

THE COMPONENTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT FACTORS IN THE TEACHING PROCESS

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Abstract

The act of teaching is a predominantly verbal. Nevertheless communication during the teaching process equally depends on the paraverbal and nonverbal components, that are meant to reinforce the formative interaction between the teacher, as traditional transmitter, and the student as receiver of information.

Given the importance of nonverbal communication in career and life, the authors of the paper, aware of the fact that the issue is not part of all school syllabi, made a study on two groups of students in order to test their knowledge on the topic as well as to find out their reactions towards the professors' sundry nonverbal means of communication.

Keywords: mimics, gestures, communicative behavior, nonverbal communication, body language, accuracy of communication.

1. Introduction

An analysis of the communication phenomenon shows an irrefutable reality - communication is a natural, universal phenomenon whose complexity generates a variety of forms of expression, involving different meanings, specific codes, diverse channels and ways of producing. All these because human communication in general, teaching communication in particular manifest themselves as multi-determined phenomena being simultaneously: information, action, interaction, relationship, transaction and require a minimum of innate skills, acquired through training.

The understanding of the educational implications of the communication process requires partial or total acquaintance with forms of human communication.

Nonverbal communication is interesting because of at least two reasons: a) its role is often understated; b) in oral communication, more than 50% of information is perceived and retained through nonverbal language.

Nonverbal language, externalized in gestures, mimics, posture can support, contradict or replace verbal communication. Basically, the nonverbal message illustrates most accurately the message and the interlocutor pays greater attention to it. From ontogenetic point of view, nonverbal communication has higher prematureness based on both innate, revelatory behavior of emotions and affects and those acquired through learning or imitation.

People use their entire body to communicate; consciously or unconsciously we use every part of our body to emphasize, reinforce, avouch or deny what we say. Nonverbal language is the favorite channel of affective communication that helps to establish the relational dimension of the communicative act.

2. The teaching process and the components of nonverbal communication

2.1. Gestures

Verbal communication is facilitated mainly by gestures and movement. Their banning by the teacher can obstruct verbal communication - blockages in communication or breaks are likely to occur, words come hard on the lips, the state of irritation increases, etc. From a psychological point of view gestures support verbal communication. In one commonly accepted taxonomic approach, Ekman and Friesen (1969) classified nonverbal cues into five functional types that apply to didactic communication, too:

Affect displays - facial expressions - the primary way one's feelings are revealed nonverbally, sometimes supported by body postures, gestures or voice tone, which, altogether, are illustrative for

one's affective, emotional state. Raising eyebrows, frowning or tilting head backwards when surprised, making a face when disgusted, staring or frowning when angry, smiling when happy or sympathizing, tightening of a fist, covering eyes, ears or mouth as denial to see, hear or say something, these are all expressions of affect displays. Affect displays can be also used to influence or manipulate others: a speaker, for example, displays enthusiasm and hopes it exudes to the audience, children will often cry to simply get attention.

There are eight basic emotions common to all cultures that the face can display: happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness, disgust, contempt, and interest and *each basic emotion has a distinctive facial expression and for most of them there is evidence of distinctive physiological responses, distinctive changes in the voice and evidence of cognitive phenomena like focusing attention on the emotion stimulus.* (Griffiths, 2010).

A combination of all these basic facial expressions can appear on the face at the same time depending on the intensity of the emotion portrayed. (Roberts, 186). When they are true they appear involuntarily while the false ones are characteristic to actors, liars, sales people who can put on a neutral face. Affect displays are extremely important because people tend to focus attention on affect displays as feedback during communication. Since affect displays convey the transmitter's feelings they can facilitate the relation adult-child, professor-student.

Regulators as nonverbal cues, whose frequency is determined by the addressee's presence, - such as eye movements, head nods, tonal variations and body movements like turn-taking cues - are used to control and support verbal communication, to regulate interaction, indicating the addresser to continue, repeat, elaborate, hurry up, stop speaking, and so on. People nod, smile, make "mm-hmm" sounds to show agreement with the speaker or that they are listening, shake head, narrow their eyes, or pout to show disagreement. Others break eye contact or change posture to show boredom or lack of participation. Voice inflections and gestures that signal whose turn it is to talk, as well as a raised arm that indicates the desire to speak are further examples of regulators in conversation. Context is important to accurately interpret regulators as well—someone who is bouncing a leg during a lecture may be indicating boredom, but if one is listening to music bouncing may be a sign of keen interest. Regulators fulfill expressive and phatic functions because they reveal the attitude towards the interaction of the participants, they are extremely important, habitual, learned, and almost involuntary.

Illustrators or iconic gestures as nonverbal cues are directly, closely related to speech, illustrating what is being said. Illustrators are useful as they add detail to the mental image that the addresser is trying to transmit: they allow the speaker to stress or emphasize words or ideas thus reinforcing, supporting and completing verbal message. Being acquired by learning, illustrators reveal the individual's social experience and indicate *direction* (up / down there / here, far, forward / back), *shape* (rectangle, spiral, circle) *size* (large, small), *person* (you, me, him), way of action (slow / fast). The timing of iconic gestures in synchronization with speech can show one whether they are unconscious or are being deliberately added for conscious effect. In case of unconscious usage, the preparation for the gesture will start before the words are said, whilst in conscious usage there is a small lag between words and gesture which can make the speaker appear manipulative.

