

Effective Nonverbal Communications and English Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication (NVC) plays a highly important role in different aspects of human life. Regarding teachers, however, it is more important, and they should be very cautious about what type of NVC they use and how they perform it in their teaching process. While practical tangible teaching techniques driven from nonverbal behaviors can help English language teachers incorporate this essential element into their classrooms, little attention has been given to this area. This article tries to shed light on the often neglected, unexplored area of research concerning nonverbal communication. It begins by mentioning the indispensable role of NVC in the communicative process and then explaining different forms and functions of these NVCs, attempt has been made to incorporate those NVCs into language classes and give some practical techniques to be considered in the classrooms, in order for the learners to be as Pennycook (1985) puts it "not only bilingual but also bi- kinesics".

Keywords: Nonverbal Communication (NVC), Nonverbal Behavior (NVB), Kinesics

1. Introduction

Communication which is used in everyday life is an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that enables human to share knowledge, ideas, thoughts, information, feelings, emotions, and attitudes (Negi, 2009). Communication takes place through two different media: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication is a conversation between two or more individuals in which

they use speech organs to convey the messages while nonverbal communication is the process of communication among individuals through wordless messages (Abushihab, 2012).

2. Background

Nonverbal communication, according to Devito & Hecht (1990), is "all of the messages other than words that people

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exchange" (p.4). Gregersen (2007) elaborates on the definition in this way: By using "messages" the author means intentional symbols, so if a language learner stretches his arm to relieve himself of a muscle cramp, this action is not considered as NVC. The second element of this definition is "other than words messages" which means nonlinguistic codes like body language, facial expressions, physical appearance, etc. are used to communicate meaning. Finally, this definition limits NVC to what involves an exchange between people and thus eliminating any messages transmitted between animals or intrapersonal communication that is when one talks to himself.

3. Functions of NVC

Knapp and Hall (2006) discuss several ways in which NVBs occur simultaneously with verbal messages. *Substitution* of a nonverbal message happens when a nonverbal cue is used instead of a verbal one, like showing your hand with the palm up as a sign of invitation to talk in the class. Actually when we replace verbal communication with nonverbal behaviors, we use nonverbal behaviors because they are easily recognized by others such as a wave, or a head-nod. That is why when someone is asked a question, instead of a verbal reply "yes" and a head-nod, most probably he prefers to simply nod his head without the accompanying verbal message. There are times when non-verbal language is even better. Sometimes there are things that are best left unsaid and only shown nonverbally. *Complements* are the NVBs that complete or modify a verbal behavior, like when a teacher's right posture in the class enhances the quality of teaching. Unlike replacing nonverbal communication, complements cannot be used alone without the verbal message. If, for example, a friend tells you that he has recently received a promotion and at the same time become a

father, you can show your enthusiasm in a number of verbal and nonverbal ways. If you say, "Wow, that's great! I'm really happy for you!" while at the same time smiling and hugging your friend, you are actually using nonverbal communication to complement what you are saying. If you simply smiled and hugged your friend without saying anything, the interpretation of that nonverbal communication would be more ambiguous than using it to complement your verbal message. Another function is *accenting* which is calling attention to a key part of the message. When you put an accent on it, you create emphasis, making

the item stand out by amplifying it. It occurs when the speaker stresses a certain word in his message; for example, when a person says "there is a trivial problem here." and emphasizes on trivial through gesture. In this example, it is also his tone of voice (paralanguage) that serves as the nonverbal communication and accents the message. Parents might tell their children to "come here." If they point to the spot in front of them dramatically, they are accenting the "here" part of the verbal message. NVCs may also *regulate* conversational flows, like when a teacher nods to show that the student is giving a correct answer and frowns when he is not. The regulatory function as Capper (2003) puts it also serves to provide vital cues for the learners' interpretation of speech acts and considerably enhances conversation (cited in Negi, 2009). To clarify the regulatory function of NVC, we can focus on the fact that generally it is pretty easy for us to enter, maintain, and exit our nonverbal interactions with others. Rarely, if ever, would we approach a person and tell him directly, "I'm going to start a conversation with you now. Okay, let's begin." Instead, we might make eye contact and smile, move closer to the person, or put our hand on his shoulder which are all nonverbal

