

## APPLYING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM

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### SUMMARY

Nonverbal communication (NVC) plays a very important role in interaction with people. It is hard to say that we communicate effectively only using verbal language without body language. From my own experiences and observations as a teacher of English at Thai Nguyen University of Education, working with Vietnamese learners' particular learning styles and watching students struggle for words to express themselves more effectively, we have drawn certain conclusions. Why do we not try to use nonverbal communication (NVC) in general and body language in particular as a method for strengthening or reinforcing verbal communication?

Thus, all our efforts in this study will relate contemporary literature on NVC and then attempt to propose some suggestions for teaching English learners in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** *Nonverbal communication, verbal communication, body language, paralanguage, gestures, eye contact, communicative language teaching, textbook*

### General Views on Nonverbal Communication

Language studies traditionally have emphasized verbal and written language, but recently have begun to consider communication that takes place without words. In some types of communication people express more nonverbally.

According to Schneller (quoted in Lynch, 1988: 120), since the 1950s more attention has been paid to NVC because of the realization that verbal language is only "one of the various human communication channels". As estimated by Birdwhistell (cited in Condon and Yousef, 1981), more than 60 percent of human communication is carried out through nonverbal language. Therefore, NVC is seen as undeniably important in communication, either with in or across a culture.

Lustig's words (1996: 187) "nonverbal communication is a multichanneled process that is usually performed simultaneously; it typically involves a subtle set of nonlinguistic behaviours that are often enacted subconsciously. Nonverbal behaviour can become part of the communication process

when someone intentionally tries to convey a message or when someone attributes meaning to the nonverbal behaviour of another, whether or not the person intend to communicate a particular meaning". Levine and Adelman (1993: 100) also share the view when stating that "nonverbal communicational is silent language, including the use of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and conversational distances". By giving these definitions, the three researchers have focused on the characteristics of nonverbal communication, its multi-channeled process and its both subconscious and intentional occurrences. However, they see it as an umbrella term covering merely nonlinguistic behaviours, which is insufficient to depict comprehensive picture of nonverbal communication. This is precisely because contemporary researchers on this field have insisted on the existence of linguistic aspects of nonverbal communication namely paralanguage.

Bostrom (1988: 160) has a more general view with higher consciousness of the presence of paralanguage. "direct face to face communication has a large channel capacity

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- you can send more than you can with a written message. This additional message capacity stems from the things that people do while they are speaking: adopt various positions, take different actions, make different movement, and produce subtle variations with their voices." Robinson, nevertheless, only points out the existence of paralanguage and body language factors not object language and environmental language which has been proved theoretically and practically to be indispensable in nonverbal communication.

### Nonverbal Communication in Language Teaching

In language teaching, the role of NVC has loomed large. Mehrabian (quoted in Wolfgang, 1984:177) has shown that in teaching, "more frequent use of gestures has been associated with more affiliative classroom style which elicits liking and cooperation from others". He also analyzes how a teacher's facial expressiveness (such as smiling) attracts more attention and responses from students than her speech (p.161). Keith, Tornatzky, and Pettigrew also find that the more a teacher uses the blackboard, the less effective a class becomes due to an insufficient amount of NVC. Grant and Henning (cited by Schneller, in Lynch, 1988:124) observe that 82 percent of a teacher's messages come via NVC, especially expressions of feelings. Witt and Wheelless (1999) find that when teachers engage in nonverbally immediate behavior, students are more satisfied and learn more. They argue that immediate behaviors adopted by classroom teacher, such as communicating from a close distance, smiling, engaging in eye contact, and making gestures, increases the learners' commitment level. Discussing learning styles, Stefani has observed that NVC is a subtle form of culture that can "actively impede the learning process" (p.352).

With regard to communicative language teaching (CLT), at the practical classroom end, where a majority of activities include group work and pair work, NVC proves to be quite necessary. The above mentioned reports show that NVC plays an irreplaceable part in classroom atmosphere and successful learning. Hence, teachers should be more aware of the role NVC plays in teaching, and should try to turn the unconscious use of NVC into a conscious one to make the class a more effective learning environment.

### Implications for English Language Teaching in Vietnam

Based on the above research and theory, we can find that NVC is quite necessary for better English teaching and learning in Vietnam, especially at the tertiary level. The main challenges, however, is how to use NVC most effectively in relationship to Vietnamese learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Under these circumstances, Huong (2002) suggests that English teachers take the following steps to improve two-way communication between them and their students.

### Seating and Spatial Arrangements

Sommer (cited in Wolfgang, 1984:175) has observed different effects on classroom behavior due to different seating and spatial arrangement. "Highest student participation has been observed at the base of a U-shaped configuration whenever the teacher is seated opposite the 'gap' of the U" because in this position, teachers can exchange more mutual eye contact, promoting more student involvement with class activities". At present, Vietnamese learners of English have to attend very large class (about 50-60 students) and the normal seating arrangement is fixed row by row with a teacher's desk facing the class. Therefore, both teacher and students often find it hard to communicate face-to-face with each other, a difficulty felt especially when teaching the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

As for this reason, classes should be broken into two or three groups, each taking a turn at participating in these subjects. Then students would be able to choose their own seats and have more contact with the teacher. The teacher needs to stand in front of her desk to make students feel more involved in the class. When possible, teachers should stand or move among students during activities. This would encourage more students' interaction because the position of the teacher would make them feel closer and more included (Brooks, 1978).

Currently it is almost always the case that students with higher ability choose the front rows, and the teacher more often focuses on them. These students consequently attract more attention from the teacher and their interaction counts for more. Teachers should consider this fact and perhaps adjust seating arrangements in order to mix students of different ability.

