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# TEACHING LEARNERS TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY IN THE L2

## Integrating body language in the students' syllabus

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**Abstract** – In communication a great deal of meaning is exchanged through body language, including gaze, posture, hand gestures and body movements. Body language is largely culture-specific, and rests, for its comprehension, on people's sharing socio-cultural and linguistic norms. In cross-cultural communication, L2 speakers' use of body language may convey meaning that is not understood or misinterpreted by the interlocutors, affecting the pragmatics of communication. In spite of its importance for cross-cultural communication, body language is neglected in ESL/EFL teaching. This paper argues that the study of body language should be integrated in the syllabus of ESL/EFL teaching and learning. This is done by: 1) reviewing literature showing the tight connection between language, speech and gestures and the problems that might arise in cross-cultural communication when speakers use and interpret body language according to different conventions; 2) reporting the data from two pilot studies showing that L2 learners transfer L1 gestures to the L2 and that these are not understood by native L2 speakers; 3) reporting an experience teaching body language in an ESL/EFL classroom. The paper suggests that in multicultural ESL/EFL classes teaching body language should be aimed primarily at raising the students' awareness of the differences existing across cultures.

**Keywords:** ESL/EFL teaching; body language; cross-cultural communication; speech; gestures.

## 1. Introduction

Research has shown that effective communication rests not only on the verbal message, but also on the meanings that are exchanged through non-verbal language, which subsumes paralinguistics – including prosodic aspects of the speech signal such as pitch, voice quality, speech rhythm, etc., and body language – including eye gaze, facial expressions, hand gestures and body movements. In fact, the meanings conveyed through non-verbal language may account for the greatest part of the message exchanged in communication. This was first established by Mehrabian and colleagues in 1967 (Mehrabian and Wiener 1967; Mehrabian and Ferris 1967; also reported in Mehrabian 1972). They suggested that in the communication of affect (i.e., feelings and attitudes) words account for only a small part (7%) of the meanings exchanged; a much greater part (38%) is transmitted through speech rhythm, volume, and tone of voice; and yet a greater part (55%) is transmitted through body language. These findings have been erroneously extended to cover all communications, leading people to falsely believe that the so-called 7-38-55 rule applies to any spoken interaction (e.g., Atkinson 2002). Indeed, it is possible that the language factor per se may have a greater significance in communication than that indicated by Mehrabian and colleagues (Jones and La Baron 2002; Krauss 2001; Trimboli and Walker 1987). At any rate, the role played by paralinguistics and body language in the transmission of meanings in communication is not controversial (Knapp, Hall and Horgan 2014).

It is known that communication takes place at multiple levels and through the integration of different semiotic resources, which all contribute to the transmission and reception of meaning (Baldry and Thibault 2006; Bateman 2008; O'Halloran 2011; Ventola,

Charles and Kaltenbacher 2004). However, while speakers are generally aware of their use of language, they are unlikely to be conscious of their use of non-verbal language, as well as the meanings they convey through it. In addition, like other forms of social behavior, non-verbal language is largely culture-specific and needs to be learned through exposure to communication in society. In cross-cultural communication, L2 speakers are likely to use non-verbal strategies that are not shared with their interlocutors, with effects on the pragmatics of communication. In many countries around the world people from a multitude of cultural backgrounds interact on a daily basis in a variety of professional and personal contexts (Dyтынshyn and Collins 2012). Opportunities to study, work and travel arise in distant, foreign countries (*ibidem*). Intercultural exchanges take place not only abroad but at home too. This is making the world's citizens more culturally aware; however, somewhat paradoxically, it also increases the possibility for linguistic and cultural misunderstandings that can be a cause for prejudice and/or social exclusion. These may arise, for example, when speakers convey, unintentionally, meanings from their non-verbal language that can be misinterpreted by interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The field of nonverbal communication has grown rapidly over the last few decades, and is being increasingly incorporated in many disciplines. In ESL/EFL instruction a number of studies demonstrate an awareness of the importance of teaching non-verbal language to learners (e.g., Cooper, Tsukada, Naruse and Yamaguchi 2013; Di 2014; Negi 2009; Richard 2011; Surkamp 2014). However, in many classes the focus is still on the acquisition of general skills (Derwing, Diepenbroek and Foote 2012), and little attention is drawn to the differences in non-verbal language between the learners' L1 and the L2, even though these may be as detrimental to L2 communication as the learners' use of non-native lexico-grammatical structures, and possibly more so. Interestingly, even the increasing popularity of public speaking classes emphasizing the importance of speech prosody and body language for effective communication has had, so far, only a limited impact on ESL/EFL teaching. Thus, non-verbal language is still not introduced routinely in the students' syllabus.

