

Body Language as Pedagogical Tool and Teaching Material

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Body language as pedagogical tool and teaching material

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Body language is inherently in all of us as a way to communicate messages to others. Whether it be a nod to say that one agrees or a shake of the head to signify “no,” (although not totally universal) body language is naturally a part of us by cultural milieu or by a simple human need to clarify the message being addressed. The following three situations take body language into consideration. While reading, think of how the situations could have been avoided or by contrast how they helped the person struggling in a foreign environment where the L2 was omnipresent.

Situation 1

My mother was almost late to my wedding in France two years ago because of a pronunciation problem at the French SNCF station in Paris. She told the ticket man that she wanted to arrive in Angers at 12:00 p.m, and said, in her American accented fractured French, “deuze heures s`il vous plait”. The man inevitably thought she meant “deux heures”, or 2:00 p.m and issued a ticket for that time since the correct way to say 12:00 p.m is “midi” in French. My mother, not paying attention to the time indicated on her ticket, smiled, said “merci” and “au revoir” content and satisfied that she was able to get what she wanted. It was only moments later that she realized that she had been issued the wrong time.

Situation 2

In February, my husband and I visited China for a two-week holiday. We were hungry so we went to a street vendor selling some local cuisine. My husband, being French, held out his thumb and index finger indicating that we wanted two of what the vendor was selling. The vendor’s eyes suddenly widened with misunderstanding and shock and repeated the hand gesture to clarify our order. His facial expression combined with the gesture signaled to me that an error had occurred. Quickly, I raised my index finger and my middle finger in a “V” shape to signal that we did indeed only want to order two. He smiled with relief and handed us two of his specialties.

Situation 3

I will soon be celebrating my 1-year anniversary in Japan. Since my arrival I have learned some Japanese and attempted to ameliorate my language skills by watching local television programs. I have tried to watch dramas, the news and the different variety shows with little success of grasping the meaning of the program. It seems that once I think I understand what the show is about, they talk about an abstract topic, a convoluted story line, or segue to another theme leaving me confused, frustrated and eager to change the channel. Cooking programs, on the other hand, are truly enjoyable to watch; I am able to guess the meaning of each program thanks to the articulate spoken language AND its corresponding images.

Each of the above situations addresses an issue in second language learning: pronunciation problems, socio-cultural misunderstandings, and vocabulary / comprehension problems. If body language had been employed in the first situation, perhaps my mother would have obtained the correct time on her train ticket. That is, she could have simply held up both hands indicating 10 and then two fingers to illustrate the desired 12:00 p.m. Likewise, a simple “ghost drawing” where she imagines she has paper and pencil and “draws” a 12 in the air could have facilitated her message to the ticket salesman. The problem was that my mother relied solely on her fractured French to relay her message. Had she reinforced her message with body language, she might have been understood.

Situation two discussed the issue of cultural misunderstandings of body language. In France, a thumb and index finger signify the number two. For my husband this is natural, a part of him. In China, however, the same gesture means eight (Storey 81)! No wonder why the vendor’s eyes widened with shock. He thought we were really hungry. Had my husband learned basic Chinese gestures, like counting, before visiting China, perhaps the misunderstanding could have been avoided.

Situation three discussed a very important issue in second language learning, comprehension skills. The reason for which I enjoy cooking shows so much is that I am able to listen to the language and see the corresponding image / action at the same time. In other words, if the cook says to cut an eggplant and I see him cutting what he called “nasu”, I instantly know that “nasu” equals eggplant. In short, demonstrative body language aids comprehension and vocabulary acquisition in the L2.

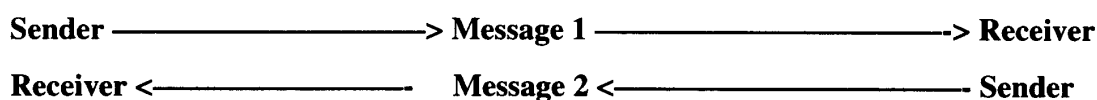
The question is then posed to the foreign language classroom. Don’t students have

similar problems in the L2 environment? Aren't they too faced with pronunciation problems, socio-cultural misunderstandings, and comprehension problems? Can't we, as language teachers, aid their global understanding of the foreign language by introducing them to necessary cultural body language and communication skills to survive in the more popular globalized shrinking world where international communication is a must? Mustn't we integrate these interrelated skills into a language program?

These problems are not only natural but also present in every L2 classroom.

The communication process and Rationale for body language in the L2 Classroom

The notion of communication contains three indispensable aspects: the sender, the message and the receiver.