behaviors that indicate our desire to open a new channel of conversation. Likewise, we do not generally end conversations by stating, "Okay then. Let's finish talking." unless there is a breakdown in the communication process. We are generally proficient enough enacting nonverbal communication in order to maintain our politeness; such as looking at our watch, looking in the direction we wish to go, or fidgeting while listening to the conversation. However, sometimes there is a breakdown in the nonverbal regulation of conversation, so we may have to say something like, "I really need to leave now." Though the interlocutor also is usually cautious enough to get what we mean by these NVBs, we have seen examples where someone does not seem to pick up on the nonverbal cues about ending a phone conversation. This inability on the part of the person makes others literally resort to saying, "Okay, I'm hanging up the phone right now" followed by actually hanging up the phone. In these instances, there was a breakdown in the use of nonverbal communication to regulate conversation. Finally, nonverbal cues may *contradict* verbal messages when a speaker uses irony; like when a teacher raising his eyebrow and nodding, calls his students "gifted, talented, and studious" as he finds them unprepared for the lesson. Another crystallization of contradiction in NVC is when you say something but you mean the opposite. Imagine when your teacher asks you how you are enjoying a new assignment. You may feel obligated to respond positively because it is your teacher asking the question, even though you may not truly feel this way. However, your nonverbal communication may contradict your verbal message, indicating to your teacher that you really do not enjoy the new assignment. In this example, your nonverbal communication contradicts your verbal message and sends a mixed message

to your teacher. It is clear that when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict one another, receivers often place greater value on the nonverbal communication as the more accurate message. One place this occurs frequently is in greeting sequences. You might say to your friend in passing, "How are you?" he might say, "Fine" but have a sad tone to her voice. In this case, the tone of voice helps you interpret how he actually feels rather than the verbal response.

4. Forms of NVCs

4.1. Eye Contact (*Oculusics*)

Eye contact or gaze behavior plays a powerful and complex role in face-to-face conversation. Despite the apparent importance of NVC in L2, little attention has been given to the effect of visual cues (Mc Caffery, 2002). Eye movement and eye contact depict the focus, direction and duration of gaze in relation to other participants (Khan, 2000); for example, our eyes narrow for concentration and pupils dilate if we are excited (Negi, 2009).

According to Novik et al (1996), people may look at one another to monitor listener acceptance and understanding, to signal attention and interest, and to coordinate turn-taking. However, Knapp and Hall (2006) define more functions for gazing. First, it *regulates the flow of conversation* in two ways: it indicates that the interlocutors are open to communication, and it manages turn-taking by sending and receiving signals (cited in Gregersen, 2007). The interlocutors who are open to communication try to look directly in the eyes and are eager to have eye contact. Conversely those who are not interested in communication, considerably reduce their eye contacts. Considering turn-taking, interlocutors who want to continue speaking do not look away very often. They sometimes look away to focus on the message they are conveying. On the other

hand, those who do not want to lose their turn or are concerned about other people's turns; frequently look away to show that the speaker's time is up. Beattie (1990) found that gaze's role in turn-taking is context-specific: when the overall level of gaze is low, as in conversations between strangers or when the discussion topic imposes a high cognitive load on the conversant, gaze plays a more significant role.

The second function is *monitoring feedback*. When a speaker looks at the listeners in the eyes, he seeks feedback. Nodding shows that the listeners are attentive. If a listener looks away and gazes in the other direction, this can be considered rude in many cultures. Usually, if a person faces such a situation, he will go on talking to another person, if any, among the audiences.

Gaze behavior also *expresses emotions*. Eyes as the most genuine expression of feelings, reveals one's emotion very clearly. Perhaps that is why a liar avoids eye contact. Sometimes having eye contact acts like a barrier for understanding especially when the interlocutor is anxious (Gregerson, 2005).

Another function is *cognitive activity*. When a question is posed to one of the interlocutors, he may change eye direction and start a process of internal cognition. This gaze shift is often unintentional.

Communicating the nature of interpersonal relationship is the last function of eye contact. Generally speaking, those who have higher status have more eye contact directed to them; maybe because they don't need to monitor the feedback of the lower status person as much as the low status person does (Gregerson, 2007). 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 & Mc Croskey, 2000).

