

# ESL Learners' Perceptions on the Role of Body Language in Enhancing Communication

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' perceptions of the role of body language in enhancing communication. Guided by Communication Accommodation Theory, the research explores how nonverbal adjustments support understanding and social connection in classroom interactions. The problem addressed is the lack of empirical evidence on how gender and personality influence these perceptions in Malaysian tertiary education. A quantitative research design was employed, involving 150 ESL students selected through random sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms and analysed using SPSS with descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests. The results indicate that learners generally perceive body language as an essential complement to spoken communication, while gender and personality differences were found to be statistically insignificant. These findings suggest that nonverbal strategies hold broad relevance for diverse learner groups, independent of subgroup characteristics. The study concludes that body language functions as a readily accessible and impactful tool for enhancing comprehension and engagement in ESL contexts. The implications underscore the importance of integrating nonverbal communication training into teacher development programmes. Future research is recommended to employ mixed methods and longitudinal approaches to capture real time classroom dynamics and to further investigate personality-based interaction patterns.

**Keywords:** (body language, Communication Accommodation Theory, ESL learners)

## INTRODUCTION

English as a Second Language (ESL) learners frequently draw on body language to support their understanding of spoken communication. This reliance is practical, as nonverbal cues, such as gestures, prosody, and visible mouth movements can ease cognitive processing, allowing listeners to align auditory input with visual information and thereby enhance real time comprehension (Zhang et al., 2021). Although such signals are valuable, their interpretation is not universal. Nonverbal behaviours including eye contact, touch, and personal space are shaped by cultural norms, and their meanings may differ significantly across learner groups (Mednick, 2022). Consequently, while learners tend to highly value body language as a scaffold for comprehension, it is essential that these cues are used thoughtfully to ensure inclusive and comfortable participation in the classroom.

Considering the diversity of classroom settings, it is crucial to investigate whether perceptions of body language differ based on individual characteristics, such as gender or personality. Experimental research suggests that women may be better at processing paralinguistic cues related to emotion perception, particularly when multiple channels of communication are involved (Lin et al., 2021). However, teachers frequently observe that both introverted and extroverted learners benefit from clear gestures and open posture during explanations. This

suggests that while subtle differences may exist, the primary benefit of nonverbal support for all students is its ability to align with their individual comfort and interaction styles.

Despite the clear benefits of body language in ESL contexts, there is a significant lack of research examining learners' perceptions through the specific lenses of gender and personality in Malaysia. Much of the existing local literature on communication challenges focuses on broader issues and does not explore how nonverbal cues are perceived across different subgroups. This is a notable gap, especially since Malaysian university students exhibit distinctive communication styles that could influence how body language is interpreted (Azmi et al., 2023). In the absence of context specific evidence that takes gender and personality into account, pedagogical approaches risk assuming uniform learner responses and may consequently overlook the needs of particular groups.

A further challenge lies in understanding how body language directly supports real time comprehension during lectures, tutorials, and assessments. Although multimodal research has shown that nonverbal cues are beneficial, research evidence has not yet resulted in demonstrable advancement for Malaysian undergraduates (Mednick, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Both studies make it clear the fundamental importance of developing local data which empirically ties nonverbal behaviours to measurable educational outcomes and is therefore necessary to ensure teachers' pedagogical practices are based on evidence not conjecture.

To summarise, studies in Malaysian contexts on gender and personality, and how they may affect ESL learners' perception of body language, are scarce. Furthermore, little is known about how nonverbal cues facilitate comprehension at the tertiary level, as research designs to examine the subjective nature of perceptions are commonly methodologically complex. This opens a distinct gap for study. The general purpose is to understand how ESL learners perceive the role of body language to facilitate communication, and if the perceptions differ by gender and personality. Ultimately, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that can guide more efficient and empirically based teaching practices in ESL classrooms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Communication Accommodation Theory** Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was first proposed in the 1970s, and it serves as a helpful way to understand how speakers adapt communication to achieve connection and shared meaning. The theory suggests speakers change verbal and nonverbal behaviours (e.g., accent, speech rate, gestures, body language) to adjust for social identity and interactional meaning. CAT discerned two specific strategies that are most applicable to the current research: convergence, in which speakers modify their communication style to become more like their interlocutors, and divergence, where differences are highlighted to increase social distance (Giles, 1973). These shifts can be conscious or unconscious and are often perceived by listeners to be either sympathetic, neutral, or even condescending. For classroom interactions, these behaviours are especially important. In employing nonverbal accommodation, instructors can provide clarity and also strengthen social relations. These strategies and behaviours are especially important for body language or modality as a basic scaffold available to ESL (English as a second language) learners.

