
The role of non-verbal communication in second language learner and native speaker discourse

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Abstract

It is undeniable that non-verbal signals exert a profound impact on communication. Many researchers proved that people, when they are hesitating, analyze non-verbal signals to comprehend the meaning of a message (Allen, 1999), because they prioritize non-verbal aspects of communication over the verbal ones. The role of non-verbal communication is much more profound when native/non-native discourse is taken into consideration (Allen, 1999; Gregersen, 2007). The aim of the present paper is to analyze non-verbal communication of a native speaker and a second language learner. The main emphasis is put especially on the differences between the non-verbal signals of second language learners and native speakers. Some of these differences may disturb or prevent the interlocutors from conveying a message in learner/native speaker discourse (Marsh et al., 2003) so it is necessary to raise awareness of cultural differences and underline the tremendous role of non-verbal communication in second language learning. Furthermore, the present paper also covers some suggestions for foreign language teachers in order to improve their knowledge of the body language of their learners in the target language and help them to raise awareness of the significance of non-verbal communication in second language discourse.

Key words: non-verbal communication, learner/native speaker discourse, cross-cultural communication

Introduction

Body language is an inevitable part of everyday communication. Non-verbal communication helps us to emphasize the explicit meaning of a message and also to enforce some assumptions in the mind of the interlocutor. Non-verbal communication of a second language learner and a native speaker in both classroom and outside classroom environment is the focus of the present paper. Moreover, examples of gestures and ambiguous interpretations of body behavior in the process of cross-cultural communication will also be included in the present paper. The emphasis will be put on the differences between gestures of second language learners and native speakers that may disturb or prevent the interlocutors from conveying the intended message.

There are different types of learner/native speaker discourse. The two types of such discourse that the present paper focuses on are:

- classroom discourse — when the teacher and students come from different countries,
- discourse outside the classroom — when students meet native speakers of the target language in everyday situations.

Non-verbal communication

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010: 97),

communication is the exchange of ideas, information, etc., between two or more persons. In an act of communication there is usually at least one speaker or sender, a *communication* message which is transmitted, and a person or persons for whom this message is intended (the receiver).

Canale (1983: 4) defined communication as “the exchange and negotiation of information between at least two individuals through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols”. The kind of communication that will be of great relevance throughout the present paper is cross-cultural communication. It can be said that cross-cultural communication occurs when at least two people “from different cultural backgrounds” exchange their information or ideas (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 147). Body language, just like verbal communica-

tion, differs across cultures. To communicate properly in other cultural contexts, one needs to be acquainted with the use of non-verbal communication within a given culture (Samovar et al., 2007). Some instances of non-verbal communication in one culture may be similar to those in another culture but differ in meaning and thus they may be ambiguous (cf. Samovar et al., 2007).

Non-verbal communication can be defined in many ways. Richards & Schmidt (2010: 398) defined it as a type of communication “without the use of words”. According to Negi (2009: 101), non-verbal communication is “the process of one person stimulating meaning in the mind of another person or persons by means of non-linguistic cues, e.g. facial expressions, gestures etc.” What is significant in communication is that verbal and non-verbal signals cannot be analyzed separately when decoding the message, because these components are linked (Kruger, 2009).

In the present paper, non-verbal communication will be analyzed in terms of four aspects, which are as follows:

- oculusics — which is the study of eye contact (Negi, 2009),
- proxemics — which relates to space between the interlocutors during communication and also their personal space (Wainwright, 2003),
- haptics — which concerns the role of touch in communication (Negi, 2009).
- kinesics — which concerns posture, facial expressions, head movements and gestures (Negi, 2009), which are defined as a movement of the face or body which communicates meaning, such as nodding the head to mean agreement (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 246).

Non-verbal communication in the foreign language classroom environment

In the classroom environment, non-verbal communication plays a crucial role, especially with regard to teachers’ non-verbal signals. Teachers may use non-verbal signals to

- encourage students to participate in a lesson,
- motivate them,

- emphasize expectations,
- monitor and control students' behavior,
- vary the tempo depending on students' reactions to the discussed agenda,
- help to come up with appropriate guess about the message,
- raise students' awareness of gestures used in the target language (Allen, 1999: 472–474).