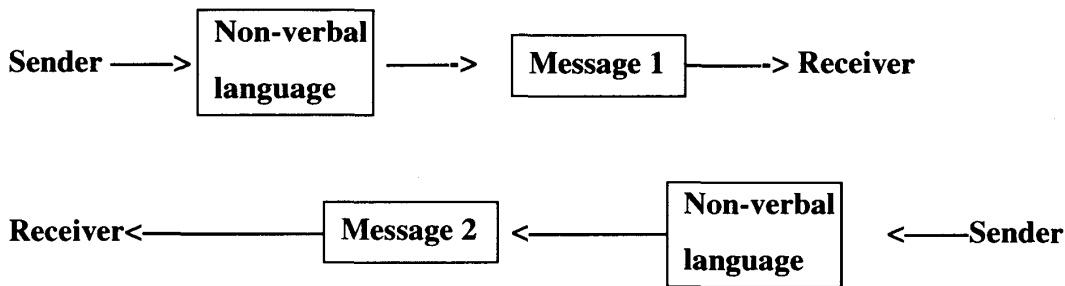


(Chiss 48-49)

If the goal of each student is to communicate well, it is therefore necessary for the sender to transmit a comprehensible message to the receiver and vice-versa to have a meaningful conversation. When one uses the same code (language) to send a message, the transmission is inevitably easier, and automatic for both sender and receiver. However, in the case of a foreigner and a native speaker, the code can be a potential problem, even catastrophic at times. Take the example of my mother (situation 1), she used a code different than her own and pronounced the language in her American accent; consequently, her message was poorly received by her interlocutor (the ticket salesman) which produced a response that was not correct (a ticket for 2:00p.m and not 12:00 p.m). The result of situation 1 was simply a non-comprehensible message due to the issue of pronunciation.

Indeed, the code and the message play an essential role in the communication process. Since it is a question of language, the sender must pay attention to the manner in which she transmits her message or find ways to enhance and render her message more comprehensible. Krashen suggests that “the presence...of extralinguistic factors that can aid the learner grasping the meaning of the strange sounds of the new language (in the) language environment may provide this type of support when it includes concrete referents-subjects and events that can be seen, heard, or felt while the language is being used” (26). Using non-verbal language in combination with the

code (language) is one way that can help illustrate one's message (see chart below).



As in situation 3 with the television programs, the sender's (the cook) message (cutting eggplant) was rendered more comprehensible by the combination of his non-verbal language and his verbal language. That is, his gestures helped convey the message he wanted to send to his viewers.

Rationale for Body Language in the L2 classroom

Language is embedded in gesture. Imagine telling a joke without smiling or having the tiniest smirk of enjoyment. Imagine telling your daughter that the household pet just died without having a facial expression of regret or using a softer, more compassionate tone of voice. Imagine greeting someone without shaking a hand, bowing, or giving a kiss on the cheek. In every culture, language and gesture go hand in hand. But, gesture can occur alone, as one sees with the deaf and their mode of communication-sign language. This absence of verbalized speech is replaced with a highly developed system of gestures. Why not present our L2 students with some basic L2 "sign language" or a set of "survival gestures" in the event our students simply lack the necessary language skills to convey their desired message? Even our ancestors used gestures to communicate with one another:

Bollinger affirms, "gesture is the mode of communication that human beings have in common with the higher apes. One important theory has it that articulate language developed through its earliest stages in gestural-largely visible-form and only later was transferred to speech. Even today, children acquire language in the midst of a large amount of non-verbal communication. Gesturing and talking emerge at the same time. *Bye-bye*, one of the first words learned by most infants in (American) culture, is almost always accompanied by a wave of the hand"(18).

If language and gesture are learned at the same time, it would only be natural to encourage our students of foreign language to do the same. Like an infant, second language learners struggle with pronunciation, the structure, semantics and the cultural innuendos of the language being learned.

Providing our students with a “survival pack” of tools, like gestures, may help them to be understood in countries speaking the target language, especially when the command of the language’s syntax and grammar may be limited.

Body language in the L2 classroom

It is the responsibility of the teacher to create a suitable learning environment for her students. Everything the students see and hear is of paramount importance to their acquisition of the L2. For this reason, the teacher must use as many pedagogical supports as possible so as to make the message clear and comprehensible to students. Non-verbal language such as gestures is a very useful pedagogical tool in the L2 classroom. First and foremost, it allows the language teacher to conduct her entire lesson in the L2 which will provide “real-life” language input, a necessary component in teaching communicative competence today. By using non-verbal language, the L2 teacher is able to communicate and convey the verbalized message more clearly aiding students, of all levels, comprehension. Below is an example of a recent conversation I had in Japan with an EFL student using both non-verbal and verbal language.