Emblems are particularly relevant, specific gestures, consciously used as substitutes for words which have a direct verbal translation, generally a word or phrase (e.g. head movement for Yes / No, accomplice eye blink, finger to her lips - for silence, open palm meaning *stop* or utterances such as *Shhh*, for *Be quiet*). Emblems occur mainly when verbal communication is inhibited by external factors (noise, distance), carry less personal information than other forms of nonverbal cues, allowing the speaker to communicate just simple ideas in general universally understood though some are culture specific.

Adaptors are movements that satisfy personal needs and help one adapt to environment, actions that release physical or emotional tension when someone is anxious or behaviors, or objects that are manipulated intentionally. Adaptors include behaviors like adjusting one's glasses, knuckles, twirling hair, or biting fingernails. In some cases these behaviors are actually relaxing, but often they're simply done out of habit, and are class of gestures hardly related to communication.

In their turn, students also make use of nonverbal communication (head nodding, frowning as sign of attention, while attending a lecture, reproachful gaze directed towards disturbing, fidgeting colleague) in their reactions in class, which, if correctly interpreted, have the valuable of feedback for professors.

2.2. Facial expressions and eye contact

Facial behavior particularly intentional as it is a conscious act, is a very visible part of communication, expresses feelings, speaks about attitude, state of mind, mood which change during interaction and are continuously monitored by the recipient. A major feature of interpersonal and group communication is eye contact; by looking or not looking at someone people can communicate their attitude toward the interlocutors. Through eye contact the flow of communication is regulated and communication effectiveness and audience's feedback monitored. Becoming aware when audience are listening or feel bored, is a feedback the addresser can use to change the subject or the way it was approached, stop the dissertation, or proceed. The feedbacks obtained from watching the students' nonverbal cues, of which facial expression detains a top position, will allow the professor understand to what degree students are engaged and participate in the process.

According to Mark Knapp (*apud* Dinu 1999, 245) visual communication fulfils four functions:

- *asking for information*; look, as means of achieving interaction, plays an important role in getting feedback; when the addressee listens with wide open eyes the addresser understands the amount of interest in the subject and further details are necessary;

- *giving permission to others to speak*; in case of group communication the permission to speak can be granted to another both verbally but also by means of deictic look orientation; this most often happens in class when the teacher allows his students to speak or indicates who is to speak by means of eyes;

- *indicating the type of relation*; the type of relations between the speaker and interlocutors is indicated by the orientation and the period of time the look lasts: superiors who try to dominate usually stare while addressing their subordinates while, on the contrary, in case they want to emphasise a disregarding attitude or disagreement with their inferiors' opinions they avoid looking the later when they speak;

- *compensating or reducing the physical distance*; look can establish a visual proxemics between persons separated by distance. The direction, moment and duration of an addresser's look are important clues, eloquent of his attitude, feelings and emotional state (like, dislike, self-confidence, attention, respect, consideration, sincerity etc.) towards the addressees whose feedback will influence. Speakers who make the least eye contact, look to the side and turn their body away are defensive, cold, immature, deceitful persons in the eyes of the listeners who find this frustrating and insulting, while those who settle longer eye contact and position their body and head squarely towards the audience are judged as friendly, mature, sincere, reliable and self-confident. A good public speaker must speak with his eyes, by sweeping the audience with his eyes, making brief eye contact with as many individuals in the audience as possible.

2.3. Paralanguage

Paralanguage is communication that goes beyond the specific spoken words. It includes pitch, amplitude, rate, and voice quality of speech. Paralanguage reminds us that people convey their feelings not only in *what* they say, but also in *how* they say it. (Robbins, Langton, 2001)

It most often prevails over the meaning of spoken words. The tone and the speed of one's voice, the pitch, ranging from deep to high, are essential parts of paralanguage important in the act of communication. Listeners are inclined to rate as more credible and captivating the addressers who speak at a slightly higher than normal rate of speech, articulate their words clearly, stress them appropriately.

Likewise, other aspects of paralanguage can impact the speaker's appearance of credibility and intelligence: Check backs are verbal ticks (*know what I mean?*, *Okay?*, *Right*), interjections (*Um*, *Uh*, *Err*, *Ah*), filler words (*Like*, *Whatever*, *So to speak*, *I mean*) when overused they get in the way of effective communication, annoy listeners and may suggest ineptitude on the speaker's part.

2.4. Posture

Posture communicates primarily the social status of individuals and gives information about attitudes, emotions, degree of courtesy, warmth of the soul, etc.

People's posture, regarding the relationship between them is:

- *of inclusion/non-inclusion* - a position which defines the space available for communication and limits access to the group.