The role of paralinguistics in L2 communication has been the object of a number of investigations, and its effects on L2 speech intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness have been ascertained (e.g., Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson and Koehler 1992; Derwing and Munro 2001; Field 2005; Hahn 2004; Kormos and Demeş 2004; Munro 2008; Munro and Derwing 1995; Munro and Derwing 2001; Pickering 2002; Pickering 2004; Ramirez-Verdugo 2005; Zielinski 2008). However, the teaching of paralinguistics is also erratic. ESL general-skills textbooks vary conspicuously in the extent to which they include pronunciation explanations and activities (Derwing, Diepenbroek and Foote 2012), and some teachers may be reluctant to teach paralinguistic aspects of L2 because of a lack of formal training (Derwing, Diepenbroek and Foote 2012). In light of the recent L2 pronunciation research, it is hoped that paralinguistics will be more effectively incorporated in ESL/EFL material and included in the students' activities. This issue will, however, not be addressed in the present paper.

This paper argues that, for its important role in communication and to prevent misunderstandings that might arise in cross-cultural communication, body language should be integrated in ESL/EFL teaching and learning. This is done first by reviewing literature discussing how people from different languages and cultures communicate different meanings with their hands and bodies, and then by reviewing the tight connection between language, speech and gestures. Second, the paper reports data from two pilot studies showing that L2 learners transfer to the L2 L1 gestures that are not understood by native L2 speakers. Third, the paper reports about an experience of teaching body language in an

ESL/EFL classroom and suggests that teaching body language should include raising the students' awareness of the differences existing across cultures.

## 2. The meanings of body language

Across cultures, differences in body language may be as conspicuous as differences in language. In fact, while some gestures are shared by all human beings (for example, smiling as a sign of happiness or pleasure), some widely used gestures may have different meanings in different cultures (for example, pointing a finger, waving, shaking or nodding the head). Most gestures are learned as part of the process of learning to communicate in a socio-linguistic community (Ekman 1972; Feldman and Rime 1991; Gudykunst and Mody 2001; Harper, Wiens and Matarazzo 1978; Kendon 1981). It is only by coming in contact and getting acquainted with a particular culture that the gestures of that culture can become known and understood. Because of this, in (inherently cross-cultural) communication L2 speakers' use of body language following conventions that are not known to speakers of the L1 or of other languages may convey unintentional meanings, be misinterpreted, and/or create annoyance, and thus affect the outcomes of communication.

The existence of culture-specific differences in body language is well documented. A major difference concerns the use of *emblems*. Emblems are gestures that hold specific meanings for members of a culture; they have a direct verbal referent and can substitute for the words or expressions that they represent (Kendon 2004; Poggi and Magno Caldognetto 1997; Ting-Toomey 1999). Signs used to greet, hitchhike, say 'yes' or 'no' are examples of emblems. Emblems are culture- and language-specific, and so are unlikely to be understood or interpreted correctly by people that are not familiar with them. On the other hand, variations of the same gestures may be used by speakers of different cultures with different meanings. Some well-known examples are: the positively-connoted American 'All-OK' sign is an obscene gesture having sexual implications in Russia, Brazil and Turkey; it means 'worthless' in Tunisia, France and Belgium, and 'money' in Japan (Matsumoto 2006; Pease and Pease 2004); the 'thumbs up' sign has a positive meaning in most parts of the western world, but it means 'man' in Japan, and is an obscene gesture or an insult in some Middle Eastern countries. The 'V' sign may be used to mean different things in different parts of the English-speaking world, depending on how it is realized. In the UK and in the countries of the Commonwealth, the 'V' sign produced with the palm facing inward is an obscene gesture, but when it is produced with the palm facing outward it means 'two' or 'peace'. In the US, the gesture is generally made with the palm facing outward, and it means 'two', 'peace' or 'victory' (Pease and Pease 2004). There are cross-cultural variations also in the use and meanings of the head shaking and nodding. In many cultures a head shake is used to indicate denial or disagreement, but in some Southern European countries, like Bulgaria and parts of Albania, it is used to say 'yes'. Nodding is used in many cultures as a sign of agreement, but in countries like Greece, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Turkey, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Albania and Sicily a single nod of the head up (not down) indicates a 'no' (wikipedia sub voce).