Teacher: “Makiko, what did you do yesterday?”

Student: (hesitant)

Teacher: “Makiko, what did you do yesterday?”

(Teacher raises arm and hand behind the shoulder in a backward motion to indicate the idea of past)

Student: “yesterday?”

Teacher: “Yes, yesterday. “ (Motioning again behind the shoulder with arm and hand)

Student: “ I went shopping.”

Teacher: “Where did you go shopping?”

Student: “uh, Toys R Us”

Teacher: “Did you drive there?” (First pointing at student “you” and then showing two hands on a steering wheel to indicate driving)

Student: “uh...I walked”

With the help of body language the teacher was able to have a two-way conversation with this beginner-level student. There was neither a need for dictionaries nor for direct translation. The student was able to communicate entirely in the target language because the teacher confirmed the

student's guesses with body language.

Rightly, guessing is an extremely important language strategy that enables students once again to learn how to rely on themselves during target language communication. H. Douglas Brown states in his Teaching by Principles that good language learners “use their intuition” and “go with their hunches” when engaged in the language learning process (201). This is a good strategy for it prepares students for real-life encounters with the outside world where native speakers will talk at a normal speed and will use unmodified, natural language. More often than not, students “try to process language in a word-for-word fashion, drawing only on one kind of background knowledge—their imperfect knowledge of the target language code. If such students can be encouraged to use other cues to meanings, the process of understanding should be facilitated” (Omaggio 133). Other cues such as facial expression, gestures, proximity, and voice inflection can give the student an additional indication of the message being sent aiding overall comprehension.

Furthermore, gestures can enhance and aid vocabulary and listening comprehension activities in the L2 classroom. As in situation 3 with the cooking show, I was able to understand that “nasu” meant eggplant when the cook pointed at it and said “nasu”. In the classroom, this type of task is essential to vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Unfortunately, we may not have eggplants just lying around at our disposal. It is, therefore, our responsibility as teachers to be creative and use as many resources as possible, including ourselves! For instance, states of the body like cold, hot, tired, hungry, thirsty can be easily reproduced by gesture either with an accompaniment of verbalized speech or without. Accompanying the gesture with verbalized speech provides for a natural link of listening comprehension and vocabulary, undoubtedly a meaningful exercise for beginning learners able to make connections.

In short, any teacher who is motivated can use his or her body to reproduce meanings and refrain from using direct translation and the use of dictionaries to convey meanings. This encourages students to guess while listening and learning vocabulary, a natural method to learning real-life language.

Gestures and Body Language as Teaching Material

Gesture and body language can be incorporated into any language conversation class whose focus is communicating meaningful messages. In this section, I propose different activities for aiding the transmission and reception of messages through the combination of verbalized speech AND non-verbal cues in the three following areas: phonetics, vocabulary, and cross-cultural

communication.

For many students of second languages, pronunciation can pose several problems, especially for speaking and listening. Often times students attempt to pronounce a word and their native interlocutors simply do not understand their message, as was true in situation 1. This is usually due to phonetic sounds existing in the L2 but that do not exist in the L1. In the case of my mother, it was a question of reproducing the [y] and [u] in French, two sounds that are particularly difficult for American speakers. Similarly, my Japanese students of English have difficulty pronouncing the [l] and [r] sounds which are indistinguishable in Japanese. That is why my students are always writing my name with Risa instead of the correct Lisa; they simply do not have the contrast which makes the difference [l] and [r] obvious for a native speaker of English. What should we do to help our students overcome such phonetic problems? I propose the following activity.

Phonetic Activity:

Objective: To practice conveying meanings with difficult contrast sounds by using Gestures.

1. Teacher reads a list of sound contrasts (i.e / l, r/) to the class and students must circle the correct word (i.e lip/rip, alive/arrive, long, wrong). Check together as a class.
2. In pairs, students repeat the exercise. This time partner 1 reads and chooses which sound contrast will be correct and partner 2 must differentiate and circle the correct one. Repeat and switch roles.
3. Change partners. Partner 1 reads and gestures a list of sentences containing the contrast sounds to partner 2. Partner 2 has a set of picture cards containing a key contrast word from the list of sentences. Once partner 2 understands partner 1's message, she gives her partner the correct picture card. Repeat and switch roles.

