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## **Nonverbal messages across cultures: Introducing nonverbal communication to university students**

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**Abstract.** Nonverbal messages represent an important part of everyday communication. People are seldom aware of them, and thus disregard their individual and cultural variability, in other words, their potential for misunderstandings. The present paper aims to raise students' awareness of the importance of nonverbal messages for a successful (intercultural) communicative event, and to introduce them to various nonverbal codes. For this, it proposes several activities focusing on nonverbal communication, in general, and on its different codes, in particular. These can be done in (foreign) language and communication classes to prepare students for real-life multicultural communicative events.

**Keywords.** Nonverbal communication, intercultural communication, cultural awareness, teaching.

### **1. Introduction**

Communication plays a key role in people's lives. From birth till death, people continuously communicate. They do it with family members, friends, colleagues, and strangers, personally and professionally, consciously and unconsciously, face-to-face and online, synchronously and asynchronously, orally and in writing. Communication is carried out through various codes, namely verbal and nonverbal, and is influenced by several factors, such as context and culture.

The way people communicate with each other is both innate and learned. Learning takes place at home, school, and work situations, throughout the entire life. Considering the current internationalized society, it can be said that communication has become global and culture sensitive. As such, mastering the skills to carry out a successful communication has become more important than ever. People should be trained from early childhood to become good communicators. School should significantly contribute to this training, paying attention to various issues, such as interpersonal and intercultural ones, at the same time.

The present paper focuses on the nonverbal code and its importance for a successful (intercultural) communication. Misinterpreting it may lead to "intercultural miscommunication, friction, and confusion" (Andersen, 2012: 294). Since there is no dictionary for nonverbal cues, training in the field is necessary. The paper aims to contribute to the training of better nonverbal communicators. It briefly introduces the characteristics of nonverbal communication and its main codes, e.g. physical appearance, body movement, facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, touch, paralanguage, space and distance, time, and silence, highlighting their cultural diversity. Then, it proposes several activities to do in class, especially at a university level. These can be

useful for (foreign) language and communication classes, in general, and for translation, interpreting and intercultural communication classes, in particular.

## **2. Nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal behavior is “an important symbol system” (Samovar et al., 2010: 244), being understood, learnt, and performed before the verbal one. It communicates specific information and emotions, while contributing significantly to judging people’s internal states, creating impressions, and managing interaction (Samovar et al., 2010). Furthermore, it mirrors personal and cultural identities (Andersen, 2012).

Nonverbal communication involves “all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver” (Samovar et al., 2010: 256). This perspective implies its unintentional and multidimensional characteristics (Samovar et al., 2010). In other words, most of the nonverbal messages delivered are unintentional, i.e. without a particular intention to be meaningful to other persons. At the same time, they do not usually appear in isolation, but are accompanied by language. They can repeat, complement, and/or substitute a verbal action, and regulate and/or contradict a communicative event (Pânișoară, 2015; Samovar et al., 2010). This complexity and variation make nonverbal cues easily misinterpreted.

While teaching and learning nonverbal communication, various interrelated aspects should be considered, such as ambiguity, contextuality and cultural dependency. Nonverbal communication may be ambiguous as it is contextual and, thus, influenced by multiple factors, individual and cultural differences being among them. That is why, attention should be paid to its cues before classifying and generalizing nonverbal behavior (Samovar et al., 2010). Usually, according to Samovar et al. (2010: 248) “[i]t is the setting (context) that offers norms and guidelines for [one’s] interpersonal actions”. This aspect is important in interaction and crucial in intercultural exchanges, as it indicates particular nonverbal cues to be deciphered for the construction of meaning.

Nonverbal messages are frequently classified in two comprehensive categories (Samovar et al., 2010). The first category includes those that are produced by the body, such as appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage. The second category, in turn, contains the nonverbal messages combined with the context, such as space, time, and silence. These nonverbal codes are briefly presented below.