Similarly, there are cross-cultural differences also in the rules concerning gaze and visual attention. While gaze can be associated both with dominance, power and aggression on the one side, and affiliation and nurturance on the other, cultures differ in the way in which these behavioral tendencies are important for group stability and maintenance (Matsumoto 2006). For example, in most western cultures, maintaining strong eye contact indicates that the listener is attentive and interested in the message. In Asian and African

cultures, looking directly into a speaker's eyes may indicate disrespect or be considered overly direct or aggressive, while lowering the eyes may indicate polite manners (Burgoon and Bacue 2003). Finally, cultures differ in the semantic meaning attributed to body postures, interpersonal space, and degree of interpersonal contact, with some cultures favoring close proximity and personal contact in interactions and others favoring wider spaces and no contact between interactants (Burgoon and Bacue 2003; Matsumoto 2006; Ting-Toomey 1999; Wang and Li 2007). For example, considering Arabs and westerners as a case in point, when conversing, the former stand very close together which for westerners would be considered embarrassing or aggressive. At the same time, Arabs share with Southern Europeans, Russians, Latin Americans and Africans the tendency to touch each others in interactions, while East Asians (such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans) interact with little or no touching, and Canadians, U.S. Americans, Northern Europeans, Australians and New Zealanders lie somewhere in between these two extremes (Ting-Toomey 1999).

Cultures also differ in the extent to which speakers use *illustrators* or *iconic gestures*, that is, kinesics behaviors, and particularly hand and arm gestures, to complement or illustrate spoken words. Illustrators have a 'pictorial' function, for example, hands may be held apart to indicate size; a hand may be raised to indicate height. They tend to be subconscious, are less arbitrary and occur more regularly than emblems. In general, Southern Europeans (e.g., Italians, Spaniards, Greeks), Arabs (e.g. Egyptians and Saudis), and Latin Americans (e.g. Chileans and Venezuelans) use illustrators more than Northern Europeans (e.g. Belgians, Scandinavians) and many Asians. For their use of illustrators, Northern Americans can be placed in an intermediate position between Southern and Northern Europeans. In addition, Asians and Northern Europeans make use of more restrained, 'quiet', gestures, while Southern Europeans' and Northern Americans' gestures are more animated. In some Asian cultures, the extensive use of illustrators is considered distracting, rude and undisciplined. In Latin cultures, the absence of illustrators may indicate a lack of interest (Morrison, Conaway and Borden 1994).

In cross-cultural communication, both emblems and illustrators may have pragmatic effects on the interaction. The former may be a cause of misunderstandings or conflicts. As for the latter, the use of frequent, broad, full arm, animated gesturing during speech may be common and/or accepted in some linguistic communities. However, in some other linguistic communities it may be considered distracting, cause annoyance to the listener, and ultimately affect the image the speaker is projecting of him/herself. On the other hand, too little gesturing may put off interlocutors that are used to a great deal of gesturing in conversations (Axtell 1991; Efron 1972; Ekman and Friesen 1969; Graham and Argyle 1975; Okada and Brosnahan 1990).

### 3. The link between gestures and language

Growing evidence shows that gestures are closely linked to language and speech. Gestures and language seem to share the same communication system, develop together and be planned and organized together (Bernardis and Gentilucci 2006; Goldin-Meadow 2003; Kendon 2004; Mayberry and Nicoladis 2000; McNeill 2005; Nicoladis 2007). For this reason, they are produced simultaneously with speech (Krauss, Morrel-Samuels and Colasante 1991; McNeill 1992). For example, if a speaker is making a gesture representing a ball while mentioning a ball, the two events will occur at about the same time.

Gestures seem to serve multiple functions, both cognitive and communicative. Cognitive functions are speaker-directed, and facilitate speech production. Their functions

include conceptualization, lexical-item retrieval, and organization of information into syntactic constituents. Communicative functions are listener-directed, and seem to be planned and produced with the addressee's needs in mind. Their functions include promoting disambiguation and comprehension and regulating turn-taking (Duncan 1973; Galati and Brennan 2014; Graham and Heywood 1975; Holler, Tutton and Wilkin 2011; Kendon 2004; Kita 2000; Riseborough 1981; Rogers 1978; Streeck and Hartege 1992). Like language, gestures are influenced by a variety of social, psychological, and cultural factors; so the use of gestures is subjected to contextual variation as much as language, though systematic patterns are identifiable within speech communities (Gullberg 2010).

