

# *Nonverbal Communication in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*

—On the Importance of Body Language

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**Abstract**—Nonverbal codes, neglected for quite a long time, now becomes an important field in language teaching and researching. Therefore, based on literature as well as our own English learning and teaching experiences, this paper expounds and analyzes the basic opinions of nonverbal communication, discloses the importance and necessity of body language which exercises influence on language teaching and learning, through analyzing the effects of body language research in language teaching and learning so as to promote acquisition of linguistic competence and help to communicate effectively in social context.

**Keywords**—body language; English teaching and learning; nonverbal communication

## I. INTRODUCTION

Speech may be an indispensable way to communication by which we know each other, but it is not necessarily the most important. Consciously or unconsciously, our body language communicates a lot about our true feelings which is the patterns of communication. According to psychologists, up to two-thirds of communication between humans is nonverbal. Here, body language is a branch of nonverbal communication. The way you sit or stand and the gestures you make broadcast a powerful message to the people you meet. Even when you keep silent, you may still be telling something. It shows that you don't want to be bothered and wish to be left alone. Uninvolved, which is the message you want to send. While some of these signals may be given consciously, most body language is involuntary, either instinctive behavior, or unconsciously learned through watching others. Body language can, to some extent, replace speech communication with the use of gesture, expression, eye contact and so forth. In addition, people's emotions are not only showed but our attitude towards ourselves and towards the people we are communicating with are exposed[1]. It exerts crucial effect on successful cross-cultural communication. As to its application, body language can be used in kinds of fields, in conversation, in classroom teaching, in commerce, in negotiation and other aspects. It can be embodied by gesture, space, eye contact, expression, motion etc..

## II. NECESSITY OF USING BODY LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

### A. Gestures and Nonverbal Communication

Deaf people convey elaborate messages through sign language; by contrast, gestures function as visual icons which represent a single idea. For example, waving one's hand is to show 'Hello!'; Touching one's stomach is to show 'I'm full or I've a stomachache, cupping one's ear is meant by 'I can't hear you' and so forth. But often these gestures are embarrassingly confused in different cultures. Eye contact is the meaning of a way to show interest to others in some countries while it means rude or disrespectful in other countries. For this reason, people in a foreign culture must be cautious of using gestures

### B. Body Language in Cultivating the Students' Characters

As for the English teaching in university classes, students' interest should be awakened by the teachers so that students may learn actively and in the process of English teaching, we are aware that diversities of ways to arouse the students' interest should be cultivated so as to help students to learn better, one of ways is body language which is used widely in English teaching.

In high education, nonverbal communication is helpful for developing the students' characters[2]. In college, students are showing full respect for their teachers and they have confidence in what the teachers say, consciously or subconsciously, students will imitate the teachers who are the models for the students. In a word, teachers' appropriate body language can motivate the students to cultivate a positive and active passion for English learning; they are bound to form a smoother interpersonal relation.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, our body language expresses what we really feel. If teachers in English teaching use some gestures and facial expression effectively, students can better express themselves. Teachers' body language can set good examples for students, and thus establishing a more harmonious studying atmosphere between teachers and students. As a matter of fact, teachers' friendly looks and gestures can greatly help to encourage the students'

enthusiasm in English learning. Furthermore, English teaching requires some accessible gestures to make the language learning vivid, specific and figurative. As a result, the students' interest is motivated and the acquisition of linguistic competence will be greatly improved.

### III. IMPORTANCE OF USING BODY LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

English teaching is becoming increasingly important in our school education. With the reform of the English teaching methods, more and more English teachers proceed to organize the teaching process in English so that the Communicated English is fully achieved and completed, through which the communication between teachers and students are conducted in English successfully. Teachers impart the information to students and ask questions basically in English, and the students are also encouraged by teachers to answer questions in English classes. However, the students may not express themselves clearly in English neither can they grasp what the teachers say. They do not have expressive ability. Therefore, it is difficult to work out the Communicated English in classes. Therefore, it is essential for teachers and students to use body language for communication in English classes.

#### A. *Body Language Is Required in English Teaching and Learning*

As far as the students' English level and practical situation are concerned, body language is inevitable and necessary, to some degree, it is required. Teachers are the message. If teachers use some good qualities, students will want to be with them. Good qualities include: physical appearance, energy, taste of speech, pitch and tone of voice gestures, expression through the eyes, and ability to hold the interest of students. Students form an impression about teachers based on these. Take it for example, when a teacher comes in classroom, he says "I am very happy to see you", while looking at his shoes. Students don't look happy. They look angry, frightened or depressed. Students always believe what they see over what they hear. They think, "He is telling me he is happy, but he is not, he is not being honest." In our English class, teachers communicate with their whole being; the tones of their voices and their gestures match their words. From the above we can learn, Teachers are the good examples of the use of body language in English teaching and body language is indispensable and needful. In English teaching, in order to improve the teaching effect and the students' enthusiasms for English body language are encouraged to be used frequently by teachers and students.

