

Language Learning and Teaching: Nonverbal Communication Matters

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0739>

Received: 14 November 2025; Accepted: 20 November 2025; Published: 13 December 2025

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, language competences have a strategic role both to establish social relations and favour mental processes and logical/cognitive capacities, but they are not sufficient to determine the complete acquisition of a language because other dimensions need to be considered, such as the socio-cultural context. So, a specific communicative competence is necessary. In the process of language learning, especially in educational settings, verbal communication is the main and only focus because language itself has several cultural, communal and societal functions and through it people communicate their own experiences, thoughts, meanings, intentions, and identity. However, the communication process depends largely on non-verbal elements many of which tend to be ignored because they are unknown. Nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, and silence. Therefore, the unsaid is important in the communicative event and the development of intercultural competences should be seen as necessary and essential in language learning. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to shed light on this field of study and encourage the consideration of nonverbal communication clues into a language learning process.

Keywords: communication, language, learning, nonverbal.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people are continuously involved in social, cultural and interpersonal contacts and numerous dimensions need to be considered in order to avoid or limit misunderstandings and communicative issues. Language competences have a strategic role in the relations, language is the primary way people use to communicate and interact, and these dynamics represent a constant part of their everyday life.

Through language individuals transmit their experiences, thoughts, meanings, intentions, feelings and identity. Having only appropriate language competences is not sufficient because communication is a complex process involving several elements: communication is what members of a culture use to share certain perspectives and visions, to follow beliefs, values, behaviours and make them known. Hymes [1], introducing the concept of communicative competence, argues that people need to use their language appropriately with regard to the communicative context. Hymes also affirmed that a person "acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner". Bonvillain [2], perfectly defined the relationship between language and communication, "language is the primary means of communication between people. (...) Language links interlocutors in a dynamic, reflexive process. We learn about people through what they say and how they say it; we learn about ourselves through the ways that other people react to what we say; and we learn about our relationships with others through the give-and-take of communicative interactions.". Language is the main link with the outside world: through it people can "reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other's minds", [3]. Brown [4] affirms that "Language is the roadmap of culture. It says where its people come from and where they are going". The communicative, cultural, communal and social functions of a language are relevant and need a specific consideration. Firstly, language helps to preserve and transmit culture; secondly, it links individuals into communities of shared

identities; thirdly, it manages all human interactions, it serves as social identification aspect unifying speakers as members of a single speech community. The communicative function of a language is evident: words are said, pronounced, expressed, declared, narrated and they are also listened, heard, perceived, caught. So, verbal communication is immediate because it is based on the use of language, which allows for a direct and rapid exchange of information. However, there is another hidden part of communication, the unsaid, the implicit and implied, that is extremely difficult to grasp and therefore generally ignored. If communication is made up with two dimensions, why do people underestimate the importance of one of the two or even neglect it? The purpose of this paper is to encourage the consideration of nonverbal communication clues into a language learning process as fundamental factor to regulate people's behaviours during their social and cultural interactions.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION: A STRONG RELATION

Language is one of the fundamental capabilities of the human life. The ability of using language allows humans to communicate, express thoughts, ideas and interact with people in order to understand the surrounding world. So, it is possible to assume that language is not only a mere means of communication, but instead a product of the human mind, rendering it a pivotal element for society. According to the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt [5], "an artistic creative principle is formed in a language, and in fact it belongs to the language itself, because its concepts get tonal embodiment, and thus the harmony of all spiritual forces is combined here with a musical element, which, once a part of a language, does not lose its nature, but only modifies it", meaning that it is not a mere mirroring of reality nor a simple instrument to express already formed thoughts: it is a creative and dynamic activity allowing to create meaning and express new ideas and opinions.