Different kinds of gestures might play a different role in facilitating access to language. Illustrators might be particularly helpful in the access of highly visual concepts, because of their visual-spatial component (see studies reviewed in Nicoladis 2007). For example, the description of an object that is falling down is often accompanied by a gesture making a downward movement. Emblems, on the other hand, occur independent of speech and convey verbal meaning without words. Unlike other gestures that occur *with* speech and allow the speaker to formulate a concept or an idea, emblems can be used as an alternative to particular words. Thus, they might play a more important role in substituting than in facilitating the access to language (Nicoladis 2007). For example, there is no need for North American speakers to use words when they are making the OK gesture, as the gesture can substitute for the word altogether. However much is still not known about gestures, and future research may provide a different view of how different kinds of gestures function in relation to language.

The link between gestures and meaning, the important communicative functions of gestures and their cross-linguistically determined variations make gestures an interesting object of investigation for research in bilingualism. Recent bilingualism studies show that when bilinguals switch languages, their gesture parameters switch accordingly (Cavicchio and Kita 2013). This suggests that bilinguals have two different systems of linguistic representation and that, for each language, verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication are planned together, with little gestural transfer from one language to the other. In addition, data from English/French bilingual children in Canada (Nicoladis, Pika and Marentette 2005) and from Italian/English bilinguals in England (Cavicchio and Kita 2013) shows that bilinguals tend to gesture more than monolinguals. A possible explanation is that, because bilinguals have access to more linguistic choices than monolinguals, bilinguals also make a greater use of gestures than monolinguals since gestures facilitate the access to linguistic information (Nicoladis 2007).

The relation between gestures and language in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural contexts is underexplored. Few systematic studies have been carried out to compare gestural repertoires across different linguistic communities, and to establish how such repertoires are determined by cultural conventions and/or linguistic factors. Many claims about gestural differences between cultures are based on observations more than empirical studies. Thus, for example, many descriptions are available of language-specific emblems such as the ones described above (e.g. the 'V' sign, the 'thumb-up' sign, etc.), but it is not known how frequently such gestures occur in speech, how they are used in relation to discourse, etc. (Gullberg 2012). Also, studies have concentrated on some European and Asian languages, while little is known about a variety of other languages in the world (Kim 2010; Kita 2009).

Finally, the interconnection of gestures, language and speech also makes gestures an interesting point of observation for language use and development in SLA research: looking at learners' gesturing as part of their behavior in L2 can provide a more accurate representation of learners' L2 development than looking at speech alone. Gestural studies

may confirm findings in SLA research, providing evidence of cross-linguistic influences of the L2 on the L1 at all stages of language development (Brown 2008; Brown and Gullberg 2008; Ortega 2009; Pika, Nicoladis and Marentette 2006). Indeed, it is suggested that gestures should be studied as part of the inter-language of an L2 learner (Gullberg 2006; Pika, Nicoladis and Marentette 2006). However, so far, few studies have addressed the issue of how learners use and understand gestures in the L2. The scanty evidence that is available suggests that L2 speakers use their L1-specific gestures when speaking the L2, and that there might be a relation between L2 learners' use of gestures and language proficiency level, with learners with low levels of competence using more L1-specific gestures than learners with higher levels of competence (Brown 2008; Nicoladis, Pika and Marentette 2005; Pika, Nicoladis and Marentette 2006), but the characteristics of these process are not well known (Nicoladis 2007).

#### 4. Effective communication and ESL/EFL

Traditionally teaching gestures has not been a part of ESL/EFL courses – though, as reviewed above, the awareness of the importance of teaching non-verbal language in the L2 classroom is growing. [Interestingly, body language appears to be of primary concern in public-speaking classes targeting native speakers.] However, it is argued that if gestures are closely linked to meaning in the production, comprehension and development of language they should become an integral part of second-language instruction (Eskildsen and Wagner 2013; Taleghani-Nikazm 2007). Providing information about L2 gestures and encouraging learners to use gestures in L2 learning settings may facilitate learners to encode and decode their L2 messages, help learners communicate more effectively, and prevent misunderstandings arising from the use and interpretation of body language that is poorly understood.

Integrating the study of body language in the L2 classroom may be challenging. As seen before, many gestures are culture-specific, and the extent to which some types of gestures are used with speech is also culture-specific. This means that in a multicultural class, the use and interpretation of gestures is likely to vary from individual to individual, depending on where the students come from. For example, some speakers may gesticulate a lot when they speak, and be perceived as annoying by interlocutors that are not used to much gesturing during speech, for instance East-Asians; other speakers may hardly gesticulate, and thus appear detached and uninterested to interlocutors that associate high gesturing with involvement in discourse, for instance Southern Europeans. In other cases, students may rely – though unconsciously – on their use of gestures to communicate particular meanings, which however may be ignored or misinterpreted by the interlocutors. To make up for the lack of common ground on which to compare L1 vs. L2 gestures, teachers must address the issue of body-language from a general cross-cultural perspective rather than from the perspective of a culturally-uniform class sharing L1 gestural habits.

