention on the eyes during interaction. Another reason may lie in the highly expressive nature of the eyes, which send and receive a plethora of message during a face to face conversation. Eye behavior has a higher probability of being noticed than any other bodily movements, so it is a much more prominent interaction signal. Through the use of our eyes, we can control interactions, elicit the attention of others, and show an interest (or lack thereof) in the information being communicated by our interlocutor (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Communications researchers make a distinction between eye contact (or mutual gaze), which occurs when both people involved in a conversation look into each others' eyes and gazing, which occurs anytime when an individual looks at another (Andersen, 1990).

Knapp and Hall (2006) define five functions of gazing: Regulating the flow of conversation, monitoring feedback, reflecting cognitive activity, expressing emotion, and communicating the nature of interpersonal relationship. Like all of the other kinesic behavior already discussed, all of the functions of gazing behavior contextualize the verbal message and aid in understanding the spoken word.

First of all, the flow of conversation is regulated through visual contact in two ways: it indicates that the interlocutors are open to communication, and it manages turn-taking by sending and receiving signals. Individuals who seek visual contact with another are signaling that they want to engage in communication, and those who obviously avoid eye contact are sending the opposite message

(Knapp & Hall, 2006). Most teachers and learners are familiar with the classroom episodes where students who do not want to answer will look everywhere BUT at the teacher, and those who do want to volunteer a response are eagerly trying to catch the teacher's eye.

In terms of turn-taking, listeners look more at their interlocutors than speakers do. One reason for this may be that, by looking away, speakers will improve their concentration on their verbal messages, allowing them to focus on constructing utterances that are more comprehensible. Speakers who do not want to give up their turn considerably reduce eye contact with their listener; whereas, listeners who want the speaker to continue usually seek greater visual connection. When speakers are willing to yield their turns, they usually indicate this by turning their head toward their interactant and increasing eye contact. Listeners requesting a turn will usually move their heads away from the speaker and reduce the visual connection (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Miscues in turn-taking among interactants with differing L1 languages and cultures often results in frustration, with one individual thinking that conversational overlap is rude, and the other believing that there is no interest on the part of his companion to participate in the conversation.

Another function of gaze behavior is monitoring feedback. When speakers gaze in the direction of their listeners, they are seeking visual confirmation that the person is actually listening, as well as try to get feedback on what is being said. In many cultures, listeners who do not make eye contact with their interlocutor will be perceived by their conversation partner as not being attentive (Knapp & Hall, 2006). Language learners who are not familiar with the cultural codes of eye behavior in Western countries and divert their gaze for other reasons dictated by their L1 culture (such as showing respect for authority, for example) may find themselves sending the wrong message both in the classroom and outside that they do not want to participate in a conversation.

Eye contact also signals cognitive activity. When one of the interactants looks away during a conversation, it may be due to complex information processing (Andersen, 1999). There is a shift in attention from the external conversation to internal cognition (Knapp & Hall, 2006). Conjugate Lateral Eye Movements (CLEM) are movements of the eye to the right and left and often accompany cognitive processing. These movements are intensified when individuals must think or reflect, and a question posed to the speaker may cause an involuntary shift (McCroskey & Richmond, 2000).

Expressing emotion is another function of eye behavior. Since individuals have less control over the eyes than other parts of the face, the eyes will more accurately reflect what people are truly feeling (McCroskey & Richmond, 2000). As the eyes are a primary communicator of emotion and are considered as the most genuine expression of feelings, particular attention must be given to the eye behavior of language learners. Consider the language learner whose foreign language anxiety is impeding progress in language acquisition. Gregersen (2005) proposed that the nonverbal behavior of high anxious and low anxious foreign language learners differed and that those learners suffering from foreign language anxiety maintained less eye contact with the teacher.

Lastly, eye behavior communicates the nature of the interpersonal relationship shared by the interlocutors. The status of the individuals participating in the conversation is an important variable. Whether male or female, people of higher status will usually have more eye contact directed at them than vice versa. This may be due to the person of lower status wanting to demonstrate their respect for the higher status person, or it may indicate that the high status person does not feel the need to monitor the feedback of the lower status person as much as the low status person does. Status can be defined by continuums containing categories such as younger/older, teacher/student, boss/subordinate, and parent/child, among others. How much we look at another person may also be an indicator of how much we like them. Another interpersonal indicator dictated by eye behavior considers that people who like each other tend to engage in longer stretches of eye contact than those who do not (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Eye behavior is frequently culture-specific, and therefore what is perceived as appropriate in one culture does not hold true for all of them. For example, eye contact is expected in North American culture and signals trust, self-confidence, respect, and that one is paying attention. In the classroom, teachers expect students to be looking directly at them and maintain their gaze while asking or answering questions. This same behavior is a sign of disrespect in some Asian cultures, and many North American teachers who are unaware of such Asian cultural norms may inadvertently accuse their learners of not paying attention, lacking trustworthiness, or having issues with their self-confidence.