Communication is a phenomenon affecting every living being and is one of the pivotal elements determining human relations [6]. Communication is an integral part of every single day and in linguistics it is described as an ongoing, dynamic process [7], meaning that it changes with society. There is a strong relation between language and communication. The ability of communicating is therefore strictly connected to the ability of using the language in all its development phases. Language develops in several phases [8]: preverbal phase (0-6 months), protoverbal phase (11-12 months), telegraphic language (20-24 months) and finally grammatical and syntactical acquisition (2-4 years). In the first phase, where the child is very young, crying and vocalising are the main vocal production and tend to be placed in the pauses made by the adults, with whom the baby is communicating. This shows that, even if the baby is not able to communicate in the common sense, they are able to express themselves and to communicate. Taking the newborn's crying as an example, it is a tool to express emotions and feelings, and the task of a parent is also to try to understand and interpret these small signals, to understand how to move on a tonic level, expressions and facial expressions. This "baggage" can then be used to get in touch with the non-verbal communication that children use from an early age, understanding their needs and emotions. Therefore, making an effort to understand these signals is necessary to be able to communicate effectively with the child.

Many psychologists agree when saying that language is intrinsic characteristic of humans. The linguist Chomsky stated that "humans are born with some basic ideas, and those ideas are of a distinct language nature" [9]. According to Chomsky [10], every language in the world is equipped with a structure called "universal grammar", which includes the description of all structural aspects shared by natural language. On the other hand, Piaget [11], the founder of genetic epistemology, provides an interactionist position. He formulates one theory featuring elements of Innatism and Empiricism, stating that the language appears in the first stage of cognitive developments of children, which he calls sensorimotor stage.

Different approaches are available about language and communication. Anyway, one point is clear: language cannot exist without communication and communication cannot exist without language.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: WHEN THE UNSAID ALSO MATTERS

Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in the ability to understand and interpret others and represents one of the three levels of communication alongside verbal communication, which is the words people say or

write, and paraverbal communication, which is the way they use their voice. Gestures and facial expressions are key elements of nonverbal communication as they can convey information about people's emotions, intentions and expectations, leading to deeper and more satisfying relationships, both in the personal and professional context. Nonverbal communication is generally defined as the aspect of communication that is not expressed in words. Abercrombie [12] claimed that we speak with the vocal organs, but we converse with the whole body. Starting from the assumption that "one cannot not communicate" [13], and that all movements are to some extent expressive, all nonverbal behaviours are summarized in this definition, which also suggests that nonverbal communication includes a wide range of behaviours, some of which may not even be considered as such. Therefore, in addition to more obvious nonverbal behaviours such as facial, vocal and postural expressions, touch, proxemics and gaze, we can also list physical attraction, facial morphology, as well as behavioural choices such as hairstyle, clothing or more generally one's external appearance. Some researchers have also included material objects, which perform communicative functions within a given society [14].

Therefore, nonverbal communication is the process of conveying meaning without the use of written or spoken words. Also said, any communication made between two or more people using facial expressions, hand movements, body language, postures and gestures is called nonverbal communication. In the field of communication sciences, nonverbal communication is divided into four components: the paralinguistic system indicates the set of sounds emitted in verbal communication, regardless of the meaning of the words, and is characterized by tone, frequency, rhythm and silence; the kinesic system includes all communicative acts expressed by body movements such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture; the proxemics analyses the messages sent by occupying space that tends to be divided into four main zones: intimate zone, personal zone, social zone and public area; the haptics consists of communicative messages expressed through physical contact. In this case we also move from codified forms of communication (a handshake, a kiss on the cheek as a greeting to friends and relatives), to others of a more spontaneous nature (a hug, a pat on the shoulder), [15]. Nonverbal communication may act as reinforcement, substitution, contradiction, accentuation, regulation. It often happens that individuals believe they have sent a clear message when, in reality, this is not the case. Humans overestimate both the intensity of their expressions and the clarity, that is, the ease with which their expressions can be interpreted, as well as the extent to which they are observed by others [16].