The ESL/EFL models teachers decide to use in class is also worth considering. The galaxy of varieties of English spoken today and the number of variations in use of English in different cultures impose an approach that presents the English language as a dynamic, multiform entity. Typically, teachers will expose learners to the kaleidoscopic array of forms that the English language can take as the language of international communication, but they will refer to one variety of English as their main linguistic model. For example, in Europe teachers might use British English as their main target language model, while in Japan the model might be American English. However, different varieties of English are unlikely to

share the same sets of gestures. As a case in point, speakers of British, American and Indian English might use very different non-verbal language with speech. How should teachers deal with the variation in use and forms of gestures in the different varieties of English? A possible approach is for teachers to raise the students' awareness not only on the lexical, grammatical and phonological differences existing between the different varieties of English spoken worldwide, but also on the differences in non-verbal language. [For example, the 'V' sign does not have the same meaning in all English-speaking countries (see introductory paragraphs)]. Though this might seem easier said than done, the number of videos and clips available through the Internet offers valuable examples of the particular uses of non-verbal language in English. Using videos the teacher might want to expose students to a variety of culturally-specific gestures and then decide to focus on some sets.

The fact that gesturing is largely unconscious raises the question of whether learners can indeed become competent in the gestures of the L2 as it is spoken in a given community. The effects of specific instruction on gesture acquisition patterns have not yet been investigated thoroughly. Studies suggest that gesture acquisition may be linked to the learners' ability to learn to encode and decode meaning implicitly through exposure to L1 input; yet, it is highly likely that students may benefit from explicit instruction on gestures. Interpersonal variation in gesturing, in both L1 and L2, will have to be taken into account in teaching or assessing L1 and L2 gesture behavior. With particular regard to gesture assessments, these cannot be based on rigid error analysis metrics. Rather, gestural behavior should be assessed in terms of preferential tendencies, by establishing whether, and to what extent, the learners' behavior can be accepted by the target L1/L2 speakers (Gullberg 2010).

The dearth of research on ESL/EFL gestural data may make teachers uncertain as to which specific aspects of L2 gestures should be taught. In addition, little material is available for teaching gestures in the L2, and teachers who aim to introduce their students to this aspect of non-verbal communication may end-up having to experiment with their own methods and materials (e.g., Cooper, Tsukada, Naruse and Yamaguchi 2013; Di 2014; Negi 2009; Richard 2011; Surkamp 2014). In consideration of the number of variables involved, it is the author's belief that teaching gestural patterns should be aimed mainly at raising learners' awareness of the existence of culture-specific body language, and at the explanation of the meaning and use of L2-specific emblems and gestures. To this end, a variety of material and activities should be used as a tool for pointing out differences in cross-cultural practices and making students aware of the possible meanings their bodies can communicate. The relevance of raising learners' awareness about language should not be underestimated: research has shown that learners can benefit greatly from developing metalinguistic awareness about language forms through conscious reflection. A critical awareness of how gestures are used with speech in real-life situations can prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings arising from learners' use of body language that is not congruent with the L2 (Darn 2005; Darn, Ledbury and White 2004; Feldman and Rime 1991; Kellerman 1992; Kelly, Barr, Church and Lynch 1999; Linger 2003; Sueyoshi and Hardison 2005).

In what follows, a pilot study is reported which investigated whether culture-specific L1 gestures, and particularly emblems, are transferred into L2, and whether the transferred gestures are opaque to interpretation to interlocutors of languages different than those of the speakers. The paper will then report the author's experience teaching about L1-vs-L2 gestures in the ESL/EFL classroom.

## 5. Do learners actually transfer L1 gestures into the L2?

Italian has been defined as a high frequency gesture language (Pika, Nicoladis and Marentette 2006), which means that gestures play a crucial role in conveying meaning and pragmatic force. Specifically, Italians' speech is characterized by the use of a wide repertoire of emblems that are, anecdotally, considered incomprehensible by non-Italian speakers (Kendon 2004; Poggi and Magno Caldognetto 1997). This is reflected in the large number of dictionaries (available both online and on paper) on Italian gestures that are aimed at helping the traveler to Italy to understand the spoken language. Because of its high number of emblems, Italian has been the object of a number of studies on gestures, and Italian ESL/EFL learners appear to be optimal candidates for studying the transfer of gestures from L1 to L2 as well as how these gestures are interpreted by non-native Italian speakers.

