

Breaking Linguistic and Communicative Barriers in an ESL Classroom through Nonverbal Communication

Chibuzo Nathaniel Nwoko, Department of Languages (English Unit), Yusuf Maitama Sule University, P.M.B. 3220, Kano, Nigeria

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Abstract

Communication has always been a problem between interlocutors, especially in a setting where a second or foreign language is the medium of instruction. Therefore, this work identifies the mode of nonverbal communication in an English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) classroom as one strategy to overcome communication barriers between the language teacher and his students. Here, the multicultural nonverbal mode that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries resolves the quagmire of comprehension and clarity by reinforcing messages that words are incapable of delivering successfully to the language learner, as a famous maxim has it that actions speak louder and even more precisely than words. Therefore, our presentation principally examines the roles such nonverbal cues as body language and paralinguistic accompaniments play in Nigeria's English Language teaching and learning environment. To justify the use of a nonverbal form of communication to bridge linguistic and communication gaps in a Second Language (L2) class, this delivery is premised on the theoretical frameworks of Hargie (2011), Oster et al. (1992), and Kibrik (1992). It is suggested that language teachers and instructors perfect the use of gestures and extra linguistic modes as alternatives to communicate meaning to their non-English audience.

Keywords: Communication, English, E.S.L. Classroom, Nonverbal Communication, Paralinguistics

Introduction

The methods and manner in which English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) is taught in our classrooms today indicate that the use of nonverbal communication strategy in teaching E.S.L. students is, no doubt, underutilized. Even though nonverbal communication is the earliest form of communication in the impartation of knowledge, it is what reinforces and provides credibility to whatever is uttered. This essential domain in teaching and learning is downplayed in our pedagogic milieu. We ask: "can words alone do everything"? Firth (1968) responds: "In many ways, these gestures and positions constitute a sufficient alternative to language, but they have a value, a property, a renewing effect and creative force that words alone cannot supply" (P. 77). This remark accentuates the maxim that actions speak louder and more precise than words. On this premise, the nonverbal technique should be understood as a practical teaching technique that aids language teachers and learners in negotiating and achieving clarity and understanding in the communication process. Therefore, the substance of this piece is to reveal that the communication barrier, which cannot be wished away in a second language class, can be overcome if language instructors are ready to utilize extralinguistic or paralinguistic

accompaniments, for these are language teaching techniques that transcend boundaries and cultures. For this reason, varied forms of nonverbal communication and how they can be employed in E.S.L. classrooms to boost and facilitate communication are examined to improve the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (E.S.L.).

Communication, to a layman, is an exchange of information and messages between or among people. However, Udall and Udall (1978) say that communication is not just giving and receiving information but giving and receiving understandable information. Canale (1983) offers the meaning of communication as "the exchange and negotiation of information between two individuals through verbal and nonverbal symbols" (p.4). In other words, there is noise when there is no clarity and understanding between or among the interlocutors in the communication process; something has limited and reduced the quantity and quality of information intended. At this crossroad of information processing, the use of gestures, body movement, distance, and other paralinguistic components becomes necessary, for what words alone cannot do; gestures and body movement supply it and fill the vacuum. Communication is principally divided into two: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication has to do with the use of words and writing symbols, while nonverbal, which is the paper's focus, does not use words.

Nonverbal Communication

As a field of study, nonverbal communication is traced to Charles Darwin, found in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), as reported in Wei(2013). Today, it has become multidisciplinary, cutting across

almost all fields of learning, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and business management. One of the reasons for its spread across academic disciplines is that non-verbal communication is now realized as something ubiquitous to humankind, something human beings cannot do without in their daily activities. Mehrabian (1971), one of the pioneers of nonverbal communication, underscores and proves the necessity and relevance of this form of communication and its primacy over verbal communication. He states that 7% of human communication comes from actual or spoken words (verbal communication), 38% comes from voice tone (paralinguistic), and 55% comes from facial expressions.

Therefore, nonverbal communication constitutes 93% of our exchange of messages or information between or among participants. This, no doubt, is amazing and a testimony that it is a communication form teachers of L2 should not underestimate. Richie–Key (1970) corroborates the precedence nonverbal communication has over its counterpart thus: "In any instance of a communication item occurring as a behavior event, non-verbal communication is obligatory, while speech or verbal communication may or may not occur concurrently" (P. 20). This is a proof that in a teaching and learning process which is a communicative event, the use of paralinguistic techniques to impart or transmit knowledge to a non - English or non – a native speaker of English is inevitable. This same ideology about nonverbal communication is shared by Bird Whistell (1970), who says that nonverbal communication bears an estimated two-thirds of the social meaning load, leaving only one-third of all meaning carried via the

spoken words. This is to say that we do and must depend mainly on nonverbal modes of communication in our day-to-day transactions.