Often referred to as body language, nonverbal communication can take many forms and be interpreted in multiple ways by different people, especially across cultures. Even the lack of such nonverbal cues can be significant and, in itself, a form of communication. Each movement and combination of body movements, such as changes in posture, eye direction, gestures, and facial expressions, provide signals that are often unambiguous and sometimes contradictory, meaning that one person may convey one piece of information while their body language conveys a completely different message. One reason nonverbal communication is so informative is because people use so many different aspects of their behaviour, appearance, and environment to convey meaning. These types of nonverbal communication can vary greatly across cultures because each culture interprets posture, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, vocal noises, use of space, and time differently [17].

Knowing, studying and being able to decipher these non-verbal messages can be a concrete help in making the verbal communication more effective, meaningful and complete as well as respectful of the cultural differences inevitably present in all the daily relationships [18].

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The integration of language and culture should be considered as one of the fundamental purposes of language teaching and learning and a key element to promote intellectual opening and curiosity, respect for cultural differences, and the enjoyment in interaction with people from other countries. Consequently, it becomes necessary to integrate the linguistic code with all the other dimensions that are involved in that linguistic context. Communication between speakers of different languages is also about understanding the perceptions and meanings arising from the other speaker, according to their cultural context. Language is, in many aspects, a social factor and it conveys social, cultural and personal messages, and in doing so it is accompanied by a whole series of important elements that enrich it but also make it much more complex. Sometimes, for those

who approach a different culture, the importance of the signals provided by nonverbal communication can be underestimated, not fully understood, or hastily judged. In a multicultural context, when our interlocutors do not share our linguistic and cultural background, nonverbal communication takes on a particularly important role. Certainly, words are very important because they communicate a specific content, but nonverbal behavior communicates this and much more. Much of what is communicated is nonverbal and misinterpretation or lack of knowledge can lead to intercultural conflict, misunderstandings and ambiguities in communication, despite the fluency of the language [19].

Teaching nonverbal communication, though, involves providing tools to interpret and use those nonverbal signals, such as body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures, to improve communication in different contexts. Consequently, when we encounter a speaker of a different language, we gain access to a different view of the world: communication cannot be considered only as a mere exchange of information, but it should be regarded for its capacity of creating and maintaining relations into a specific cultural context. Taking into account these considerations, we should wonder what the main purpose of teaching and learning a language is, if it is only the acquisition of new language skills or also about gaining new cultural points of view and benefiting from them. To communicate with other people, is it enough just to master grammar, vocabulary, speaking, writing skills, or is it important also to focus on cultural and intercultural aspects? Can a sort of "linguistic appropriateness" exist according to the cultural context we are in?

Valdes [20] argued that learners can become linguistically and culturally competent if they are aware of themselves as "cultural beings". Along with learners' acceptance of other cultures, "comes the acceptance of their language and a greater willingness to let go of the binding ties of the native language and culture". Communication and culture have a strong link and so are linguistic and intercultural competences. As the constant changes within the existing context create continuous interactions among people coming from different cultural and social backgrounds and speaking a language that is different from ours, it is evident that language learning and learning about target cultures cannot be separated. A simple linguistic competence is, evidently, not sufficient: we definitely need to "cross the bridge", immerse ourselves in the new culture, we must strive to grasp every signal, whether verbal or non-verbal, said or unsaid, and adapt our communication style accordingly.