The following experiment was aimed at investigating whether L2 learners' transfer emblems from their L1 into L2. This experiment and the next were based on the author's experience teaching an oral communication class to Italian learners of English at the University of Padova, Italy (reported in Busà and Rognoni 2012).

### 5.1. Target emblems and participants

Two frequently used emblems were chosen as the target for the experiment, based on the author's observation of her students' gesturing patterns when speaking English L2 in class. These emblems are exemplified in Figures 1 and 2. Both emblems can be considered part of the Italian language, and have been described in the literature on Italian gestures (Caon 2010; Diadori 1991; Poggi and Magno Caldognetto 1997). The first emblem, consisting in bringing the palm at shoulder level and shaking the fingers forward and backward, is used in Italian to indicate past times, and is likely to be used in association with expressions like 'once upon a time', 'a long time ago', and it will be referred here with the acronym OUAT for 'Once Upon a Time'. The second emblem, consisting in joining the palms of the hands and shaking the fingers forward and backward, pivoting it on the palms, is used to signal questioning in expressions like 'why?', 'what are you doing?', 'what are you saying'. It will be referred here with the acronym WAYD for 'What Are You Doing?',

The subjects were ten graduate female students from the University of Padua, taking a class in oral communication skills taught by the author. They were all Italian native speakers, born and living in the Veneto region, in Northeastern Italy. Their average age was 23. Because the experiment was run on the students attending the author's class, the number of subjects used for the experiment, as well as their sex, age, culture and place of origin were dictated by the circumstances rather than on the basis of an experimental design. This limits the statistical significance of the experiment, but the results of the experiment can still give indications on the process that is being investigated. Future developments of this experiment will be run on more casually-selected subject samples.





Figure 1  
A speaker using the Italian emblem meaning “Once upon a time” OUAT.



Figure 2  
A speaker using the Italian emblem meaning “What are you doing?” WAYD.

## 5.2. Elicitation technique

To elicit the learners' spontaneous production of the target emblems and thus test for the occurrence of gestural transfer, the students were asked to produce two oral tasks, as part of the regular class activities. The students had no awareness that they were being monitored for their gestures. In the first task, the speakers were asked to learn, and re-tell aloud, a modified version of Aesop's fable 'The Fox and the Crow'. This task was used to elicit the OUAT emblem, triggered by the past tense used in the narration of the fable. In the second task, the speakers had to learn and enact, in pairs, a short dialogue, purposely created for the experiment, which required subjects to ask each other a number of questions. This task was used to elicit the WAYD emblem, triggered by the question-and-answer exchanges in the dialogue.

During both oral tasks, the students were filmed with a digital video camera; the recordings were then transferred into a computer. Because the students were filmed regularly during the course, their filming during these tasks did not make them self-conscious of the purposes of the recordings. The students were later informed about the study and granted the author the permission to use the videos for research purposes.

## 5.3. Evidence of transfer of L1 emblems into the L2

In the first task, the narration of Aesop's fable, 4 out of 10 speakers produced the target emblem OUAT when saying 'once upon a time', at the beginning of the fable. In the second task, the WAYD emblem was produced in 4 out of 5 dialogues, co-occurring with the

expressions ‘why?’, ‘what are you doing?’, or similar. The subjects did not seem to be aware that they were using Italian gestures in English. Thus, though preliminary, the results of this experiment provide an indication that the transfer of emblems from L1 to L2 does take place. The results also suggest that the transfer occurs in contexts where the meanings expressed by the speakers would trigger the use of emblems in the L1.

## **6. Are transferred L1 gestures truly non-transparent to interpretation?**

A second experiment was devised to investigate whether Italians’ emblems are understood correctly by non-native Italian speakers.

### **6.1. Material**

The video recordings obtained in the experiment described above were used to create a clip with *Final Cut Pro*® for an evaluation task. The clip consisted of two repetitions in a row of each of the following muted stimuli: 3 samples of the OUAT emblem, 3 samples of the WAYD emblem, and 3 gestures that were used as distractors in the stimulus presentation sequence. The gestures that were selected to work as distractors were iconic gestures recurrent in the data that had been produced by some of the subjects to describe the crow landing on the cheese in the fable ‘The Fox and the Crow’. The resulting set consisted of a total of 9 stimuli produced 2 times by 9 different speakers (9x2). The total duration of the clip was approximately 5 minutes. The clip was cropped together with another short video, not reported in this paper, consisting of one muted 19-second video showing two speakers interacting in a dialogue. The clip was embedded in the web-based survey and test presentation tool *eSurveysPro* (<http://www.esurveyspro.com/>) and presented for evaluation via web in Italy and abroad.