### *2.1. Physical appearance*

Physical appearance is the most obvious and present nonverbal code. People’s desire to influence the messages sent with their bodies is very intense (Samovar et al., 2010), as they are continuously concerned with the way they appear to others. Appearance is related to “relatively stable physical features of human beings such as gender, height, weight, skin color, and body shape, as well as [to] the strategic use of artifacts [...] like clothing, jewelry, make-up, hairstyles, and accessories” (Andersen, 2012: 295). Each and every aspect is important during communication, particularly during initial encounters (Andersen, 2012) since that is the moment when a first impression about somebody is made.

### *2.2. Body movement*

Another nonverbal code that communicates meaning is kinesics. The kinesic cues refer to body shifts and movements, such as posture, sitting positions and gestures. They can transmit messages related to one’s attitude towards others, e.g. leaning forward to indicate being

comfortable with others, emotional states, e.g. tapping on a table being nervous, and the desire to control the environment, e.g. waving the hand to ward off a fly (Samovar et al., 2010).

### *2.3. Facial expressions*

Facial expressions have an important role to play in communication. They may show dominance or submissiveness, reflect a course of action, indicate interest and involvement, or point out comprehension (Samovar et al., 2010). Moreover, typical of nonverbal communication, the “differences in the appearance of facial expressions of emotion across cultures reveal that these facial expressions contain nonverbal ‘accents’ that identify the expresser’s nationality or culture” (Andersen, 2012: 296).

### *2.4. Eye contact and gaze*

The study of the messages sent by the eyes through movements, gaze, blinks, or pupil dilatation, is called oculusics. The possible messages are numerous and varied. According to Samovar et al. (2010: 262), they “express emotions, monitor feedback, indicate degrees of attentiveness, influence changes in attitude, define power and status relationships, and take on a central role in impression management”.

### *2.5. Touch*

Haptic communication is the first communication code acquired by people, being developed since birth (Gherheș, 2019). Through touch, the child discovers the world and builds relations. The reasons of touching and the implications generated by being touched provide messages about communicative exchanges. Touch behavior may be related to professional, personal, and social settings. Differences exist across cultures in relation to the amount, location, type, and private manifestation of touch (Anderson).

### *2.6. Paralanguage*

This code is concerned with “the communicative characteristics of the voice and with how people use their voices” (Samovar et al., 2010: 267). Also referred to as vocalics, it usually includes vocal qualifiers, such as volume, pitch, tempo, resonance, and tone, vocal characterizers, such as laughing and crying, and vocal segregates, such as fillers like “hmmm” (Samovar et al., 2010: 267). It is worth mentioning that some scholars classify paralanguage as belonging to verbal communication or as a distinct code at the border between the two, influencing both nonverbal and verbal codes of communication (Pânișoară, 2015).

### *2.7. Space and distance*

Even if this code, as well as the next two discussed, does not depend on the communicator, and is not part of the body, it still communicates meaning. As pointed out by Samovar et al. (2010: 269) “the flow and shift of distance between [interlocutors] are as much a part of the communication experience as the words being sent back and forth”. Proxemics studies aspects such as personal space, territory, seating and furniture arrangements, and the meanings assigned to this type of behavior (Andersen, 2012; Samovar et al., 2010), all of them influencing and being influenced by (intercultural) communication.

### *2.8. Time*

The study of time in relation to its meaning, usage and communication is known as chronemics. Considering that time orientation and perception vary from one culture to another, this code of nonverbal communication has been thoroughly researched by intercultural studies (Andersen,

2012). Several aspects have been paid attention to, such as informal time, particularly punctuality and pace, orientation to past, present and future, and the perception and use of time as monochronic (i.e. linear and segmented) and polychronic (i.e. flexible and less tangible) (Samovar et al., 2010).

### 2.9. *Silence*

Choosing not to speak may also assign nonverbal meaning to a communicative exchange. According to Samovar et al. (2010: 280), “[s]ilence can be a powerful message”, since it offers interlocutors the chance to think, suppress an emotion, encode a response, start another idea or provide feedback. At the same time, it can “cause considerable disruption in conversation” (Archer et al., 2012: 116), which may run unsmoothly, and lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions.