- *congruent/ noncongruent* - communicates to what degree a person participates to what the interlocutor says or does. Intense involvement leads to a position similar to that of the listener's, while noncongruent posture indicated divergence in attitude or status and implies lack of any interaction. These are very important positions in the act of teaching, teachers should consider.

- *of orientation* - refers to the fact that two people can choose to sit face to face or next to each other. The first situation communicates predisposition for conversation, as it is the case with the professors and students in a classroom, and the second - neutrality.

3. Case study

The authors of this article made, during the tutorial classes, a study including two of the student groups of the Financial Accounting Management and of Law and Public Administration Faculties. Each group of students contained 25 students; the day the experiment was done there were 21 students present in the Law group, 20 in the Financial Accounting Management group. They purposely chose students of the first year of study and the experiment was carried on during the first semester of the academic year.

We mention that previously students had been tested about any contingent knowledge of the subject - nonverbal communication - hardly part of school curriculum in Romania. Pictures illustrating affect displays, regulators, illustrators and emblems were showed to the students who were asked to identify the feelings, attitudes, emotions or meanings depicted.

80% respectively 84% of the students of the two groups were able to discern the meanings correctly but they admitted it was primarily out of personal life experience and intuition and not as a consequence of former thorough study (parents or grandparents very often asked them during childhood to act or behave in a certain way the moment they were looked at, in the company of others, in public spaces at kindergarten and later at school); nor were the students aware of the existing cultural differences in this respect. It is interesting to point out that they all asserted that the authors of the popular moral precepts relied more on intuition, less on scientific knowledge of nonverbal language. Their examples were: *Sweet talk helps, The tone makes the music, Silence is gold, Eyes are the mirror of the soul, Facts cry louder than words.*

It had been noticed that during the seminars, when there were discussed issues that students ought to have prepared themselves, two groups distinguished: the great majority of students who used to study thoroughly, and a relatively small one who usually failed to fulfill their assignment, relying only on issues the professors had exposed during the courses and had only vague knowledge of the academic issues under discussion. Intentionally, these became the subject of the experiment.

The assistant professors adopted two attitudes: the first one characterized by a relaxed stance (sitting or standing at a distance of about one meter away from the speaker) and a jovial attitude; eye contact was a constant of communication with the student who was encouraged by nodding or other movements of the head and hands and raised eyebrows, a slightly perceptible smile whenever his/her ideas were correct. All these were meant to provide reinforcement, make the student confident and determine them to keep on speaking. Occasionally, the teacher used calm voice to utter words of encouragement such as: *correct, please continue, right, etc.*, made *mm-hmm* sounds to show agreement. During the English class - one of the authors' field - gestures were used to suggest different notions - possession, place, shape, size - and help the subject to dare to use them in case they were in doubt. The speaker's sense of uncertainty was fading away, self confidence gaining ground.

When the situation required that certain matters be explained or clarified by the assistant professor this began by referring to the speaker's intervention using the words: *as your colleague mentioned ... as your fellow student correctly remarked...etc.*

The result was that, although the way the students had fulfilled their task was not satisfactory, they still managed to bear a conversation based on the knowledge acquired during the professor's lecture, being encouraged by the kind, sympathetic attitude of the assistant professor. Subsequently, they were explained what had been intended and acknowledged that this attitude was felt like a support and helped them face the challenge.

A contrary approach was taken to another group of students: professors displayed a rigid attitude: with folded arms or fingers pounding on the table because of boredom or irritation, rigid face,

frowning eyebrows, mouth closed to disapproval or an ironical smile addressed to the students who had failed their assignment. All this, associated with occasional visual contact and discouraging words such as: *I do not think so!, You don't say so!, Not really, Really? etc.*

The result was that students, subject to such a deliberately inappropriate behavior, ended by refusing communication, feeling embarrassed to other colleagues and professor alike. They admitted this during a prior discussion when they were explained the purpose of the experiment they had had to face. They hardly had confidence to speak or answer simple questions about topics familiar to them.

Finding out that non-verbal communication stirred the students' interest the authors of the article indicated bibliography illustrative for the issue, considering its importance in the context of the two faculties' students' training for their future careers in law, accounting respectively.

4. Conclusions

In teaching communication paraverbal and nonverbal communication form a well structured, complex and convergent whole as they are more quickly interpreted and precisely understood than verbal communication; in most cases nonverbal communication - a gesture, a look, mimics - gives sense and meaning to the message.

Affective experiences and attitudes necessary for the relational dimension of communication - are conveyed better and more easily by paraverbal and nonverbal communication.

The authors realized that what students knew about the topic was mainly intuitively and less based on thorough study. Their inferences about the professors' attitudes barely relied on specialized training. (Ekman and Friesen, 1969:50) Being aware of the importance of nonverbal communication in career and life (how to face a job interview, how to deal with clients or customers and build their feelings of trust, how to sell a service, a product, etc.), the authors suggest that the curricula should provide the students of the two faculties the opportunity to approach the subject scientifically.

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