### **6.2. Subjects and evaluation procedure**

The clip was evaluated by a group of 30 American English native speakers (ENS), average age: 36, and a group of 30 Northern Italian native speakers for control (INS), average age: 27. In both groups, the subjects were either university students or professionals. The subjects were asked to watch the clip and, after each stimulus, select the meaning of the speaker’s gestures from 5 different options: “A long time ago”, “I’m hungry”, “It’s hot in here”, “What’s the problem?”, “No meaning”.

### **6.3. Evidence that transferred L1 gestures are non-transparent to interpretation**

The results of the evaluation task showed a clear difference in the emblem interpretations given by the INS, on the one side, and the ENS, on the other side. The INS identified the correct meaning of the two target emblems in 91% cases, and could not identify a specific meaning for the distractors in 80% of the cases. The ENS gave much lower percentages of correct responses for both the emblems: the OUAT was identified correctly in 31% of the cases, the WAYD in 68% of the cases, and the distractor was correctly identified as not meaningful in 53% of the cases. The difference in the general accuracy scores for the performances of the INS’ and the ENS’ evaluation tasks was significant to a paired t-test

(mean for ENS: 60.55, mean for INS: 87.44,  $t = 4.86$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.001$ ). It is fair to say that, after running this experiment, we realized that the experimental procedure had some methodological glitches, which might have led the non-native Italians to identify the OUAT emblem and the distractor to percentages that were higher than expected (see discussion in Busà and Rognoni 2012). However, in spite of their limitations, the results provide indications that non-native speakers may not understand the language-specific gestures that speakers transfer into L2, while native speakers generally do. Further studies will be aimed at expanding and replicating the results of this pilot experiment.

## 7. An experience teaching gestures to L2 learners of English

Establishing, though preliminarily, that learners do transfer their L1 gestures into L2 and that the transferred gestures may not be understood by interlocutors of different language backgrounds may give reasons for teachers to 'venture' into teaching gestures in an L2 class. What follows is the report of the author's experience teaching body language, as part of a course on English communication skills to a class of intermediate (B1) speakers of English L2, university level, in Italy. The class was taught in a multimedia lab over a period of 12 weeks; participation in the course was limited to 20 students.

### 7.1. Methods and materials

The course was aimed at enhancing the students' ability to communicate effectively in the L2 by raising their awareness of cross-cultural differences in the use of verbal and non-verbal language. It focused on two common threads: the idea that communication is multimodal; and the idea that non-verbal communication is largely culture-specific and may significantly affect the outcome of L2 interactions between speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Throughout the course, these two concepts were examined and exemplified in class with the aid of a variety of materials, including figures, pictures, and videos. These materials were used to discuss aspects of body language and/or to illustrate the meaning of particular postures, and of hands, eyes, and head movements. For example, pictures and/or videos of well-known figures from the world of politics were often used to exemplify how people's perceived personality is often associated with features of their body language. This material was used in addition to common learners' material (i.e., language books and audio-video materials for language learners) to create reading, listening and speaking activities for the students. In addition, as a weekly assignment, students had to read chapters from books on body language (i.e., Fast 1988; Pease and Pease 2004).

A significant amount of time during the course was spent watching videos and discussing the gestural characteristics of the people in the videos, as well as making comparisons with the verbal and non-verbal behavior that would be appropriate in the students' native countries in similar situations. Videos provide authentic examples of multimodal communication, and through videos students can practice linguistic structures, idioms, pronunciation, and discourse conventions, but also be exposed to the gestures of L2 speakers. A variety of videos that can be used in class to exemplify differences in speakers' gestures can be found in the Internet. The teachers' comments on the videos can make learners aware, rather quickly, of the differences in body language between native and non-native speakers, especially when the audio is muted.

In each class, some students had to deliver, in front of the class, a short oral text having the same characteristics as one of the videos watched in class. In the case of interactions, interviews, conversations and the like, the students had to work in pairs or groups. All these oral presentations were filmed, reviewed and discussed in class and/or received written feedback from the teacher. A private *YouTube* channel was created and the students' videos were uploaded regularly, to allow the students to watch their own and their classmates' videos and make comments on everybody's gesturing during the oral tasks. In their presentations in front of the class the students were encouraged to try to monitor their own gestures, and to avoid using language-specific gestures. These were in fact quite frequent, especially at the beginning of the course, but their use decreased as the course progressed. Examples of gestures that may look inappropriate to an international audience are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