## 3. **Activities**

Next, several activities are proposed for teaching students nonverbal behavior, and training them in the appropriate skills. The focus is first on general aspects, aiming to make students (more) aware of their own individual and cultural pattern. After raising their awareness of the importance of nonverbal communication, particular activities are suggested in order to highlight cultural sensitivity, pointing out the different nonverbal codes. Nonverbal signals are frequently misinterpreted by people coming from different cultures. As such, following Samovar et al. (2010: 249), “learning about the alliance between culture and nonverbal behavior will help” students of intercultural communication to improve the way in which they “engage in intercultural interactions”. Moreover, considering that nonverbal communication reveals cultural traits, “by understanding the cultural differences in nonverbal behavior, [they] will not only be able to understand some of the messages being generated during the interaction, but [they] will also be able to gather cues about underlying attitudes and values” (249).

### 3.1. *General activities*

Several activities can be done in class in order to raise students’ awareness of nonverbal communication, such as playing mime, watching movies with or without audio, telling stories, role-plays, observations, discussions and/or case studies, focusing on individual and cultural aspects. Next, various possibilities are presented.

*3.1.1. Activity 1: Nonverbal and verbal communication.* This activity (adapted from Pânișoară, 2015: 119) highlights the connection between the two codes of communication. The teacher divides students into groups of three, and gives them a text with a little story. One of them is the listener, while the other two tell the story. The first one does it totally nonverbally, i.e. without verbal actions, while the other does it only verbally, without any nonverbal reaction. The listener has to point out the differences between the understandings of the two versions of the story. All the students should afterwards discuss the implications of the two codes of communication, i.e. nonverbal and verbal.

*3.1.2. Activity 2: Discussion.* Several topics could be approached in class, either in pairs or groups, under the form of debates or general discussions, to make students reflect on nonverbal communication and its relation to culture. Possible examples are:

- a) What do you understand by nonverbal communication?
- b) How often do you use nonverbal communication?
- c) Is nonverbal communication culturally sensitive? Provide examples.

- d) Why is it useful to understand the nonverbal language of a culture? (Samovar et al., 2010: 284)
- e) In what situations might you need to interpret the nonverbal behavior of someone from another culture? What problems could arise from not understanding differences in nonverbal behavior? (Samovar et al., 2010: 284)
- f) Are there more cross-cultural nonverbal behaviors that are alike or more that are different? (Samovar et al., 2010: 284)
- g) From your personal experiences, can you think of some diverse ways that people from various cultures greet, show emotion, and beckon? (Andersen, 2012: 313)

*3.1.3. Activity 3: Movie watching: Observing body language.* In order to introduce students to the different types of nonverbal communication, the next activity (Intercultural Training Exercise Pack, 2019: 33-34) could be done. As indicated by research (Intercultural Training Exercise Pack, 2019; Stoian, forthcoming), observation skills are essential for a successful (intercultural) communication exchange. As such, this activity aims to develop students' ability to focus and observe various important elements of body language, while speculating on their meaning.

The teacher prepares in advance a short video presenting an interaction between people from another country. The same activity could be done with people from the same country, focusing thus on national culture and nonverbal patterns. Documentaries or news reports could be used. Students are given a handout on body language, which they have to fill in while watching the video. They are informed on the purpose of the activity, i.e. to develop and practice observation skills. They also receive some background information regarding the context of the video, e.g. the identity of the participants or the situation in which they are. The video may be watched twice so that the students manage to get the meaning.

The handout they receive is the following:

Observing Body Language handout (Intercultural Training Exercise Pack, 2019: 34)

- a) Watch the video.
- b) Closely observe how people dress, greet, and interact with each other. While watching, please tick the boxes that match your observations and reflect on what the individuals concerned are trying to communicate.

*Dress code*

Casual  Uniformed  Colorful  Formal  Eccentric  Neutral

What are the individuals concerned trying to communicate through their dress code?

*Greetings*

Collective greeting  Hugging  No touching  Neutral face  No greeting  
 Handshaking  Smiling  Individual greeting  Kissing  Touching  Emotion

What are the individuals concerned trying to communicate through their greetings?

*Gestures and personal space*

Stand close  Keep their distance  Avoid physical contact  Good eye contact  
 Avoid eye contact

What are the individuals concerned trying to communicate through their gestures and personal space?

*General impression of the interaction*

Formal  Hierarchical  Laid-back  Informal  Organized

What are your overall impressions of the communication?