As far as cross-cultural communication is concerned, teachers who represent a culture different than the learners' home culture and are unaware of the divergence of their students' code of non-verbal signals may not understand their pupils' intended message appropriately (Richards & Schmidt, 2010) or get a false impression of their students' attitudes towards classes. Students from some Asian countries may remain silent during classes in order to show high respect towards the teacher who is considered to be an authority and a source of knowledge (Dresser, 2005). In contrast, in countries such as the United States or Poland teachers appreciate it when students actively participate in classes, which is a sign of their engagement and attention.

Non-verbal communication outside the classroom

According to Allen (1999: 470), "in day to day nonclassroom communication, people rely on nonverbals both to produce (encode) and to understand (decode) communicative messages", which means that when trying to comprehend the message provided by the interlocutor, most of us rely on non-verbal signals as much as on verbal ones. We rely on body language especially in situations when non-verbal and verbal symbols are divergent and contradict each other (Negi, 2009). This happens because most of non-verbal signals are sent unconsciously (Wainwright, 2003; Macedonia & von Kriegstein, 2012) whereas a verbal message in most cases is carefully thought out (Wainwright, 2003). Moreover, people tend to use non-verbal signals when they are at loss for words or when they cannot come up with an appropriate word so they replace verbal signals with non-verbal ones.

Learner/native speaker discourse

Two native speakers of the same language rely heavily on their non-verbal signals while communicating especially in everyday situations. In cross-cultural communication it is much more significant because when speakers are not aware of the differences in non-verbal communication, their interlocutors may get a false impression or misunderstand the message. When the language learner is aware of the body language of the target culture, he or she can shun all the inconvenient situations that could occur in case of lack of knowledge of non-verbal communication. Richards and Schmidt (2010: 147) claim that:

There are often more problems in cross-cultural communication than in communication between people of the same cultural background. Each participant may interpret the other's speech according to his or her own cultural conventions and expectations. If the cultural conventions of the speakers are widely different, misinterpretations and misunderstandings can easily arise, even resulting in a total breakdown of communication.

Gregersen (2007: 52) also confirms the importance of non-verbal communication, especially when cross-cultural communication is concerned:

If speakers of the same language rely so heavily on nonverbal communication to achieve understanding, one can only imagine its critical role when considering an exchange between second language speakers and their potential language difficulties.

Oculistics

The first aspect of non-verbal communication is oculistics, namely the study of eye contact. It focuses on eye related signals sent during communication. According to Gregersen (2007: 59), "eye behavior has a higher probability of being noticed than any other bodily movements, so it is a much more prominent interaction signal." If eye behavior plays such an important role and is the first non-verbal signal that is noticed during the conversation, teachers, as well as learners, should be aware of whether the eye contact should be maintained or avoided. For instance, in some cultures, maintaining eye contact

may be a sign of great respect towards the interlocutor, whereas in others, it may be understood as lack of respect. Maintaining eye contact is considered rude, disrespectful or even humiliating in Africa, the United Kingdom and many Asian countries, such as India or Japan (Dresser, 2005; Axtell, 2007). Native speakers from these countries avoid eye contact in order to show respect towards the elder person, someone with a higher social status or in authority (Dresser, 2005; Richmond & Gestrin, 1998).

According to Gregersen (2007: 60):

Language learners who are not familiar with the cultural codes of eye behavior in Western countries and divert their gaze for other reasons dictated by their L1 culture (such as showing respect for authority, for example) may find themselves sending the wrong message both in the classroom and outside that they do not want to participate in a conversation.

Let us imagine a situation when the learner comes from Poland and the native speaker is Japanese. If the Polish learner tries to maintain eye contact, the Japanese will try to avoid it. At the end of the conversation, both speakers will be irritated and they will think that their interlocutor did not respect them when in reality both of them were highly respectful towards each other. Dresser (2005) provides an example of an Asian student who shuns eye contact with her American teacher in the classroom situation, which confused the teacher. This again confirms that not only students but also teachers may be unaware of the cross-cultural differences in non-verbal signs.

Eye contact is significant not only in the classroom environment but also in everyday communication. Learners should pay more attention to it when having a conversation with other people and find analogies with their body behavior.

Proxemics

Personal space depends on cultural background. For instance, in Latin America or Italy people allow closer contact than people from Europe or China (Axtell, 2007: 18). If a learner does not know how close he or she may come to the interlocutor, they may engage in the situation called *conversa-*

tional tango (Axtell, 2007: 18). Axtell provided an example of such a phenomenon; it occurs “when American and Latin men meet each other and the Latin steps forward, not realizing he is entering the American’s space. The American, naturally, takes a step backward” (Axtell, 2007: 18).