#### B. *Factors Contributed to the Difference between Chinese Culture and American Culture*

Firstly, according to Edward Hall, Chinese culture is high-context culture, while American culture is low-context culture[3]. In the high-context culture, information are directly given and communication between people are conducted by the rule of straightforwardness while in the low-context culture, people are more proficient in reading indirect information and a lot of information is hidden[4].

Secondly, different value system contributes to the differences between Chinese culture and American culture. Deep-rooted Confucianism has a profound effect on Chinese people who enjoy the virtue of taking things calmly. That is why Chinese are neither too elated at good news nor too sorrowed at bad news. So it is not amazingly that Americans feel that Chinese are inscrutable.

Thirdly, Chinese appreciate harmony. In their mind, harmony means the avoidance of overt conflict in interpersonal relations in some ways. The Chinese business person works to achieve harmony, even if the deal falls through. It is a matter of great concern for the Chinese to keep harmonious relationships with family members, close friends, colleagues, and other primary group members. When the harmony is ruined, they are likely to remedy it by smiling. That is why the teachers in China smiled at the American students and the Chinese parents smile at their guests. This is the typical example of body language.

#### C. *More Importance Should Be Attached to Cultural Background in English Teaching*

Nonverbal communication is usually considered as the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless message. It is estimated that the information conveyed by verbal codes in the communication account for 35% while information conveyed by nonverbal codes amounts to 65% [5]. Some nonverbal differences exist cross cultures and they may greatly influence intercultural communication. The same nonverbal action can be perceived and understood differently in different cultures.

While in the language teaching, nonverbal communication should not be ignored any more. Language competence is no more important than strategic competence in teaching English. Teachers should give weight to the introduction of cultural background, which may help students to better understand both verbal and nonverbal codes. Teachers can also make use of modern equipment such as video-CD, internet, slide, movie to help students in learning the correct use and interpretation of non-verbal codes and at the same time avoid cultural obstacles caused by nonverbal codes.

### IV. THE CONCRETE APPLICATION OF THE BODY LANGUAGE

#### A. *Body Language in Listening*

To be able to listen well gives you confidence in communication. For many students, listening is the most difficult skill to acquire. No one can teach you how to listen, among the five skills of learning English, listening is the first part ability. If you can understand and hear others well by listening, communication between teachers and students in English class will be preceded smoothly. The Greek philosopher Epictetus ever wittily said: "Nature has given man one tongue and two ears that he may hear twice as much as he speaks." From the saying, so important is the listening in our daily life. So important is the listening in English class, it is a basic purpose to understand others in English teaching, thus, the students' listening should be trained by the teachers. In this process, the teachers should use body language to help

students to understand well. Take it for an example, when the teacher read poetry "My love is like a prisoner. It's you that I surrender". The teacher can raise his arms above his head, his both fists in semi-circle being over his head. Therefore, the students will know "I love you; I would like to follow you". While the student is listening to "If I had my child to rise over again, I would finger paint more and point finger less". The teacher can use his fingers to paint more with nodding and use his index to point one student, accompanied by shaking head, through these vivid body languages, students not only understand what the teacher says, but are thrilled at beautiful poetry. As beginning a new lesson, the teacher tells the story outline in English. The body language may help. For example, a teacher can extend his arms gradually when he says "She is relaxed"; when he says "Her figure is long and thin, in her fancy green suit she is like springtime come alive". Using his hands to act a slender figure, as a result, the students will be aware: She is very attractive and charming indeed.

### *B. Body Language in Speaking*

With the reform of college English education, people pay more and more attention to speaking. Speech may be the most obvious way by which we communicate with each other. Since the spoken language is one of the important ways to communicate, teachers should try to make students speak more in English class. However, a large number of students are not willing to speak in English. Especially, some English teachers punish those who give incorrect answers, it does not take students long to lose their eagerness to answer questions in English. Not only do they lose their joy in answering questions, but they also lose their desire to say anything at all in English. They feel intimidated to speak and are afraid of making mistakes, although for different reasons, they feel like giving up; their teacher's body language will exert effect on the students' spoken English and help to improve it. Spoken English teaching should be given weight in English teaching. If learning some dialogues, students are encouraged to organize the class to practice spoken English according to the characteristics of dialogue. The situation of two students' acting out the dialogue is as follows: student A asks student B "what's wrong with you?" B should press his stomach with suffering facial expression when he answers "I have a burning stomachache. And I feel like vomiting, too"; when A asks B "What did you eat yesterday", he acts out eating gestures, student B answers "I had some crabs at lunch and then I just felt terrible", student B advises "You should see a doctor", he uses his hands to act a cross and make a sound of ambulance and also acts out sleeping gestures with his hands holding up his head and his eyes closed. With the help of body language, the students are excited and interested in speaking, under this interesting atmosphere with these body languages; students are not nervous and worry about making mistakes. And body language contributes to the students' speaking ability. Suppose one freshman firstly attend English class and they don't know each other. One may greet class like this: "Hello, everyone, nice to meet you here Now I 'glade to introduce myself. My name is Jane. Swimming is my favorite which makes me much attractive; and reading various books broaden my vision and make me rich in mind. During the introduction, the teacher uses vivid gestures such as the act of swimming and

reading, showing a wonderful figure and intelligent brain, with mating gestures as possibly as the teacher can, student may understand each other and have strong desire to speak in English. After his introduction, the teacher can create a circumstance for the students to practice and an good atmosphere for speaking in English will be established. Usually the application of body language in different situations will result in an attracting and successful lesson[6].