Gesture, facial expression, and gaze behavior all work together with words to create meaning, both in encoding and decoding messages. When activities and interaction in the ESL classroom are devoid of the information that can be derived from kinesic behavior (as evidenced by the increasingly common practice of using audio-taped materials and multimedia software), a reduction in the quality of communication may result (Kellerman, 1992). The following section of this study suggests different techniques that language teachers can use to make the communicative process more authentic by including the visual as well as auditory channels in classroom activities, and also by raising the learners' awareness to the importance of noticing the kinesic behavior of their interlocutors.

Pedagogical Implications

Reasons abound for including visually supported spoken messages in the ESL classroom. As opposed to information communicated through auditory-only channels, kinesic behavior can reduce the ambiguity in spoken language, facilitate communication by increasing the redundancy within the message, and reduce the fatigue experienced by listeners who do not have the benefit of using all the sensory channels (Kellerman, 1992). Communicative competence is limited when learners are deprived of all the authentic input, both visual and auditory, that works in tandem to achieve such competence (Pennycook, 1985). Thus, teachers may want to reconsider the use of materials such as audiocassettes and non-visual multi-media that limit the learners' ability to rely on visual sensory input, and to provide opportunities for learners to increase their awareness of

the appropriate use of nonverbal communication. The end result would be what Pennycook (1985) referred to as being "bi-kinesic," meaning that the body motions of the language learner would be more closely aligned with the target language, and have less interference from the source language. Essentially, we need to be providing activities where verbal and nonverbal behaviors reinforce each other. Among these are the use of video, drama and role play, and interviews. The few ideas given below are among a multitude of others that have been presented in recent literature and are meant to stimulate other classroom teachers to come up with their own.

Video

Through video, context clues are provided that can stimulate prediction and speculation and the activation of background schemata. It also can enhance clarity and give meaning to an auditory text. Butler-Pascoe and Wiburg (2003) describe a variety of exercises that use videos. They suggest that language learners can be shown an opening scene in an adventure movie. The teacher then would ask the students to predict what might happen after it, with the option of showing the next scene with or without sound. Students would then be asked for further predictions. One group would be shown the video without sound and asked to make a prediction about what might be said, while a second group listens only to the sound and tries to ascertain what images might be passing on the screen. Beyond action videos, other movies might show individuals interacting socially, parents and children relating to one another, and scenes containing arguments, all demonstrating that there are many opportunities via video for observing and analyzing social language. Butler-Pascoe and Wiburg (2003) predict that eventually students would be able to make their own productions to demonstrate social interaction, watching them repeatedly and re-taking some scenes if desired in order to analyze the appropriateness and effectiveness of their messages.

Focusing on phatic communication, students in the following exercise will watch native speakers interacting on a short video in order to focus on aspects of nonverbal communication.

Drama

Drama activities like the two that follow provide ESL students with a method for both discovery and discussion. In the first activity, students will develop improvisational skills, learn to listen and react in a spontaneous way, as well as to learn new vocabulary in context. To begin, an individual gets into the middle of a circle of other learners and mimes an action. The whole group supports that individual by mirroring the action. When someone in the circle discovers the name for the action, that individual turns to a neighbor and names it. The person in the middle who mimed the action says the action out loud, giving the cue for another volunteer to step in and quickly begin to mime a new action. The game continues until all have taken a turn in the middle (Culham, 2002).

This next drama activity focuses students' attention on the important role

that nonverbal behavior plays in the encoding and decoding of emotions. In a multi-cultural classroom, it may also aid in the intercultural understanding of affect display rules concerning when, how, and with whom, certain emotions can be expressed. This activity encourages students to observe one another and interact as a group without necessarily putting on an act. As a group they explore how emotion is displayed, how it influences physical interpretation, and they explore the subtle distinctions among words that express emotion. Students are asked to relate to the expression of emotions and body language. To begin, a volunteer writes an emotion on the board then asks the class to add more related emotions to it. By using movement and facial expression, students explore together the full range and levels of intensity of the listed emotions (Culham, 2002).

Interviews

Interviews are an effective way for students to learn about others in the class and the countries from which they come. In the following exercise, learners will become aware that communication in novel situations with a new language can be ambiguous, often times frustrating, and necessitates new ways of conveying meaning. The first step in this interview is to pair up students and instruct them that they are to find out as much as possible about their partners and their countries, but that they are not allowed to speak. Large pieces of paper and magic markers should be made available to the students with the limitation that they are not allowed to write words or numbers. After 20 minutes, students give information about their partners to the rest of the group, checking to see if they gave and received clear messages. Inaccurate information needs to be clarified. An ensuing feedback discussion will highlight to the learners the important role of nonverbal communication, but also demonstrate how ambiguous it can often be (Gaston, 1984).

Conclusion

While only a few of many teaching ideas stimulating nonverbal awareness were presented here, the purpose was to spark the creativity of other language teachers to create and incorporate activities that do not artificially segregate the auditory and visual channels of the communicative process. By using methods and techniques that raise learners' consciousness about the integral role of body language in speaking and listening in a second or foreign language, we have taken the first step in helping them to become not only bilingual, but bi-kinesic as well.

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