4.2. Gesture

Hand gestures which are a form of kinesics represent an interactive element during communication. The majority (90%) are produced along with utterances and are linked semantically, prosodically (Mc Neil, 1992) and pragmatically (Kelly, Barr, Church & Lynch, 1999). According to Ekman & Friesen (1969; cited in Gregersen, 2007) there are four types of gestures important for effective communication. *Illustrators* are gestures synchronized with speech and rendered right before or simultaneously with a lexical item for conveying the same meaning. They facilitate negotiation of meaning when the intelligibility of the speech is reduced, as in noisy conditions (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005).

Another type of gestures are *regulators* that just like eye movement, control turn-taking and other aspects of interpersonal communication. Regulators are of great help in order for the termination of speech and turn-taking to occur really smoothly and unconsciously.

The third type of gestures are *emblems*. These nonverbal behaviors are used quite intentionally by the speakers and they are meaningful. They can either substitute a meaning or accompanied by it, like making a round shape with forefinger and thumb to show success.

Finally *affect displays* as the last type of gesture should be learned. They reveal one's feelings and express emotions most of the times accompanied by laughing or crying, like when you widen your arms to show joy and happiness.

4.3. Facial Expressions

Facial expressions as another form of kinesics reveal the attitudes of a speaker. That is why L2 learners look more at the faces of their interlocutors to use visual information to facilitate comprehension. Lip movements are the primary, though

perhaps not the sole source of facial cues to speech (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005). When the interlocutors open their mouth, it signals readiness to talk. Smiling is used in greeting and renders happiness; however, it sometimes means attentiveness and involvement in the conversation. Flashes of the eyebrows shows happiness in greeting but when the eyebrows meet in the middle, it is the sign of dissatisfaction or not understanding something. Wrinkling of the nose shows you are disgusted but when used as an emblem, it is a funny activity. Individuals manage their facial emotions through simulation, intensification, neutralization, deintensification, and masking (Ekman, 1978; cited in Gregersen, 2007).

A person may *simulate* facial affect when he has none, in order to show for example satisfaction he tries to wear a smile and have flashing eyebrows. A person who intensifies his facial expressions, want to appear as having more feelings than he really does. *Deintensification* is just the reverse and shows the feelings less than real. *Neutralization* occurs when one demonstrates feeling when in reality nothing is felt. At last, those who cover their feelings with another, actually *mask* their emotions. For instance, when a person is angry with his friend because of breaking something, but pretends that he is not.

4.4. Proxemics

Proxemics, what Menninen & Kujanpaa (2002, p.3) call "spatial behavior" is the physical distance we place between ourselves and others (Helmer & Eddy, 2003, p.43). Physical proximity or proxemics is a meaningful communicative category. Every one concerns about his body bubble, the distance he is relaxed when he has with other people. That is, if a person starts getting closer to him maybe in order to be understood, he feels as if that person is invading his territory.

People have certain patterns for delimiting the distance when they interact, and this distance varies according to the nature of the social interaction. In an attempt to identify and classify the distance people use, Hall (1959) identifies four types of distances which he believes can vary according to cultural, personality and environmental factors.

Intimate distance ranges from body contact to approximately eighteen inches (just less than half a meter). According to Hall (1956), the close phase (up to six inches) includes intimate activities which require extensive contact of the bodies while the far phase (from six to 18 inches) does not allow for much, if any, body contact.

Personal distance ranges from 1.5 to four feet between people. Hall identifies a close and a far phase. The close phase (1.5 to 2.5 feet) permits one person to touch another, while the far phase of personal distance (2.5 to four feet) "an arm's length" does not permit this.

Social distance (four to 12 feet) is the casual interaction-distance between acquaintances and strangers. This much distance is common in business meetings, classrooms, and impersonal social affairs. Its close phase (four to seven feet) is the characteristic of informal interaction, while more formal interaction requires the far phase (seven to 12 feet). Some physical barriers such as desks, tables, and counters, usually make people keep this distance. Hall mentions that this type of proxemic behavior is culturally conditioned and arbitrary.

Public distance ranges from 12 to 25 feet or more. Its close phase (12 to 15 feet) provides the amount of space generally desired among strangers, while its far phase (15 to 25 feet) is necessary for large audiences. In this case, speech must be projected or amplified to be heard.