What, then, is it about? To begin by way of definitions, one communication expert on the roll call is Knapp (1980), who avers: "Generally when people refer to nonverbal communication, they are talking about signals to which meaning will be attributed – not the process of attributing meaning" (P. 18). This definition follows that language learning collocates with semiotics or signs which words alone cannot convey. To Miller in Wei (2013), "Non-verbal communication includes overt behaviors such as facial expressions, eyes, touching and tone of voice as well as less obvious messages such as dress, posture, and spatial distance between two or more people" (P. 3). In the roll call of definitions that capture what non-verbal communication looks like, this, by Miller in Wei (2013) appears to be a synthesis of all, for, in it, the different forms through which one can recognize nonverbal communication are highlighted. It shows that this mode of communication is more paraverbal and extralinguistic, devoid of words or utterances as a wink to someone communicates something to that person; one's dress code communicates something; the same applies to office space, sitting arrangement, and even a handshake. On this account, and in order not to bore the audience with definitions, a common ground shared by scholars in this discipline is that non-verbal communication is communication without words.

Taxonomies of Nonverbal Communication

One classification of nonverbal communication is that of Daokun (1988), who recognizes the following as the

different forms and channels of this communication mode:

1. Body language comprises body postures, gestures, basic manners, and movements of any body part. This implies that by not doing anything or saying something, many messages are communicated as winking, wearing a long face, or grimacing and standing akimbo.

2. Paralanguage – It is all about how things are said, not actually what is said. This is to say that it is how something is said that matters and communicates meaning. Paralanguage includes pitch modulation, tone, rhyme, silence, cadence, and pause.

3. Object Language-- This comprises smell, complexion, clothing, cosmetics, and furniture.

4. Environment Language includes time, space, colors, and city planning. Daokun labels body language and paralanguage nonverbal behavior, while object language and environment language are labeled nonverbal meaning.

However, other categorizations of nonverbal communication relevant to E.S.L. classes besides those of Daokun (1988) are examined in this work. They include Kinesics, spatial language, time language, and oculesics.

Relevance of Teaching English as a Second Language Via Nonverbal Communication

Having asserted early on that non-verbal communication accounts for more than 50% of what goes into a communication process and language teaching being an act and process of communication in order to transmit communication competence and performance to the learners, we need to

capture its essence and relevance on teaching ESL/EFL students in our society. As foreign language teachers, no doubt we appreciate the difficulty in teaching those whose mother tongue (M.T.) is not English, not alone when teaching what some label technical and challenging aspects of language such as syntax, phonetics, and phonology. In our classrooms. It is identified and suggested to teachers that non-linguistic and verbal codes should work in a complementary manner, not one in isolation from the other. Experience has proved today that people who have learned a target language (T.L.) and those interested in learning such have applied both linguistic and extralinguistic communication platforms.

It is imperative to state that nonverbal communication is used in language teaching and learning to amplify, regulate, substitute, accent, and reinforce spoken messages that words cannot (Knapp and Hall, 2006). In our schools today, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, observation reveals that the place of nonverbal communication input is now substituted by code-switching and code-mixing during English language classes. Words and expressions, the English teacher does not find an alternative means of teaching the meaning, and he has to code-switch to the language of the immediate community the students are familiar with. At this juncture of linguistic and communication barriers, the language teacher should see nonverbal and paralinguistic strategies germane to communicate meaning without alternating from one code to the other. This is why Pan (2014) says, "we converse with our bodies" (P. 1). For example, English words such as *dribble*, *inflect*, *rigging*, *lopsided*, *caricature*, *genuflect*, *substitute* and *gesticulate* are words whose meanings can

hardly be forgotten by the learner if acted out by the teacher. For instance, if the foreign language teacher talks about *dribbling* in football to the learner without demonstrating with his legs or any other body part for the student to see, the communication process to some students in that classroom may result in noise. This is where the use of a nonverbal form called Kinesics becomes relevant. It refers to how the movement of the body communicates meaning. Kinesics includes smiles, gestures, and eye contact. Daokun (1988) adds that facial expressions promote a supportive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere and boost students' achievement and confidence. We, E.S.L. teachers, rarely imagine how eye contact can contribute to the student's attention to their lesson. In place of words, eye contact can signal the learner to show approval, intimacy, and disapproval.

