



Nonverbal Communication in Multicultural Interactions in ELT

by [Zuzana Gorleku](#) and [Sherzod Amanbaev](#)

When the American actress Mae West said that she spoke two languages, “Body and English,” she did not realize how big of a role body language plays in teaching English learners (ELs).

Children whose mother tongue is not English have unique educational needs and we, as their teachers, have an obligation to make the necessary adjustments and modifications for meeting those needs. To enable these children to fully participate in the teaching and learning process, the most significant need for them is not only becoming competent in verbal communication in English, but also in the often overlooked, and perhaps more important, nonverbal dimension of communication.

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication

Before educators focus their attention on nonverbal communication (NVC), they must be knowledgeable about the importance of NVC and understand the role it plays in education and communication processes with their language learners. Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus at UCLA, developed the communication model “7-38-55” (Mehrabian, 1971). He found that conveying meaning in communication broke down in this way:

- 7% through spoken word
- 38% through tone of voice
- 55% through body language

This means that 93% of communication is conveyed nonverbally—it follows, then, that we *must* incorporate those nonverbal aspects in our teaching methods. We believe that nonverbal communication (NVC) is deeply rooted in the brain, because the first humans’ communication was dependent on NVC and the utterance of sounds. Mehrabian (1971) reported that a person’s NVC has an enormous influence on their communication with others and strongly influences the reactions they receive.

Additionally, research conducted by Morett et al. (2012) and Pan (2014) suggested that gestures may facilitate acquisition and retention of the target language.

Nonverbal Communication and Multicultural Interactions

Perhaps the greatest influence on the critical 93% of NVC is culture. Nieto (2009) indicated that culture encompasses every aspect of our life and dictates the nature of our interaction with others. Because ELs may come from different countries and cultures, their NVC may greatly differ from that of their classmates, which can have an enormous effect on their interactions and relationships.

The importance of NVC in multicultural interaction cannot be understated. Absent an understanding of NVC, the teaching and learning process can break down entirely: Expression would be not merely ineffective in conveying proper meaning, but misleading or downright wrong, and accurate evaluation of student progress would be impossible.

Types of Nonverbal Communication

The critically important NVC that helps us decode the messages includes

- body movements,
- physical distance between speakers,
- volume of voice,
- touch, and
- use of time in conversation.

We have grouped the NVC in the following categories based on information contained in [*Communication in the Real World*](#) (Anonymous, 2013).

Nonverbal Communication Categories

Kinesics: Refers to body movements, including postures, facial expressions, eye contact, head movement, and gestures

Proxemics: Refers to the space and distance, physically, between communicators

Vocalics: Refers to the vocalized but not verbal aspects of NVC, including tone of voice, speaking rate, volume, tone, and vocal quality

Chronemics: Refers to how time affects communication/use of time in conversation—willingness to wait, punctuality, and interaction between interlocutors

Haptics: Refers to touch

Based on our personal and professional experience working with ELs in multiple countries and on multiple continents, nonverbal features of communication should receive more attention in teaching ELs.

Nonverbal Communication in the Classroom

Bachmann (1973) has taught us that one of the most important English language teaching goals is that the teachers themselves must first understand the rich array of their own NVC. Following this, they can help their students understand, recognize, and incorporate relevant and appropriate NVC factors, stemming from the target culture, while conversing in English. Bachmann (1973) shared a few insightful ideas of how ESL teachers could spark students' interest to achieve this goal:

- Dialogues should be acted out in the classroom, incorporating the critical elements of body language.
- Films could be used for teaching the target culture's NVC, with teachers calling students' attention to the body language used in the film.
- Role-playing can be very effective because various gestures, facial expressions, and distances can be illustrated and practiced.

Speakers' proficiency in second language NVC has a significant influence on their competence in communicating in the second language. NVC can send a strong message that may support or conflict with what is being said with words. Knowing your learners is an important part of teaching NVC: Once you have a working understanding of your students' cultures, you will be better able to understand how it influences your students' NVC, which is culture specific.

Based on our literature review and anecdotes from personal experience (see the Appendix), we propose the chart shown in Figure 1; it illustrates the impact of intercultural competence on NVC, which consequently affects (latent) variables in the educational process (circled).

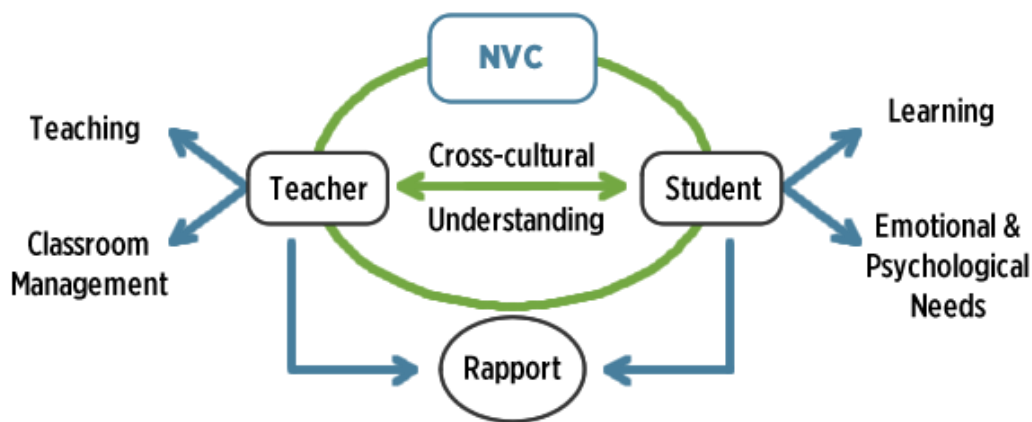


Figure 1. The impact of cross-cultural understanding on nonverbal communication between teacher and English language student.