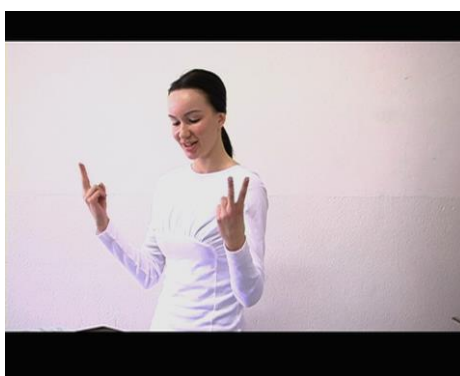


Figure 3

A speaker using a gesture to represent the number 'two'. This gesture could potentially be misinterpreted as an obscene gesture by a British interlocutor.

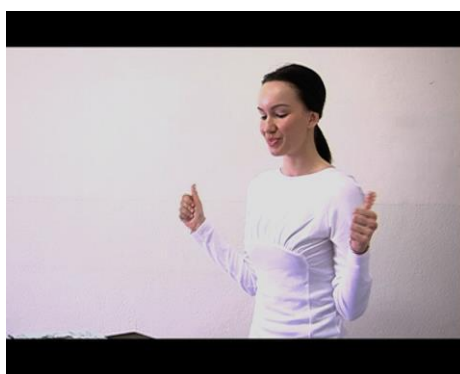


Figure 4

A speaker using a gesture that has no meaning in the L1, Croatian. This gesture has a positive meaning in Canada, but could potentially be misinterpreted as an obscene gesture by some Middle Eastern interlocutor.

The videos of the student presentations were one of the core features of the course. In fact, videos appeared to be a useful tool to provide learners with precious feedback for improvement. In addition to the in-class videos, the students had to prepare, as part of their home assignments, a short video of themselves enacting a real-life situation similar to those analyzed in class. For this presentation, too, the students received written comments from the teacher. Finally, the students were filmed while giving a course-final formal presentation to the class on an academic topic, and had to show awareness of all the English language structures, intonation patterns, body language and communication strategies studied in class.

Here, too, the classmates' comments on each individual's presentation style were encouraged. The course emphasis on the students' presentations and the teacher's feedback on the individual communication styles in English was aimed at maximizing the students' awareness of body language in communication, and to enhance their integrated competence of verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

## 7.2. Students' assessment

Speech evaluation criteria have been developed that teachers can use to assess the improvement of a learners' speaking skills. A directory of speech evaluation forms can be found at the address <http://www.ratespeeches.com/a+speech-evaluation-form-directory-sorted-by-criteria>.<sup>1</sup> Some of these forms also include the evaluation of speakers' gestures in speech.

At the time when the experiments were run, the author could not retrieve generally-accepted criteria for evaluating learners' speech that also included body language. Thus, the assessment of the students' improvement in gestural behavior and control for gestural transfer from the L1 at the end of the course was based on the author's subjective judgment. This was done through the comparison of the student's videos recorded at the beginning of the course with those recorded at the end of the course, which showed a clear improvement in learners' overall body gesturing. The learners showed a considerable reduction in the use of their L1 emblems in their L2 productions, and particularly those that were focused upon during the course. Students also reduced their language-specific use of number gestures, opting for L2-like gestures. For example, at the end of the course, most students were using a non-Italian way of counting from one to three, i.e., starting from the second finger rather than from the thumb, and with palms facing the audience rather than the speaker. On a theoretical level, all students acquired awareness of the differences in cross-cultural gestural behavior and showed increased sensibility for body language in communication. As with other aspects of language learning, time will show if the effects continue.

## 8. Concluding observations

As reviewed in this paper, language, speech and gestures are interconnected. Gestures, like language, play an important role in communication as they express meaning and reflect cross-cultural differences. To prepare learners to communicate in a world where opportunities for cross-cultural interaction have increased due to globalization, language teaching should integrate body language. Learners should gain an awareness of the meanings carried by body language and how these may be culture-specific and differing from language to language. In addition, learners should learn that, together with their linguistic habits, they transfer into their L2 the whole repertoire of L1 gestures, which are not likely to be understood by the interlocutors and may be a source of confusion or intercultural misunderstanding in L2 interactions. For example, gestures that have different meanings in different cultures may be interpreted as signals of detachment, impoliteness or rude behavior, and affect successful communication or be a potential source of prejudice. Though the claims made in this paper are based on preliminary studies, it is hoped that they can still provide indications that body language in cross-cultural communication can be taught, practiced, and improved.

<sup>1</sup> The link was active as of October 25, 2015.

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