#### Use of Face and Eyes

In reference to kinesthetics or body movement, posture, and face and eye movements, a teacher is able to encourage student interaction by using this sort of NVC himself. Therefore, a teacher should learn how to use body language as a means for engaging student participation in class discussions. For example, a teacher can smile to encourage students to answer a question when they are still uncertain. Bayes (quoted in Wolfgang, 1984:178) considers "*smiling to be an element that fosters a supportive and non-threatening classroom climate*". By looking a student in the eye, a teacher can understand a point, or shows interest in the lesson. Once a teacher frequently makes eye contact, students will become more familiar with it and they in turn will employ it to communicate back to the teacher.

Gaze is another NV behavior for effective classroom management and directions (Keith, 1974). If a teacher increases the use of gaze, she is able to reduce disruptions and maintain order.

In Vietnam, teachers and students are usually from the same cultural background, so both sides are aware of what gestures and face or eye movements are suitable in the classroom context. If teachers are pioneers in this, students will be influenced because they consider their teachers to be models to imitate. Hence, class interaction will improve and learning outcomes will be better.

#### Use of Gestures

Since they do not have enough ability to communicate verbally solely in the target language, our students often feel uncomfortable and turn unconsciously to gestures. Vietnamese English teachers should make use of this tendency to model the use of gestures in expression, especially to fill gaps. Some useful examples include hand gestures to show directions and shoulder-shrugging to express "*I don't understand*" or "*I don't know*" to students so that they can be more fluent in their NVC, which will in turn build confidence in verbal communication.

Teachers in Vietnam should be trained in how to use NVC in their classes. Otherwise, they may persist in their traditional thinking that students come to class and study passively to gain knowledge, and that only teachers have a right to point, look, or smile in the classroom.

#### Facilities

Another important point to be raised here concerns class sizes and classroom facilities. Large class size has been a long running problem in Vietnam. To use NVC effectively, we need to reduce the number of students in each class so that teachers can move around more easily, gestures can be used more comfortably, and facial expressions can be observed more clearly by both teachers and students. Classroom should be equipped with a video recorder and a television, and lessons on NVC should perhaps be the first use made of them. For example, a teacher can show, without sound, films of NVC throughout the world. Students can observe and try to build

up awareness among students of the significance of NVC in real-world communication.

### Use of Communication Methodology

Littlewood (2000:2) asserts that *"Asian students do not like only to listen and obey the teacher all the time. If a teacher knows how to initiate the process of communication, they will respond actively"*. I believe the same is true of NVC, which is an important consideration to bear in mind when using CLT methodology. I completely agree with Chan (1999) that not every Western teaching method can be successfully applied in Asian contexts (in this case, China). Therefore, we should employ CLT with reference to the Vietnamese cultural background of our students, so that they can feel at ease when moving around the class to work in groups of pairs. For example, after dividing a class into small groups, teachers can use gestures such as learning forward to each group, nodding the head to show interest, and moving from group to group or pair to pair.

### Textbooks

There have not yet been any textbooks written about the use of NVC in teaching English at the tertiary level in Vietnam. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam should invest more attention and resources to textbook design, especially those dealing with the four basic skills. New books teaching speaking skills, for instance, could be illustrated and shaped with NVC in mind, both local and cross-cultural.

The above discussed issues are just some of the many implications of NVC for teachers and learners of English at the tertiary level in Vietnam. It is my hope that the Vietnamese government will make a financial investment in these types of training and teaching resources. But even in the absence of large-scale change, every teacher can make modest but meaningful methodology changes in her/his own classroom.

### Conclusion

This study's discussion has shed light on the effectiveness of highlighting the use of NVC in the process of teaching and learning English in Vietnam. Vietnamese learners are hard-working and teachable, and constitute a favorable audience for trying the above-mentioned methods. Equipped with knowledge and skills regarding NVC, Vietnamese learners can employ it in their jobs; a familiarity with NVC will help them feel more at ease in expressing themselves at international conferences, or in interacting more naturally with native speakers of English.

Future research in this area should focus on how Vietnamese cultural or psychological factors could help build up a more systematic use of NVC, among learners on which patterns of NVC should be employed, and on how much NVC, language teachers might use in relation to verbal expression.

As CLT gains ground in Vietnamese English classrooms, it will not be difficult for English teachers to get used to the idea of using NVC in their reciprocal communication with students. I am convinced that once the new method is started-as long as it is based on our cultural traits, which shape students' thought patterns and learning styles-it will become quickly rooted and established, with many positive effects on the quality of education.

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## TÓM TẮT

### ỨNG DỤNG GIAO TIẾP PHI NGÔN NGỮ TRONG GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH Ở VIỆT NAM

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Trường Đại học Sư phạm – ĐH Thái Nguyên,

Giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong quan hệ giữa con người với con người. Hiểu qua giao tiếp sẽ hạn chế nêu chỉ sự dụng lời nói mà không có ngôn ngữ cơ thể. Qua kinh nghiệm thực tế trong quá trình giảng dạy và quan sát phong cách học tập của sinh viên và thấy được những nỗ lực trong việc thể hiện bản thân của các em, chúng tôi luôn băn khoăn: Tại sao chúng ta không cố gắng sử dụng giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ nói chung và ngôn ngữ cơ thể nói riêng như một phương pháp để tăng cường hiệu quả của việc giao tiếp trong quá trình học ngôn ngữ? Bài nghiên cứu này sẽ đưa ra cách nhìn tổng quan về giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ và đề xuất một số giải pháp ứng dụng giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ trong việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam.

**Từ khóa:** giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ, giao tiếp bằng lời nói, ngôn ngữ cơ thể, cơ chế, ánh mắt, giảng dạy theo phương pháp giao tiếp, sách giáo khoa

Ngày nhận bài: 25/4/2016, Ngày phản biện: 11/5/2016, Ngày duyệt đăng: 15/6/2016

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