After filling in the handout, it could be discussed in class, as probably students will have their own interpretations of the video watched. They could also be encouraged to speculate on their own nonverbal behavior in the situation presented.

The same activity could be done focusing on a real-life situation. Students may observe the same aspects pointed in the handout, but in a public place, such as an airport, mall, or other spaces where people from different cultures get together and communicate.

*3.1.4. Activity 4: Personal checklist.* This activity (adapted from Cross-cultural Working – Toolkit, 2019: 1) is also focused on different types of nonverbal communication, but it is centered on inner observation instead of outer one. Students receive a checklist in which they choose between “Yes”, “No” and “I don’t know”. In case their answer is the last one, they have to provide a resource where they could find the answer to such cultural question. The questions are:

- a) Do I have a comfortable personal space in my interactions?
- b) How do I use touch?
- c) Is there anything particular I need to be careful about in giving or receiving things?
- d) Do I frequently use any particular gestures?
- e) Which is my acceptable level of eye contact?
- f) Do I know what body language is taboo in my culture?

This activity highlights individual nonverbal patterns that could be generalized to national cultural ones. The students’ answers are discussed in class in order to observe individual variability and cultural similarity.

The same activity could be done, paying attention to other culture than one’s own. The teacher could propose one, possibly English, French, or German, since these are the ones usually studied at school. S/he can also let the student choose. Far-away cultures, such as Japanese or Arab, could be discussed for the sake of pointing out major differences. The same indications are kept, the questions (Cross-cultural Working – Toolkit, 2019: 1) being slightly different:

- a) Should I expect differences in what is thought of as appropriate ‘personal space’?
- b) Should I anticipate differences in the way my counterparts use touch?
- c) Is there anything particular I need to be careful about in giving or receiving business cards?
- d) Should I avoid any particular gestures?
- e) Should I expect differences in the level of acceptable eye contact?
- f) Do I know what body language is taboo?

*3.1.5. Activity 5: Practicing nonverbal skills.* Understanding, identifying, and reflecting on nonverbal communication is not enough for the training of the required skills in this field. Students need also to practice, either in real-life situations or by role-plays. The activity proposed (adapted from Fleming) is a role-play, in which students prepare a silent play, and have an opportunity to communicate nonverbal messages. Students are divided into three groups, screenwriters, actors, and spectators. The students acting as screenwriters have to write a silent play scene, paying attention to the following aspects:

- (a) The scene starts with a person doing an obvious task, like eating or driving.
- (b) The initial scene is interrupted by somebody else’s entrance. The appearance of the new actor/s has a big impact.
- (c) A physical commotion takes place.
- (d) The problem is resolved.

The acting group performs nonverbally the script written by their colleagues, whereas the spectators watch the play, trying to guess the story, including the conflict and resolution. At the

end, a discussion is carried, in which students are asked to present their feelings and thoughts regarding their roles.

### 3.2. Focused activities

Several activities can be done in class to familiarize students with a specific nonverbal code. All those proposed here follow a similar pattern. Students are first introduced to the theory (briefly described in section 2). Secondly, they are presented with an example of cultural difference regarding the discussed nonverbal code, in order to raise their awareness of cultural sensitivity. Then, in case the example is not from their own culture, they are asked to think about and investigate what is the national custom. In the end, the students receive an activity so that they become more aware of the importance of the nonverbal message and develop their nonverbal skills.

*3.2.1. Physical appearance.* This nonverbal code contains many elements, so a wide array of activities can be done. The focus of the present one is on clothing, which clearly makes a statement about one's identity. Particular examples are discussed, such as the conservative and elegant clothes of Germans and Argentinians, the loose robes of Muslim women and men, the black attire of the Amish in the United States or the national traditional garments, e.g. the kimonos in Japan (Samovar et al., 2010). Students are then asked to think about what clothing means in their culture and whether there are any patterns of interpretation.

Finally, they have to provide their interpretation of the following nonverbal actions (adapted from Samovar et al., 2010: 284):

- a) An elderly woman dresses entirely in black.
- b) A child dresses in uniform.
- c) A young man dresses entirely in black.
- d) A woman dresses entirely in white.
- e) A middle-aged man is wearing a suit during the day.