4.5. Haptics

Haptics is the use of touch as a form of communication indicating degrees and patterns of intimacy like a reassuring pat on the back. Since use of haptics can be either threatening or persuasive, teachers should have competence using it.

Other than that, *haptic* in another context refers to systematic hand movement across the visual field accompanying speech that typically terminates in a touch of some kind, like one hand touching the other. That touch occurs simultaneously with the articulation of a stressed syllable of a word, focal stress of a phrase, or a prominent word in discourse (Acton 2010; 2012). For instance, the essential, haptic-integrated English pronunciation (EHIEP) framework (Acton, 2012) ordered sets of procedures that train learners in haptic-based techniques for classroom instruction. Haptic-integrated clinical pronunciation is also a different way to learn pronunciation, based in part on the notion of training the body first. It is also based on research in the use of movement and touch in learning and training. Used relatively by untrained teachers but appropriate for all teachers (and learners) of all levels, it focuses on pronunciation used in conversation Acton, (2015).

4.6. Vocalics

Since it is not related to the content or verbal messages, the concept of vocalics is called as a part of non-verbal communication. However, it is associated with other attributes of speaking Vocalics which include the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers. All these aspects are collectively known as prosody. Trager (1960) developed a classification system to study the vocal cues, which consists of the voice set, voice qualities, and vocalization.

Voice Set is the context in which the speaker is speaking. The factors that influence this context are taken into account, which include elements like the situation, gender, mood, age, or even a person's cultural background.

Voice Qualities is defined by factors like volume, pitch, tempo, rhythm, articulation, resonance, nasality, and accent. Finally, the *voice qualifier* refers to the style of delivering a message. Vocal segregates are like fillers or short sounds, which notify the speaker that a person is listening.

As mentioned, kinesics looks at facial expressions, bodily posture, etc; oculusics signals the behavior of the eyes or the uses and variation of eye contact and gazing; proxemics is the physical distance we place between ourselves and others; haptics is the use of touch as a form of communication indicating degrees and patterns of intimacy; vocalics or paralanguage is the study of nonverbal attributes or vocal cues. Other forms of NVCs are these: *Physical appearance* refers to the attributes of image such as attractiveness, height, weight, dress, etc. *Olfactics* looks at communication through smell. *Chronamics* is the study of the meaning, usages and communication of time and punctuality. Finally, *environmental factors* refer to environmental setting like pollution, temperature, etc. Now talking about nonverbal behaviors, the author wants to give practical techniques of using NVBs and incorporate them into classrooms.

5. Incorporating NVC into ELT

- Gestures that are regulators greatly aid in understanding a speaker's message as they supply extra clues for determining the meaning of an utterance.
- Use gestures to reinforce and support your words. Lively and animated teachers capture student's attention and arouse their interest.

- Emblems as gestures can be used by good teachers in order to encourage the gifted students through clapping, for instance.
- A good teacher makes students aware of emblems in the target language at least the ones that are culture-bound in order for the students not to make a misunderstanding occur.
- Try to encourage students by nodding. Frowning at the students when the answer is wrong makes them embarrassed.
- Invite language learners to talk with your hand palm up. Do not point at them since it is often insulting.
- Use of substitutional nonverbal messages can be energy-saving and sometimes time-saving for teachers. For example, they can use gestures to tell their students to come to the front of the class.
- Close observation of the interlocutors' illustrative gestures would be of great help since they may not understand what the teacher says, but they sure get what he does (This is actually making use of complement function of NVBs).
- You can get volunteers' responses through their body language. Those who do want to be volunteer are eagerly trying to catch the teacher's eyes and sometimes even lean forward to indicate readiness.
- A liar or anxious student avoids eye contact or maintains less eye contact with the teacher (Gregersen, 2005).
- Some teachers tend to look away when a difficult topic is being discussed in order not to be asked. Try not to be among those teachers.
- Remove the learners' stress through using haptics as another form of NVB. For instance in the exam session a reassuring pat on the learner's back can relax him and help him recall what he learned.
- Hand gestures as a part of kinesics are very important. They help you in conveying feeling as well as meaning. Wide gesture is not appropriate for the class.
- Repeated movements like tapping a pen on the desk or leg movements are not acceptable. That is the sign of nervousness.
- Fidgeting in the chair should be as little as possible.
- Sometimes you need to use paralanguage to wake learners up through snapping your fingers or change voice qualities like your speech tone when you understand they do not listen to you.
- Teachers' movement in the class makes learners active and prevents them from fatigue and sleepiness unless the movement continues hurriedly and nervously. Move around the classroom to increase interaction with your students. Besides, the way in which a teacher stands, moves around the classroom, and uses gestures to accompany verbal messages can show authority.
- Being closer to students allows teachers to make better eye contact and increases the opportunities for students to speak.
- At times smile at the students. If you smile regularly you will be perceived more likable, friendly, warm and approachable. Besides, smiling is often contagious and students will react favorably and learn more.
- A learner with an open mouth while leaning forward signals either readiness to talk or asking about something that is still ambiguous to him.
- A good teacher should be able to differentiate between the facial expressions of those who simulate facial affect and those who really have such a feeling so that the teacher will get whether the learner really gets the meaning of what he is reading or not.
- Through the students' body language you can get whether they understood the lesson or not. Those who look directly at you and seek great visual connection (Richmond & Mc Craskey, 2000) after the lesson explanation is finished, seem to have understood the lesson. However those who avoid direct eye contact seem not to have