Therefore, as far as teaching and learning a new language are concerned, students need some sort of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to communicate effectively especially in multicultural contexts. Mixing linguistic and cultural competences contributes to intercultural awareness, skills, and know-how that are strategic within the globalized world. The development of intercultural competences is an active process of continuous learning which implies even a transformation of the person's identity while experiencing other different cultures or group interactions, in their own country or abroad [21]. As far as teaching and learning a new language are concerned, the concept of communicative competence should become 'intercultural communicative competence', needing from students some sort of knowledge, skills, attitudes necessary to communicate interculturally. The linguistic and cultural competences contribute to intercultural awareness, skills, and know-how because within the globalized world intercultural contacts are greater and greater, necessitating both understanding and negotiation of differences through effective communication. The theoretical framework shows a growing interest in exploring 'culture', both in language teaching and learning [22]. Some researchers [23] highlighted the importance of cultural information in language teaching, claiming that there is an interrelationship between a language and its people and if cultural information is not taught as a part of communicative competence, complete communication cannot happen. Sihui [24] affirmed that language and culture are inseparable: beliefs, ideas, and identities of a group of people are constructed and communicated by language. Therefore, the educational settings should work on cross-cultural experiential learning encouraging the learners to lose themselves in the target language [25] and taking into consideration elements and dimensions of nonverbal communication and combining them with verbal language learning. We argue that this fundamental aspect should little by little become a central issue in teaching a foreign language. Certainly, teaching "the unsaid" may be extremely hard: symbols, gestures, facial expressions, social and personal space, eye contact and so on are not of immediate understanding and, especially, of easy application. Saying without words may be misunderstood much more easily than saying with words. Nonverbal communication is complex and understanding it often depends on the social environment in which one operates. There is no dictionary with unambiguous translations of nonverbal messages.

Consequently, teachers should become more aware of the fact that enabling learners to communicate effectively with people coming from various cultural backgrounds could be one of their main goals and could fall into their teaching methodology. In fact, learners should be committed to turning language encounters into intercultural encounters and more profound relationships [26]. Teaching culture in schools is essential to develop informed citizens capable of interacting effectively with the world. Not only does this process involve acquiring knowledge but also developing transversal skills and a deeper understanding of diverse cultural realities. Effective methodologies include innovative teaching methods, an experiential approach integrated with other disciplines, teaching respect for cultural diversity, recognizing that each culture has its own value and uniqueness, and using texts, multimedia materials, and digital tools that offer a variety of cultural perspectives. Moreover, teaching a language refers to signs, drawings, artifacts, clothing, and personal adornment but also an environmental dimension, made up of colors, lights, architecture, space, directions, and natural elements that communicate to humans about their nature [27]. Within the classroom, teachers need to apply a kind of experiential learning using simulations, working on theatrical situations, facing incidents or misunderstandings. In other words, acting rather than talking, recurring to patterns that are different from their own culture. Certainly, even before entering cultural environments different from our own, it will be necessary to reflect on our own cultural belonging and what characterizes it. In this sense, observing real-world situations in which cultural diversity plays a key role will allow students to gain a certain awareness of their own cultural identity and its defining characteristics. Measuring oneself with “the other” brings into play numerous dimensions and perspectives that feed on diversity and encourage reflection, skills and effective attitudes. In this sense, the school promotes harmonious and integral development, growth, and the full realization of people, by forming them solidly both on a cognitive and cultural level.

The challenge of teaching culture and language together probably will not be simple, but the point is that only speaking a foreign language does not guarantee success in communication with different cultures.

FINAL REMARKS

Language is people’s primary resource to communicate and build social relations, is what individuals use to express themselves, their thoughts and identity but, noticeably, it is not sufficient within multicultural contexts where the need to interact with people having a different cultural background is concrete. “Language teaching must offer a knowledge of the world that students can use to develop their personal and cultural identity, via contact with many different discourses and cultural representations” [28]. Certainly, some questions arise from all these considerations, in terms of pedagogical innovation, didactic and methodological approaches used by teachers and the necessary requirements. However, it could be significant to consider new teaching models contemplating linguistic, cultural, and metalinguistic elements to guarantee a complete set of competences both to learners and teachers. Moreover, teachers should no longer have teaching units that focus on the word, sentence or a paragraph, but rather target individuals’ action and agency within a foreign community [29]. It would include teaching sociocultural pragmatics to enable the learners to move away from a monocultural national identity and to learn how to construct multiple cultural identities simultaneously: within this we can also hypothesize the teaching of nonverbal communication within a broader language learning program. We can assume a cross-disciplinary approach to foreign language instruction without missing the purposes of developing linguistic competence in foreign language learners. Therefore, the need is to come across further studies and research on this topic, that encourage and promote language learning not merely as a communicative practice but also as a cultural activity which includes learning some nonverbal communication signals to support the effectiveness of words.

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