When new abstract grammatical concepts are introduced in class, gestures become the sine qua non. The arm movement becomes a great instrument to teach abstract ideas. A teacher without gestures and arm movement, which is stationary or sedentary, is considered dull and inanimate, hence will not be able to gain the interest and attention of the students to his lesson. Gestures ensure that complex grammatical terms are simplified. The following passage on Agriculture illustrates the role nonverbal communication mode can play in teaching English vocabulary:

Farming is the most crucial aspect of agriculture that has attracted attention within the last few years. Agriculture has several other aspects, like *fishery*, *livestock*, and *poultry*. All these are also important in that they have to do with the production of

food items that human beings consume for survival.

In many parts of the world today, farming has been regarded as the mainstay of the *economy*. *Crops* such as *cocoa*, *rubber*, and *cotton* have been produced in the such *commercial* quantity that they are sold to other countries. Some countries have a better *comparative advantage* in producing certain farm *crops* than others. In these other countries, there is a need to spend money on *agriculture*, particularly farming. Most farmers use *outmoded tools*. Many have no place to store their crops, most of which are permanently destroyed by *insects* and *pests* before *harvest time*. All these have adverse effects on their *productivity*.

The government can do a lot to help farmers. Farmers' cooperative societies can be encouraged, and *loans* can be made available to farmers through *government* institutions, like *banks and finance* corporations. Farmers can be *taught* how to build suitable storage structures for their produce. All these and a lot more can *help* improve farming conditions in these countries. (JAMB Use of English Past Questions and Answers, 1978-2015)

Some of the words and expressions highlighted in the passage exemplify abstract and concrete items. In a language class where students are yet to understand the meaning of such words, the use of *regalia* could be improvised. This strategy calls for providing ordinary objects in life that represent such words and situations. Alternatively, the role of drama, role play, video play, and interviews are relevant complements to understanding the meaning of those lexical items. It is one way of creating an exciting and appealing atmosphere in a foreign language class and getting the learner involved in the

communication process. Unsurprisingly, such students will hardly forget the meaning of such objects and situations anywhere they see them outside the classroom and anytime they or other people are confronted with such life and realistic situations. Another efficacious approach to understanding the passage by the students, facilitating effective classroom communication, is the adoption of choral repetition of strange vocabulary items. This method is advocated for both lower foreign language classes and tertiary and mature ones, just as one of the Chinese proverbs says what I say, I never forget. In other words, mere lecture methods, talking, and oral explanation, popularized and established in our language classes in the university classes, should be deemphasized but balanced by more action and demonstration. When Asher (1968) psycholinguistically expounds the functions of the left and right brains in language acquisition, it becomes an eye-opener and insight to the language teacher as to how and what facilitates effective communication in such classes. His observation tells the difference it would make in second language acquisition if the lecturer in classes gave a nonverbal method more preference than traditional talking.

When language is taught by lecturing or explaining, the cynical left brain is targeted, and the information is kept in short-term memory (if at all). It is soon forgotten as it never becomes "real" to the student. When language is taught actively through movement, the right brain "believes." the information retains the same way that skills such as swimming or riding a bicycle are remembered long-term (P.3).

This hemispheric difference which is attested to by Hargie (2011), is an insight, a call, and a reminder to second language

teachers that performance, demonstration with body parts, and other paraverbal means are more consequential in language teaching and learning for such go hand in hand and are accommodated by the right brain which enhances retentive memory and thorough understanding of the message. The same skill is also essential in overcoming syntactically complicated sentences and expressions. One way of overcoming such is miming or pantomime, which actors and actresses find familiar. By mimicking such expressions, the learner decodes the message and meaning as he watches what the presenter or teacher is doing. This English teaching and learning style is akin to what visual aids do: they are the resources one should employ to clarify meaning and abstract concepts or technical terms during vocabulary studies and studying English idioms and idiomatic expressions. It aligns with the direct method of learning a foreign language in Applied Linguistics.

Let us recall those areas or levels of language E.S.L. students dread, such as Syntax and Phonetics and Phonology. At the same time, let us imagine the world of difference it would make if the oral and aural teaching techniques we are more interested in were combined with visual and audiovisual apparatuses. It is observed that communication in a Syntax class will record over 70% of understanding if the natural trees and how they branch off are improvised and brought to class to symbolize grammatical jargon like subject, clause, sentence, nominal phrase, nodes, leaves, or terminal nodes. Often, we tend to believe we are too in a hurry to cover our topics, therefore no time for extralinguistic activities even when the teacher knows that it is one way of driving home one's points, but this is where chronemics; that is, time language and time distribution in language

classes are required. A language teacher needs minutes to tune the students up and warm them up and time for the presentation of objects. It is not news that some of our E.S.L. students and we have never visited a language laboratory before. At the same time, we teach phonetics and phonology to someone whose language is foreign to the language of instruction. Although this may not be the teacher's fault in Nigeria, the authorities could be held culpable for not providing those needed facilities. Communication in that type of environment would have been swift if the students could see what they heard from the lip movement, gestures, and facial expressions of the native speakers. They hear their voices and see through the audiovisual aids in the laboratory. This should be followed by engaging them in discourse. This approach is equally of sociolinguistic relevance because, by so doing, their sociolinguistic competence is enhanced as they observe certain language attitudes displayed by the native speakers on the screen. The reason is that such attitudes, which include food and other social behavior, may not be entirely captured by words and mere demonstration by the teacher.