got it. So if two thirds of the learners avoid eye contact you need to teach it again.

- Do not stand as stiff as a poker in the class. Have relaxed posture. Slump posture is a sign of either low self- confidence or lack of knowledge while stiff posture is a sign of pride and feeling superior.

- Avoid speaking with your back turned or looking at the floor or ceiling. This will make you look disinterested.

Avoid defensive postures, like arm or leg-crossing.

- Ask learners for feedback. If they nod and smile at you or nod with their eyebrows meeting in the middle, as an illustrator gesture, it means most probably they are getting what you say. However, frowning at you without taking notes and remaining nonplused reveals they have not got you.

- Eye Contact helps regulate the flow of communication and can establish relationship between the parties. Blinking, staring and looking can indicate whether one is bored, interested or hostile.

- Try to have eye contact with all of the individuals. Look at them directly into the eyes then look away and glance at the other one. But do not stare at them coldly.

- As teachers be ware not to reveal your moods especially the negative ones through your facial expressions. If you have headache or are tired, for instance, it should not be revealed from your face; otherwise, soon it is going to be rendered to the students.

- Oculistics is highly important. Maintain eye contact to open the flow of communication and convey interest, concern, warmth and credibility, but do not usually look at some specific language learners just because they are active or gifted.

- Concerning proxemics, the distance between you and your students falls into the category of social distance while teaching which may differ in some specific situations, like when the student needs condolence.

- Beware of the language learners who de-intensify their emotions. This way they can hide their feelings. Thus, it is hard to get how much they understood what you said.

- Give special attention to chronemics. Punctual teachers tend to have punctual students. Being on time prevents learners from distraction.

- You can manage turn-taking in a discussion by looking away from the one who is talking and giving a signal to another. In this way the chance to speak in the class is distributed evenly.

- Using vocalics help you in attracting the students' attention. For instance, the verbal aspect of "hello" is the actual word "hello". The vocal aspect is the sound of the word when it is uttered which includes the inflection of the voice, pitch, loudness, etc. (Birjandi & Nushi, 2010). So, when you say "hello" to the inattentive language learner loudly and with a specific pitch and tone, you have used the paralinguistic feature of NVC.

- Vocal segregates as fillers made by the teacher when a student is speaking can be a good feedback in order for the learner to understand he does have the teacher's attention.

6. Conclusion

Though major differences in the interpretation of nonverbal features can make NVC as one of the most difficult areas of language for second/foreign language learners (Stam, 2006; Yoshika & Kellerman, 2006), it has not yet received the attention it deserves in language teaching (Mc Caffery & Stam, 2008). While a few of many practical teaching techniques were presented here to arise the interlocutors' conscious use of NVBs, the purpose was to stimulate the teachers' creativity in incorporation of body language to second/foreign language classes. In this way nonverbal behavior along with verbal behavior can be a great aid for teachers in

order to not only receive but also send the accurate messages to language efficiently.

7. References

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