The principles of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) are supported by multimodal evidence showing that visible signals facilitate understanding. Neurophysiological studies that employ EEG, for example, have shown that prosody, gestures, and mouth movements can significantly lighten listeners' cognitive load allowing them to process information more effectively (Zhang et al., 2021). This can be especially salient for second language learners who may have limited linguistic proficiency yet benefit from extralinguistic cues (Zhang et al., 2023). Additionally, emotion perception studies provide evidence that sensitivity to paralinguistic information may vary by gender (Lin et al., 2021). Therefore, CAT serves as a valuable theoretical lens through which to study how gender and personality influence accommodations in perceptions of communicative behaviour.

To summarise, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) offers an extensive perspective on how body language functions as an adaptive resource in the interactional context of a classroom. By conceptualising nonverbal signs as strategic resources to enable clarity and mediation of identity, CAT provides an explanation of the utility of gesture and expression as a resource for second language learners. The theory is the basis of the

current study which aims to seek an empirical understanding of how Malaysian university students perceive nonverbal accommodation, with a particular focus on the influence of gender and personality.

### **ESL learners' perceptions of the role of body language in enhancing communication**

A growing number of studies reveal that ESL students' perceptions of body language are related to positive classroom dispositions, such as increased participation and improved understanding of content. One example from a large study on higher education students indicated that nonverbal communication, especially facial expressions and gestures, was important to students' assessment of teaching quality. The study also revealed that factors such as age and gender play a role in students' perceptions (Keelson et al., 2024). Similarly, a qualitative account from the same research study, based on videos and interviews, illustrated that even minor physical actions, such as a teacher moving around the classroom, were seen as supportive cues to attention and participation (Wulandari et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings indicate that learners place considerable value on visible cues that animate and clarify spoken communication. Although the research consistently points to a positive link between nonverbal cues and student perceptions, an important limitation lies in the heavy reliance on self-report data and single site studies. Such constraints limit the generalisability of the results and underscore the need for more diverse research designs that can capture how these perceptions develop and how they influence learning across varied, real-world classroom contexts.

### **ESL learners' perceptions of body language based on gender**

Gender can be a factor in how learners perceive and process nonverbal communication, potentially influencing how they respond to body language in a lesson. Findings from controlled laboratory studies suggest that women may demonstrate an advantage in interpreting certain nonverbal cues. For example, one study found that women were more adept at processing facial expressions and prosody, and experienced stronger nonverbal over verbal "Stroop effects" in multisensory tasks (Lin et al., 2021). These findings indicate that gendered patterns in nonverbal processing may play a role in how students evaluate a lesson's effectiveness, a point also supported by a large-scale survey that linked lecturer gestures and facial expressions to higher teaching quality ratings, while also testing for gender as a moderating factor (Keelson et al., 2024).

Beyond the laboratory, classroom-based research also points to gendered differences in communication style. A descriptive study in higher education noted that while not specific to ESL learners, female students tended to combine verbal and nonverbal communication more frequently than their male counterparts, who relied more on direct verbal talk (Hadiani & Ariyani, 2021). This suggests that different communication preferences may influence how a student perceives a teacher's use of gesture and gaze. Qualitative evidence from classroom settings also shows that teachers' purposeful movements can increase student attention, a cue that female learners might be particularly sensitive to, given their demonstrated advantages in processing paralinguistic signals (Lin et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2024). While these findings imply that gender can influence a learner's perception of body language, the effects appear to be modest and highly dependent on context, and some research designs lack direct ESL segmentation.

### **ESL learners' perceptions of body language based on personality (Introvert vs Extrovert)**

Personality traits are consistently linked to second language (L2) outcomes and could also influence how students evaluate nonverbal support. A meta-analysis of over 8,800 participants, for instance, found a positive association between L2 achievement and the Big Five personality traits, with openness and extraversion showing particularly strong links (Chen et al., 2022). This suggests that a student's dispositional tendencies may shape how they engage with and use the input they receive. In real time interaction, studies have even shown that observers can accurately identify a person's extraversion or introversion based on nonverbal cues like gaze, posture, and facial expressions (Saber et al., 2021). This indicates that personality is visibly expressed through body language, which in turn suggests that a learner's own personality might influence how they perceive the nonverbal cues of others.