Example of partner 1's list of sentences and possible gestures:

- * Look at the grass! Look at the glass! (May pretend to hold a glass)
- * Let go of my list! Let go of my wrist! (Points at wrist)
- * He dialed a long number. He dialed a wrong number. (May point thumb down)

This is a fun game and useful activity for real-life language practice. It gets students thinking about the reality of their particular language difficulties and emphasizes the idea of using extralinguistic support, mainly gestures to express themselves to native speakers.

Many students often complain that they do not have sufficient vocabulary to express themselves in the L2. I tell them that there are many ways to stretch their already learned vocabulary. One such way is using the language strategy of circumlocution, or trying to describe something when one simply does not know the correct word, and gesture together. A great game to use to practice this strategy is called password.

Vocabulary Activity: Password

Objective: To use circumlocution and gestures to describe vocabulary words.

1. Before starting the game, teach students helpful phrases like “it looks like this” “it’s a thing that ...” “it’s like this...” etc.
2. Divide students into groups of four. Each group gets a set of cards containing words on them.
3. One member of the group draws a card and must describe the word on the card using both verbal and non-verbal cues. Once the group guesses the word, they shout out “password” and are awarded a point. The team with the most points wins.

Example of password:

If the word on the card is “banana” the student might say, “it’s a fruit, it’s long (gestures shape with hands) and it’s yellow.” She might also want to gesture the action of peeling the fruit to add another clue for students. Now you try it. How would you describe the word “lemon?”

Students tend to really like this game for it is competitive, fun, and dynamic. It allows them to practice the very important skill of circumlocution with the aid of gestures. Again, this gives the students another opportunity to familiarize themselves with the idea of combining verbalized speech with non-verbal cues. For more ideas to help students reinforce their messages, I recommend looking at the first 30 pages of the text Speaking of Speech and Teaching Techniques for Communicative English pp.17-26.

Like poor pronunciation and a limited vocabulary, little knowledge of cultural body language can cause misunderstandings in the L2 environment. For this reason, I first suggest that the L2 teacher hold a primary role in the presentation and familiarization of cultural gestures. She can help prevent these misunderstandings by utilizing gestures in class everyday to convey messages and reinforce meanings. Ideally being native, the L2 conversation teacher unconsciously imports her own cultural gestures. The idea here is that the more frequently the students witness these L2 gestures, the more likely they will be able to associate them with the L2 and eventually

produce them. That is, they will be able to separate the L1 and the L2 as two different language systems and connect the idea that the L2 also contains its own set of gestures.

Cultural gestures activity

This idea is more formal and conventional.

1. In this particular activity, students are given a piece of paper with photographs of different people from the target language culture illustrating several cultural gestures.
2. They then receive a list of their meanings. The students must match the meaning with its corresponding gesture.
3. Afterwards, the students are asked to think about their own culture and make comparisons and talk in groups of 3 or 4.
4. Finally the students engage in a role-play based on the cultural theme and try to incorporate the gestures in their role-plays.

This is only one idea. There are unlimited ways to teach culture and its gestures. I encourage those who are interested to refer to Lies Sercu's article, "In-service teacher training and the acquisition of intercultural competence" pp.255-289 for additional thoughts and activities. Another text that may compliment a conversation class well is Genzel and Cumming's text entitled Culturally Speaking which addresses many cultural issues including the idea of gestures.

For any learner of a foreign language, sending and receiving messages is difficult. The task may become easier when either the sender or the receiver includes a visual stimulus like their body. Not only does this help reinforce messages and reconfirm guesses of the sender's messages vis-à-vis the receiver, but it also allows each person to be totally self-reliant in the L2 environment. Sometimes L2 gestures, like the language, may cause misunderstandings; therefore causing a communication breakdown. Familiarizing students with the target culture and its gestures may help avoid these miscommunications. Using gestures also serves as a "plan B" when one lacks the necessary language skills (syntax, grammar, phonetics, semantic knowledge, etc.) to express more complicated language. A "Plan B" will help students survive in the new global community today.

Despite the logic behind body gestures combined with verbalized speech to render one's message more comprehensible, there is the realistic view that not everyone can effectively carry out the task or want to. It may be a question of ability, or the knowledge of how to move one's body to correspond to specific messages. Many teachers may find the task "silly" or even a waste of time

and rely solely on the language itself. Similarly, students may not like the idea of having the additional pressure of moving their bodies, as if the L2 wasn't difficult enough. Whatever your point of view on this topic is, I encourage you to at least present and try using gestures in your classroom to see if your students find the slightest difference in comprehending a sender's message or have an easier time expressing themselves. Then, let the students decide what works for them.

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