People should not intervene in the personal space of another person, because this causes a feeling of discomfort or even danger. The best solution is not to stand too close in order to shun possible “running away” of our interlocutors.

Haptics

Another significant aspect of non-verbal communication that varies across cultures is haptics. In the countries where personal space is smaller, the use of touch is much more extensive than in those countries where individuals stand further from each other. If students from China, Japan or the United Kingdom encounter native speakers from Brazil or Italy, they may feel uncomfortable because of the extensive use of touch by the native speakers during conversation (Axtell, 2007: 196, 189).

According to Samovar et al. (2007), cultures can be defined as either touch or non-touch. Touch cultures are those where you can for instance shake hands to greet a stranger or touch the interlocutor during conversation, whereas non-touch cultures may be defined as the ones where people tend to avoid the use of touch, especially with strangers (Samovar et al., 2007; Axtell, 2007).

In non-touch cultures, e.g. China and Japan, any kind of touch should be avoided (Axtell, 2007), but in touch cultures touch should be used cautiously. Shaking hands, the most common greeting used in Poland and Germany, cannot be used in India towards women (Axtell, 2007). In Poland and Germany it is also common to greet children by patting their heads, which is another gesture that might be found offensive in India, because the head is thought to be “a sacred part of the body” (Axtell, 2007: 206).

To avoid using haptics in an inappropriate way, the foreign language speaker may observe his or her interlocutor and the proximity between them or just study tourist guides which, nowadays, more and more often cover the agenda of non-verbal communication.

Kinesics

Kinesics concerns bodily movements such as gestures and facial expressions. There are a lot of gestures that may be ambiguous depending on the culture. Moreover, there are lots of gestures that are culture specific and are not used everywhere. Gestures are a subcategory of kinesics.

The most ambiguous gestures

The number of gestures that are used is so huge that the present paper will include just a few examples that may be difficult and most troublesome to use by foreign language learners in their discourse with native speakers.

There are some confusing gestures that are performed exclusively with the head. The first gesture that will be analyzed is *nodding the head* which is the movement of the head up and down. According to Samovar et al. (2007), this gesture is interpreted in Western cultures as an agreement, whereas in India it is a gesture used to express disagreement. A gesture antonymous to nodding the head is *moving head from side to side* which means agreement in India and disagreement in Western cultures (Samovar et al., 2007).

There are manifold gestures that can be performed with hands. Unfortunately many of them have a different meaning that depends upon cultural context. Some of them are as follows:

- hand beckon with palms down — moving the fingers back and forth with palms down — “come here” in Thailand or Italy, “go away” in Poland or Germany (Dresser, 2005),
- hand beckon with palms up — moving the fingers back and forth with palms up — “come here” in Western cultures, in Vietnam this gesture is used to summon the dog (Samovar et al., 2007),
- pointing — people use various gestures to point, for instance pointing with a forefinger is considered rude in Western cultures (Samovar et al., 2007; Dresser, 2005), in Germany and France a person points with his or her little finger and in Japan people tend to point with the entire hand (Samovar et al., 2007),
- thumbs up — the erect thumb is presented towards the interlocutor — means “O.K.” almost everywhere, but in Australia this

gesture seems to be highly offensive especially for people of the older generation (Morris, 1994; Dresser, 2005; Axtell, 2007),

- hand ring — thumb and forefinger tips are joined and create a circle — “everything is O.K.” (America), in Japan this gesture is used to depict money, in Tunisia people use this gesture to say “I’ll kill you”, in France it means “zero” or “worthless” (Morris, 1994; Axtell, 2007),



Figure 1.

Hand ring (Morris, 1994: 118)

- *hook'em horns* — erect forefinger and small finger create a symbol of horns, the hand is raised — a gesture used extensively at the University of Texas in America as a form of greeting, in Brazil it means “good luck”, but in Italy this gesture is used to tell the man that his wife is cheating on him (Axtell, 2007).
- There are lots of more complex gestures that can be performed with hands. They are usually performed with the assistance of the head. These are as follows (based on Morris, 1994):
- forefinger bite — putting one’s forefinger between teeth and biting it — showing anger in Italy and pity in Saudi Arabia.



Figure 2.