Spatial language is one strategy that needs to be encouraged in our E.S.L. classes. This is all about distance and sitting arrangement. One may wonder how that affects communication and academic performance in a second-language classroom. Experience has proved that stationary or sedentary teachers bore their students, and language classes are no exception. The more movable the teacher is in a class, the better the communication process. On this premise, Kimberley (2008) sitting model in Pan (2014) in an E.S.L. class is worth practicing. He advocates two types of sitting arrangements and classroom space for effective communication. One is

the horseshoe, and the other is the modular classroom arrangement, represented diagrammatically thus:

Horseshoe Arrangement

This model is appropriate because the teacher can now access all the students, and students, in turn, have access to their teacher. By so doing, participation and interaction become active. However, this arrangement favors only classes that accommodate a pocket of students, which may be a far cry in so many schools in Nigeria. According to Pan (2014), the teacher sitting in this fashion, clustered by students, appears "less intimidating than behind the traditional and imposing symbol of his large desk" (P. 2630).

A modular seating arrangement is desirable only if the language teacher wants broader participation and interaction among students in smaller groups.

Modular Classroom Arrangement

Kimberley (2008) adds that although many other factors can determine communication in an E.S.L. classroom, the arrangement of classroom space has the most significant impact. The idea behind these models is that language classes do not require a crowd but a handful of students for effective communication to occur. However, as acknowledged above, the case differs in many English Language classes in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Language goes with semiotics or signs. Signs are needed in teaching tenses or time. This is what the use of the finger does. Fingers can denote time by moving them back and forth, especially for beginners in a grammar class. It is not enough to keep repeating present, past, and future tenses, followed by sentence constructions where those tenses are used,

as this will make the subject and the concepts abstract to beginners. In such a situation, it is the role of gestures to clarify grammatical information and be precise in the explanation. The same should be applicable in teaching cases or pronouns.

Total Physical Response (T.P.R.), popularized by Asher (1968), is an aspect of nonverbal communication that pays in E.S.L. classes. It is a language teaching strategy that goes hand in hand with oral communication. According to him, Total Physical Response is a method of teaching language by using physical movement to react to verbal input to reduce inhibitions and lower their affective filter. It allows students to react to language without overthinking, facilitates long-term retention, and reduces student anxiety and stress. It centers on using commands to practice English to reduce the habit of overanalyzing language. Drawing on this model, E.S.L. students should be divided into groups while teaching them the phonology of English or sound systems of the language. At the same time, one group at a time acts as an observer group and the other as an Act-Act group. It is observed in his experiment that the Act-Act – a group who was asked to dramatize during the oral drill after listening to the foreign conversations on the tape and watching what the teacher does while showing them what the Russian words mean performed better in the performance test in the oral drill class than the Observe – Act group. This proves the preeminence of movement of the body and facial expressions over mere passive listening and watching. By doing and imitating what the language teacher and other interlocutors on the tape say, foreign language learners, perform better in pronunciation. In the same manner, gestures cannot be jettisoned in teaching discourse analysis, for gestures and

gesticulation are preferred in teaching turn-taking and other conversational principles. This implies that the turn-seeking and turn-yielding signals such as eye – contact, winking, beckoning, nodding (either in agreement or disagreement), hand raising, and thumbs up need to be taught via paraverbal means for the student to adequately understand what Grice (1975) maxims of cooperative principle in discourse mean and for them to make sense to the students.

Conclusion

The substance of this work was premised on the logical argument that people learn and are interested in learning new languages by using extralinguistic means of communication. Logical as this argument sounds, it is suggested that there be a shift from the mere traditional lecture method and explanation our language classes are known for to a multimodal approach that encourages more gestures, body movement, visuals, and audiovisuals for these nonverbal communication modes make information retentive and permanent in the E.S.L. student. This form of communication could substitute code-switching and code-mixing, entrenched today in our language classes, particularly at lower levels. Therefore, let us realize that the teacher's action can convey meaning in a target language. It is in second language classes like ours and the need for the adoption of para- linguistic odes that the application of the ancient Chinese proverb is most desirable, for it says tell me, I forget, show me, I remember, involve me, I understand: It culminates in linguistic competence and performance in a target language.

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