### *C. Body Language in Reading and Non-Verbal Signals in Reading*

The purpose of English teaching is to train the students' preliminary ability of using spoken and written English[7]. English teachers should attach importance to the reading ability which can be helpful for the students' further study, particularly should cultivate reading ability. When it comes to learning a language, there is no doubt that all learners should pay attention to listening, speaking and writing, but reading can also be very important which helps student input much information about language. There are many good points related to reading. Through reading, students may naturally get insight into native English. Without input, Students cannot practice, that is, they cannot speak English and write in English. There are two ways to get correct English sentences: listening and reading. Here we just highlight the importance of reading aloud. While the teachers read English in a right pronunciation and perfect intonation with some gestures in English class, students cannot help imitating the teachers' pronunciation and easily getting insight into the beauty of the language. When they read, it gives them a good example for writing, by reading they see and learn grammatical English naturally which is achieved by the teachers' body language. When reading aloud the sentences, students raise or lower our tone just as the teachers read. After training for some times, as soon as they read sentences, they will be conscious of the gestures which help them read and write in English. The meaning of a text is not only conveyed by means of words. To sum up, the correct and proper gesture together with the fluent English can create a good environment of learning which will be certainly important in improving the students' reading ability.

### *D. Body Language in Writing*

The teaching of college English writing at tertiary level in China has been rather weak and there is an urgent need to reform it. In the view of the present situation and drawbacks in writing, teachers should conduct some teaching experiments in writing to help students, on the students' part, writing is dull and tiring, unlike speaking, it is important for them to enjoy writing lesson. For teachers, it is urgent to try different approaches to arouse students' interest in writing, teachers try to blend online learning with classroom teaching, in the virtual classroom nearly all communication is written, so it is critical that students feel comfortable expressing themselves in writing. This approach will enhance students' cognitive development, increase students' motivation and self-confidence in English writing, such as online learning, teachers give them instructions with smile and some

interesting pictures to encourage them. Teachers can use simple, hand-drawn pictures of “sad faces” and “happy faces” to illustrate students who look like those teachers need to instruct and who are the good examples of writing homework. Writing is compared to building, before a house will be built, the architect has to form a plan and conceive a drawing and then enough material ought to be prepared. It is the same with English teaching on writing. Teachers should help students work out a plan on how to start their composition. Teachers use body languages such as different markers and pictures to make students have confidence in writing, not only instruct students to know about diction, the choice and use of words, but also should improve their writing ability in English teaching. If a student has studied English for a few years, he may have a large number of vocabularies. What matters is that he should learn to pick out words to express himself. It is therefore necessary for teachers to be patient with students on the principles that guide the choice of words. Through online, teachers communicate with students on how to organize a passage, using some vivid pictures and convenient writing tools to help students. When in doubt about the meaning and use of a word, or about the distinction between related words, he is willing to ask for help from teachers about the guidance and information because the teachers are patient to use body languages in communication with students.

“Tell me, I’ll forget; teach me, I’ll remember; involve me and I’ll learn.” was said by the famous linguist Franklin [8]. If the students are asked to write a composition which is not familiar to them, they would have troubles and difficulties in doing it. However, if students have known or experienced something about the composition, they can finish the writing job very well. Therefore, the teacher should organize some English-related activities in class or out of class which students are encouraged to participate in and then ask them to write it down. After that, the students can write an article much better because of having the experience. The teachers can deeply impress the students with the body language such as facial expression, eyesight, gesture, posture in the activity which can give them the truly scene and help them to write well.

## V. CONCLUSION

Effective communication is about what we really want to express and convey. When you see a person, even though he doesn't speak to you, you begin watching him: his actions, his attitude, his clothing and many other things. There is a wealth of information there if you know how to read it. So it is same with English teaching and learning. Learning English needs practice. Some effective methods should be adopted in English classes by teachers to make students enjoy practice. If the body language is applied in English classes, the students' attention will be focused on the lessons, thus participating in class activities vigorously. Because of this positive method, students eagerly answer all the questions they could, never worry much about making mistakes. With the corresponding body language English teachers should explain the theories by using proper body language to make classes vivid and interesting to have students' practice ability greatly improved.

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