

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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The relevance of nonverbal communication in foreign language teaching is enormous. Mastering the verbal system of a foreign language does not guarantee effective communication because mastering the nonverbal systems of that foreign language is also essential. These verbal and nonverbal systems are not connected, and the use of one without the other might cause a disequilibrium.

Nonverbal communication is the transmission of messages or signals through a nonverbal platform such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and the distance between individuals. This form of communication is characterized by multiple channels and scholars argue that nonverbal communication can convey more meaning than verbal communication. Some scholars state that most people trust forms of nonverbal communication over verbal communication. Nonverbal communication accounts for 60–70 percent of human communication.

Nonverbal communication includes the use of visual cues such as body language (kinesics), distance (proxemics) and physical environment appearance, of voice (paralanguage) and of touch (haptics). It can also include the use of time (chronemics) and eye contact and the actions of looking while talking and listening, frequency of glances, patterns of fixation, pupil dilation, and blink rate (oculesics).

Just as speech contains nonverbal elements known as paralanguage, including voice quality, rate, pitch, loudness, and speaking style, as well as prosodic features such as rhythm, intonation, and stress, so written texts have nonverbal elements such as handwriting style, spatial arrangement of words, or the physical layout of a page. However, much of the study of nonverbal communication has focused on interaction between individuals, where it can be classified into three principal areas: environmental conditions where communication takes place, physical characteristics of the communicators, and behaviors of communicators during interaction.

Culture plays an important role in nonverbal communication, and it is one aspect that helps to influence how learning activities are organized. In many Indigenous American Communities, for example, there is often an emphasis on nonverbal communication, which acts as a valued means by which children learn. In this sense, learning is not dependent on verbal communication; rather, it is nonverbal communication which serves as a primary means of not only organizing interpersonal interactions, but also conveying cultural values, and children learn how to participate in this system from a young age.

Non-verbal communication is different from person to person and especially from one culture to another. Cultural background defines non-verbal communication as many forms of non-verbal communications like signs and signals are learned behavior. As there are differences in meanings of non-verbal communication, miscommunication can occur when inter-cultural people communicate. People can offend others without meaning due to their cultural differences in non-verbal communication. Facial expressions are mostly similar in most cultures as many of them like smile and cry are innate. According to researches, six expressions are universal; they are happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, anger and surprise. But it might also be different like the extent to which people show these feelings, in some cultures people express openly and in some people do not.

Western cultures mostly consider eye contact to be a good gesture. It shows attentiveness, confidence and honesty. Other cultures such as Asian, Middle Eastern, Hispanic and Native American do not take it as a good expression. It is vital to know what eye contact communicates before you visit a new culture and so that you can better connect with people in a foreign country.

A touch is another example of nonverbal communication which is normal between the same sex and forbidden between the opposite sex in Arab culture unless if the members are male relatives. Every culture is different in their nonverbal expression of emotion. Feelings of friendship exist universally in the world, however their expression differ. It is okay in some nations for men to hug and for women to hold hands; in other countries, these shows of warmth and liking are disheartened or forbidden.

Non-verbal gestures and greetings vary across countries, cultures, and religions. Bowing, kissing, saluting, touching fingers, tapping shoulders, clapping hands together, shaking fists, and pounding the chest are all gestures used to greet people, both formally and informally, in various countries around the world. Muslims also have strict cultural rules about touching.

Teachers can help the students to avoid such misunderstandings knowing and using the cues of nonverbal communication, students can increase their comprehension and expression and be more successful in communication process. There are a variety of ways to teach nonverbal communication.

One alternative is through readings. Several books and articles about nonverbal behavior are available.

A second possibility is found in interviews. Students might interview people from different cultures about acceptable behaviors in different situations. After students have surveyed many people about these issues, they can share their findings with the rest of the class.

Observations can also offer a very powerful tool for teaching nonverbal communication. Students can observe people, videos, pictures and television. Then they might compare these people's behavior in relation to the situation, culture, sex of participants, etc. It is very important for students to observe without judging; they need to understand that these behaviors are just different, not better or worse. Roleplay is another possible activity to teach nonverbal communication. This is important because students can experience what a person feels in inappropriate situation.

These are just some of the alternatives to incorporate nonverbal communication into the foreign language class. There are many other possibilities to explore for teachers who like to be creative.

List of references

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