As seen in Figure 1, NVC between a teacher and their English language student is a cyclical process during production of the message, for both individuals. For this process to flow smoothly, it is necessary to have certain shared knowledge about each other's cultures.

Encouraging Cross-Cultural Understanding Between Teacher and Student

Teachers' misinterpretations of ELs' NVC can be alleviated in a number of ways, including the following.

Engage in cross-cultural professional development. Professional development specifically targeting the growth of cross-cultural skills will help educators who work with ELs appreciate other cultures and people who are different from them and also accept the fact that *different* does not mean *bad*.

Ask questions. Teachers of ELs should ask questions to find out who their students are, what they like, what they value, what they believe in, how they learn, and so on. When we listen to our students' stories, seek to know the things that matter to them, and show our genuine interest in their lives, the doors to their hearts open and an incredible connection is created.

Share about yourself. We should be equally interested in sharing aspects of our own language, customs, and traditions; this mutual cultural exchange helps us to learn about each other, better understand differences, and conclude what is important and unique in the cultures we have in the classrooms.

Build a safe, welcoming, and positive environment. Having positive teacher–student rapport can establish a comfortable classroom environment where students feel happy and relaxed. This can lead to students being more invested in class and actively participating in the teaching and learning process (Pack, 2018).

A Note in Closing

We would like to emphasize that we do not wish to teach NVC formally to our ELs in order to make them look more like native speakers. Birdwhistel (as cited in Bachman, 1973) explained that doing so might lead to the students “being judged insincere and affected” (p. 10). Imitations are insufficient. Rather, students should be able “to recognize and...use appropriate gestures and facial expressions for a given situation” (p. 10).

We recommend teachers learn about [observational learning](#) and its stages (attention, retention/memory, motor/initiation, and motivation) to better assist their ELs to succeed in NVC. Our findings suggest that cross-cultural knowledge plays a significant role in understanding NVC in multicultural interactions between a teacher and ELs. This comprehension positively affects the overall *educational* process. The existing research focusing on multicultural NVC is notably limited and provides insufficient content particular to decoding students' NVC.

References

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Appendix: Anecdotes

The following anecdotes demonstrate that comprehension of nonverbal communication (NVC) in cross-cultural interactions between a teacher and English learners plays a significant role in the teaching and learning process.

Kinesics

Refers to body movements, including postures, facial expressions, eye contact, head movement, and gestures.

Bulgaria

I had a student from Bulgaria in my ESL class. While I was explaining uses of the verb *to be* in English, I was continually checking my student's understanding by asking Yes/No questions. Though the majority of my students were nodding their heads and showing understanding, the Bulgarian student's head movement repeatedly indicated "No." I was concerned and asked him to come to my office after class to make sure that the concept of the verb *to be* was clear to him.

He walked in with his Bulgarian friend, whose English was more advanced; his friend told me that my student did not have any problems with the lesson being explained in class. To the contrary, he was able to understand the concept immediately. I was perplexed and shared with him how he constantly shook his head "no." The friend simply explained that nodding one's head indicated "no" in Bulgaria, while shaking one's head is a sign of "yes." This new knowledge about the intentions behind my Bulgarian student's head movement assisted me in my instructional practice.

India

Two international students from Kerala, India, asked me to provide them with recommendation letters. As I handed them the letters, they glanced over them and their heads started wobbling. It looked like a cross between a shake and a nod. Did it mean "yes"? Did it mean "no"? I remember how confused I felt—and I asked about it. They explained that the head wobble meant a silent "yes" in India. The awareness of the Indian students' nonverbal feature had a profound effect on my communication with them and it created a more friendly environment in our classroom.

Proxemics

Refers to the space and distance, physically, between communicators.

Saudi Arabia

It was at the beginning of my ESL teaching career, and I was teaching a group of students from a Middle Eastern country. I was doing my first one-on-one conferencing with them after their drafted composition. One of the students approached my desk and stood behind me so close that I could feel his breath on my neck. Once I felt my personal space was violated, I quickly got up from the chair and took a few steps back to make sure that I was in a "comfortable zone."

I could see that my student was startled by my sudden action. I found out later that in some Middle Eastern countries, their social space equates to what those from the United States might consider intimate space, and that “people cannot talk comfortably with one another until they are very close to each other” (Hall, 1976, p. 209). My students appreciated me sharing and modeling the differences between the United States and their proxemics.

Romania and India

A colleague of mine shared a story with me in which she described a situation from her ESL class. Shortly after she assigned pair work to her students, a female Romanian student called on her and complained about her assigned male work partner from India, who pulled his chair too close to hers—so that he was almost touching her with his elbow. She said “I move, he also moves. I do not like it!”

My colleague said she was embarrassed about the fact that she used to put all English language learners under the same “ESL umbrella” and did not realize how unique each and every one was. She says, “now I know that NVC speaks differently in each culture.”

Reference

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