*3.2.2. Body movement.* This activity focuses on gestures, as types of body movement. Attention is drawn to the multitude of existing gestures, e.g. pointing, waving, placing hands on hips, or folding arms, and to their cultural diversity. For example, in some cultures, such as Romanian and American, people move one's head from side to side in order to signal "no", i.e. disagreement, while in Bulgarian and Indian cultures, the same movement signals the opposite, i.e. agreement. Students are asked to think about their own culture and reflect on the meaning of particular gestures, such as crossing fingers, pointing people, or showing thumbs up.

Afterwards, they have to analyze the meaning of the following gestures from their own cultural perspective (adapted from Samovar et al., 2010: 284; Stoian & Şimon, 2017: 6349):

- a) Two people are speaking loudly, waving their arms, and using many gestures.
- b) A customer in a restaurant waves his hand over his head and snaps his fingers loudly.
- c) An adult pats a child's head.
- d) At a party, a guest keeps the hands by her body without doing any gesture.
- e) Two men kiss in public.

*3.2.3. Facial expressions.* Students are presented with particular cultural differences in the expression of emotions through facial signs. Many cultures, such as Italian, exaggerate emotions, whereas others, such as Japanese, hide their public expression. For example, Americans smile a lot showing happiness or friendliness, Germans smile less and only to known people, while Japanese smile to accept commands, mask emotion or avoid answering a question

(Samovar et al., 2010). Students are then asked to think about the facial signs used in their own culture to express main emotions.

Finally, they have to locate pictures from magazines and/or newspapers that they believe show the next facial expressions: (a) anger, (b) joy, (c) sadness, (d) fear, and (e) revulsion, and show them to people from various cultures, paying attention to what interpretations these give to the facial expressions (Samovar et al., 2010: 284).

*3.2.4. Eye contact and gaze.* Direct eye contact is very important in communication, as it can be rude or not, depending on gender, class, and culture. Some examples are provided to students, such as the Japanese or Caribbean, who consider prolonged eye contact as rude, threatening, disrespectful, and that is why they look down or away, or even close their eyes. For the Americans, the norm is the opposite. Students are then asked which they think is the norm in their culture as far as eye contact is concerned.

Next, the following activity (adapted from Pânișoară, 2015: 103) is proposed in order to analyze, reflect, and see the importance of eye contact. Students are suggested to go to a public place, such as a cafeteria or the entrance of the university, with a colleague or friend, X, and ask X to stay there without doing anything. Then, they take there another friend or colleague, Y (the two must not know each other), place Y at 5 meters from X and ask Y to stare at X. Students have to observe how X behaves under such a visual aggression. The observations are then to be discussed in class, paying attention to gender, age and other factors that could have influenced the nonverbal communication between X and Y.

*3.2.5. Touch.* Haptic communication may be considered a taboo in many cultures. Students are asked to think whether there are such touch taboos in their own culture. Then, they are told that people in Spain or Italy kiss and hug family members and friends when they meet, behavior that would be frowned in places such as Japan and Scandinavia (Samovar et al., 2010).

The activity (adapted from Peace Corps, 2011: 94) proposed in this case is an observation one. Students have to search for at least four of the following people: (a) two men, (b) two women, (c) husband and wife, (d) unrelated man and woman, (e) parent and child, (f) older and younger person, (g) boss and subordinate, (h) male boss and female subordinate, (i) female boss and male subordinate, and observe how much and in which parts of the body they touch each other. If possible, at least in two cases, the students have to point out the differences, if any, between touching behavior in public and in private.

*3.2.6. Paralanguage.* This code is very complex, cultural differences existing in terms of volume, tempo, pitch range, pitch height and so on. Students are presented with some examples regarding volume. Arabs speak loudly, since this means strength and sincerity, whereas Philippines speak softly as a sign of good education (Samovar et al., 2010). Then, students are encouraged to think of themselves and their cultures.

Afterwards, they receive a five-minute video in an unknown language, without subtitles, and have to infer meaning. Attention is to be paid to the sound of the characters' voice, their expressed emotions, their rhetoric activity and even their personalities. Students' observations are further compared and discussed in class.