Forefinger bite (Morris, 1994: 81)

- *cheek brush* — the backs of fingers on the cheek move up and down — presenting a feeling of being bored in France, a way of indicating hesitation in America.



Figure 3.

Cheek brush (Morris, 1994: 16)

- *cheek screw* — the forefinger is moving in a circular motion into the cheek — in Italy gesture indicating that a woman is beautiful, in Southern Spain used to show that someone is effeminate, in Germany suggesting that a person is crazy.



Figure 4.

Cheek screw (Morris, 1994: 16)

- *chin flick* — backs of fingers placed under the cheek brush it a few times — disagreement in Mediterranean area, showing disinterest in Belgium, France, and Tunisia, a motion of disbelief in Northern France and Greece.



Figure 5.

Chin flick (Morris, 1994: 27)

- *forehead tap* — tapping one's forehead with a forefinger — in Holland people tap the middle of the forehead to indicate that someone is crazy, whereas in Europe when someone is tapping his or her right side of the forehead it means that someone is intelligent.

To use gestures consciously, one may try start using them freely in all possible situations in order to memorize them faster and make them look less artificial during conversations. It may be useful, especially when someone wants to learn gestures typical of another culture. As far as misleading gestures are concerned, it is recommended, especially to beginners, not to use them too often in order to avoid any kind of misunderstanding.

Posture

Posture is a way of positioning one's body or body parts, for instance when standing or sitting. By posture, people can express respect or disrespect, interest or lack of interest and negative or positive emotions. By positioning their body people may as well offend their interlocutor during conversation.

As for posture, some gestures seem to be harmless but may be extremely offensive in some cultures. The three most common ambiguous postures are:

- crossing one's legs — in most cultures it is a sign of being relaxed, but according to Samovar et al. (2007) it is a taboo in Korea,
- slouching — leaning back and sprawling one's legs as well as crossing one's legs is a sign of relaxation, but in countries where people tend to behave in a more formal manner, this way of sitting is considered as rude and such a person is thought to lack good manners (Samovar et al., 2007; Novinger, 2001),
- ankle-to-knee — putting an ankle of one leg on the knee of the other most commonly means a relaxed position, but in Thailand, Singapore or Saudi Arabia it may be taken as an insult, because when sitting in this position the person is showing the sole of the shoe (Morris, 1994; Remland, 2000).

It is always advised for both native speakers and foreign language learners to familiarize themselves with postures accepted in the target culture in order to avoid any inconvenience or bad impressions.

Summary

Marsh et al. (2003) claim that people have difficulty deciphering gestures and their intended messages across cultures. Hence, it is extremely important to raise awareness of the cultural differences and the tremendous role of non-verbal communication among language learners. Presenting gestures to students does not only help them become more communicative and comprehensible in their target language but it will also improve the quality of their learning. Allen (1995, 1999) proved that the students who learn expressions with gestures learn faster than those who do not learn corresponding gestures. According to Gullberg and McCafferty (2008), second language learners use gestures not only to fill in the gap created by their “lexical shortcomings” (Gullberg & McCafferty, 2008: 138) but also for “compensatory functions as requests for help [...] and negotiation procedures, clarification or illustration; regulatory functions like turnkeeping and turnyielding functions” (Gullberg, 1993: 63). If second language students use gestures more often than native speakers and non-verbal communication serves a variety of functions in their native/non-native speaker discourse, they should use them appropriately to the situation, which means that they should be aware of cultural differences and know gestures of the target language in order to be understood better.

Teachers can apply gestures during classes. Instead of using gestures appropriate for their culture, they could switch to the target culture. It is communication that should be improved when learning foreign language and there is no better way to improve it than through the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages. Brown (1987) claims that communicative competence of foreign language learners consists of both, verbal and non-verbal communication and the second component cannot be underestimated, otherwise the non-native speaker may not be able to send and receive the message unambiguously.

Of course we should also be aware that foreign language students always need some time to get used to the new rules concerning non-verbal

communication of the target culture (Dresser, 2005). Moreover, using non-verbal communication is “a dynamic process” and “the decision of when to use gestures and how gestures could be employed are influenced by the interlocutor’s background knowledge, and most importantly, by the ongoing interaction process in which the interlocutors are engaged” (Zhao, 2006: 15). But if the interlocutors are aware of cross-cultural differences as regards non-verbal communication, they will use appropriate gesticulation with ease and their communication abilities will be much better.

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