

Aspects of Nonverbal Communication

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Nonverbal communication has received much attention in the areas of business presentation, sales and marketing, and the development of social skills. Little attention, however, has been given to its importance in general communication despite major differences in cultural use and interpretation of body language, expression, personal space and other nonverbal tools. It is estimated that less than ten percent of interpersonal communication involves words, the remainder being made up of voice tone, sounds and a variety of devices such as kinetics (movement), haptics (touch), oculusics (eye-contact), proxemics (space) and chronemics (time) as well as posture, sound symbols and silence, which either replace or accompany words. Different studies have identified a wide variety of types of nonverbal communication. The following is a relatively simple classification:

Kinesics	body motions (blushes, shrugs, eye movement, foot-tapping, drumming fingers)
Proxemics	spatial separation (in relation both the social and physical environment)
Haptics	touch
Oculusics	eye contact
Chronemics	use of time, waiting, pausing
Olfactics	smell
Vocalics	tone of voice, timbre, volume, speed
Sound Symbols	grunting, mmm, er, ah, uh-huh, mumbling,
Silence	absence of sound (muteness, stillness, secrecy)
Adornment	clothing, jewellery, hairstyle
Posture	position of the body (characteristic or assumed)
Locomotion	walking, running, staggering, limping
Expression	frowns, grimaces, smirks, smiles, pouting





It is often assumed that nonverbal communication is a transferable skill. However, there are two major problematic factors: firstly that, like speech, it has both form and function, and, secondly, that it is not always directly translatable. It is the first of these factors which makes nonverbal communication difficult to teach, and the second which leads to breakdowns and misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Gestures, expressions and all other forms of nonverbal communication have functions, which, as with language, need to be taught along with their forms. In the same way as language items, some paralinguistic expressions have several functions, while nonverbal communication in general performs the three basic functions of managing identity, defining relationships, and conveying attitudes and feelings (but not ideas):

Form	Main Function (in some cultures)
Nod (Yes)	Repeating
Shrug (I don't know)	Substituting
Scratch head, quizzical look	Complementing
Tone of voice, pointing	Accenting

Hand raised	Regulating, turn taking
Head shake	Contradicting
Eye movements	Deceiving
Staring/Looking down or away	Dominating/Submitting
Raised fist	Aggression
Hand-shake	Socialising
Touching, kissing	Arousal
Over-adornment	Boasting

Misunderstandings occur because the functions of paralinguistic forms vary from culture to culture, although there are some universal nonverbals such as smiles, laughter and sour expressions. There are also differences according to gender and age. Nonverbal communication tends to be relatively ambiguous and open to interpretation while its influence often depends on the nature of the 'listener', particularly when it is unclear whether the messages conveyed are deliberate or unconscious. Nonverbal indicators are most common in polychronic cultures, in which an individual often performs several tasks simultaneously. The following are examples of common gestures which have different functions and meanings in different cultures:

			
Perfect	Thumbs up	Stop	The 'fig'
Commonly – everything's all right perfect France – worthless Japan – money Germany – rude Malta, Greece, Brazil – obscene	Commonly – all OK Australia, Iran – rude Nigeria – very offensive Japan – five Turkey – political rightist party	Commonly – stop, enough (person, car, action) Turkey – You get nothing from me W Africa – You have 5 fathers!	Turkey, Greece, Tunisia, Holland – obscene Russia – you get nothing from me Yugoslavia – you can't have it Brazil – good luck

Nonverbal and verbal communication are normally inseparable, which, for example, is why it may seem so difficult to use the telephone in a foreign language. It needs to be taught and practised situationally, in the right contexts, and with plenty of cultural input and awareness. Given its importance, there is a singular lack of material for the teacher which focuses on this aspect of communication, but here are a few techniques:

- Learners discuss the meaning of gestures and expressions (either demonstrated by the teacher, from pictures, or from existing published materials. This is particularly effective with multilingual classes.
- Learners watch a video clip without sound, then discuss and write the dialogue.
- Learners act out a dialogue using gesture and expression only:
 - A: Excuse me. Can you take a picture of me?
 - B: Yeah, sure.
 - A: Just press that button.
 - B: Er, which one?
 - A: The one on the top.
 - B: OK, right. Er... can you move back a bit.
 - A: Is this OK?
 - B: Fine, now smile. That's it. Very nice.
 - A: Thanks.
 - B: Not at all. You've got a lovely smile. Er... fancy a drink?
 - A: OK, but I've got no money on me.

- o B: That's OK. I'll pay.
- Learners, in pairs, take turns in listening to each other for 30 seconds, using only nonverbal responses.

Nonverbal communication has implications for the teacher as well as the learner. It is often said that one can always recognise a language teacher by their use of gesture in normal conversation, while it is certainly true that a system of gestures has evolved which allows a teacher to perform aspects of classroom management quickly, quietly and efficiently. Gestures for 'work in pairs', 'open your books', 'listen' and 'write' are universal, while individual teachers have developed nonverbal repertoires involving the use of fingers to represent words, expressions to denote approval/disapproval and gestures to indicate time, tense and other linguistic features, and hence systems for instruction, correction and management which well-trained learners respond to immediately. The effective use of nonverbal cues assists in a wide range of classroom practices by adding an extra dimension to the language:

- reducing unnecessary teacher talking time
- increasing learner participation
- confidence building
- reducing fear of silence
- clear instructions
- efficient classroom management
- classroom atmosphere
- improving listening skills
- improving performance in pair and group activities
- self and peer correction
- avoiding misunderstandings
- improving intercultural competence

Teachers, however, should always remember that the meanings of gestures and other nonverbal cues need to be taught in the same way as the meaning of essential classroom language, also that a number of nonverbal techniques already exist in their repertoire, such as the use of cuisenaire rods, colours and charts, adapted from the Silent Way. Make sure that the learners understand your codes, and teach them to use them themselves.

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Web Resources

All of these were online at the time this article was published.

- <http://digilander.libero.it/linguaggiodelcorpo/nonverb/>
- <http://members.aol.com/nonverbal2/diction1.htm>
- <http://psychology.about.com/sitesearch.htm?once=true&terms=nonverbal&SUName=psychology&TopNode=4911>
- <http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Shores/2339/nonverbal.html>
- <http://digilander.libero.it/linguaggiodelcorpo/liaisons/>
- <http://www.percepp.demon.co.uk/pfolpt1.htm>
- <http://members.aol.com/katydidit/bodylang.htm>

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