*3.2.7. Space and distance.* The activity chosen for this nonverbal code focuses on personal space, which is closely related to culture and cultural values (Andersen, 2012; Samovar et al., 2010). Students are presented with the tendency of individualistic cultures, such as English, American or German, to value intimacy and thus prefer more space, as opposed to collectivistic

cultures, such as Arab or Latin American, who prefer closeness and interdependency (Samovar et al., 2010).

Then, they are proposed to observe how personal space is considered in their surroundings. Students are asked to pay attention to how close different type of people stand to each other in various settings. The people observed are (a) two men, (b) two women, (c) man and woman, (d) two children, (e) older and younger person, (f) parent and child (g) husband and wife, and (h) boss and subordinate. The settings are as follows:

- (i) In normal conversation, at work or on the street
- (ii) In line at the post office, bank, cinema, etc.
- (iii) In an elevator, crowded or uncrowded (adapted from Peace Corps, 2011: 92).

**3.2.8. Time.** Punctuality plays an important part in nonverbal communication, especially in intercultural contexts. Students are indicated that in the USA, a boss, a rock star, or a physician can arrive late, while a secretary, a warm-up band or a food caterer cannot. In Latin America or Spain, to be on time is considered rude, whereas in Germany to be late is rude. Then, students are indicated to think about the meaning of punctuality in their own culture and in relation to different persons, such as family members, teachers, or doctors.

Next, they are proposed an activity (Samovar et al., 2010: 279) in which they have to observe, compare, and reflect. The following situation is considered: David Thorn was sent to Mexico by his employer, a computer chip company, to try to negotiate a large contract that would allow his company to start producing chips in Mexico. The contract would mean a savings of millions of dollars for the company. His Mexican contact person, Santiago Guzman, invited David to a dinner party that he and his wife were hosting. Santiago told David the party would start around eight on Friday night. David arrived a few minutes before eight so he could make a good impression. When he arrived, Santiago and his wife were still dressing and had not even begun to prepare to receive guests. Students are asked to analyze the situation, the participants, and the facts, paying attention to their cultural perception of punctuality, and indicate what went wrong.

**3.2.9. Silence.** Since knowing when and where to be silent and the meaning attached to it is highly important in a culture (Samovar et al., 2010), attention should be paid to silence during communication and language classes. Several examples are pointed out to students, such as British and American cultures who consider silence awkward and avoid it, or the Finnish people who value silence and consider it a sign of respect (Archer et al., 2012). Students are asked to reflect on their own culture and the meaning it assigns to silence.

Then, they are presented with a real-life situation from work, in which an American female boss pays a compliment to a Chinese female subordinate. The compliment says “I want to thank you for doing a wonderful job. You’re very, very nice” (Fong, 2012: 277). The Chinese woman answers by silence. The students are asked to explain the compliment exchange and to figure out the meaning of silence in this case, paying attention to cultural differences.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Nonverbal messages are continuously used by people to communicate meaning, usually in the company of verbal ones. Involving shared meanings, they are learned and passed on from generation to generation (Samovar et al., 2010). Since most of the nonverbal behaviors “show a considerable imprint of culture” (Andersen, 2012: 294), people need to take them into consideration while communicating within their culture and across other cultures. In order to raise such awareness, training is necessary.

The present paper has proposed several activities to focus on nonverbal communication in general. It has also suggested various tasks to highlight the different nonverbal codes, i.e. physical appearance, body movement, facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, touch, paralanguage, space and distance, time, and silence. Their main goal is to raise students' awareness of the importance of nonverbal cues for a successful (intercultural) communication. The exercises also aim to make students develop skills in the field and to provide them with an opportunity to practice such skills. All in all, the activities presented can be used during (foreign) language and communication classes, in general, and during translation, interpreting and intercultural communication classes, in particular.

To conclude, nonverbal behavior is an essential component of communication. As pointed out by Andersen (2012: 294), “[o]nly through the experience of cultural differences via education or travel can cultural variations in nonverbal behavior be understood and appreciated”. As such, schools should prepare students for real-life situations, and equip them with the right knowledge and skills to cope with continuously changing contexts.

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