Evidence from classroom-based research further supports this idea. A study of over 300 undergraduates reported that extraversion was a predictor of lower writing anxiety, which implies that extroverted students may be more willing to engage with various communicative cues than their introverted peers (Soltani & Saedirad, 2022). In practice, teachers often instinctively tailor their approach to different personalities, as described in a qualitative study where educators detailed differentiated strategies for introverted and extroverted learners, including adjustments to their interactional moves and classroom positioning (Yusuf & Miolo, 2024). These findings collectively imply that personality may moderate how helpful a student perceives a teacher's body language to be. However, a significant gap remains, as few studies have directly investigated how a student's personality interacts with their perception of nonverbal cues during comprehension tasks in an ESL context.

The existing research reveals a clear pattern: learners generally perceive body language as a valuable and cognitively beneficial tool for comprehension. However, a deeper look shows that a learner's gender and personality may introduce subtle but important differences in these perceptions. For instance, women often demonstrate a greater sensitivity to paralinguistic cues, while extroverted individuals may show a higher comfort level with multimodal input. Despite these insights, a significant portion of the current literature relies on self-reports or controlled lab experiments, leaving a notable scarcity of evidence from authentic classroom settings. Furthermore, there is a clear lack of research that connects these subgroup variables directly to multimodal accommodation theory. This gap points to a significant theoretical and methodological limitation. Future research that uses rigorous quantitative designs and specifically contextual sampling is needed to facilitate understanding of the interactions between gender, personality, and nonverbal communication. Collecting these types of data will be necessary to generate findings that can lead to practical, evidence-based guidance to support more inclusive and effective learning environments.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

The present study employs a quantitative research design to gauge ESL learners' perceptions in measurable form and to analyse the results statistically. Quantitative designs allow for the exploration of relationships of variables and hypotheses testing, based on objective data, that has been established with rigor in the social sciences (Apuke, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A survey was used in a primarily structured format to explore learners' ideas about body language, gender, and personality. This design allows for both reproducibility and inferential analyses in the statistical sense, to draw sound conclusions about subgroup differences in perception. Ultimately, the quantitative approach best suited the aim of generalisable findings to inform evidence-based approaches to improve ESL communication to include body language.

### Sampling method

The current research studied 150 ESL students in a Malaysian public university specialised in English language learning. This sample size corresponds with the more recent quantitative studies on ESL learners' perceptions in Malaysian higher education indicating that it is adequate for analysis, while balancing accuracy with practical requirements (Muhamad et al., 2024; Razawi & Mohamad, 2024). To ensure a degree of homogeneity, the participants held the same academic specialisation, which strengthens the internal validity of the results.

Participants were employed through a simple random sampling, which is a probability-based sampling technique that grants everyone a fair chance of being selected. The use of this technique decreases bias and improve the viability of results (Noor et al., 2022). In this study, the method was implemented on a verified student list to ensure fair and proportional representation across gender and personality category. This method will help fulfil the aims of this study by providing results that are unbiased and statistically reliable to the population of interest.

### Instrument and data collection

The main research instrument was a systematised questionnaire adapted from Alaoui and Rafed (2019) that explored the role of body language in supporting spoken communication. Learners offered input regarding how

strongly learners feel body language enriches communication by indicating their feelings on a 5-point scale. Respondents used a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The survey was conducted utilising Google Forms, a digital platform which allowed for the use of various formats for questions, automatic storage of collected data, and tracking of responses in real-time. This platform was chosen for its accessibility and capacity to manage and support the collection of large amounts of data, a method validated by various studies in recent language education literature (Rahman et al., 2023; Sari & Wahyuni, 2022). The survey link was shared via institutional email and responses were automatically stored in a secure Google Sheets database.

Prior to the analysis, the dataset was systematically cleaned of incomplete or duplicate responses which is widely recognised as good practice standards in survey-based research (Ali et al., 2023; Noor et al., 2022). This is to protect the accuracy and confidentiality of the data, while the use of a digital platform made this process easier and eliminated the need to handle the data manually.

### Data Analysis

Data collection was conducted through SPSS, a recognised statistical software that is commonly used in quantitative research. SPSS allows researchers to conduct both descriptive and inferential analyses efficiently and reliably with large datasets (Noor et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2023).

For this study, descriptive statistics (i.e; frequency counts, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarise learners’ perceptions. Then, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare perceptions across gender and personality types. This systematic approach led to clear patterns of interpretation, as well as meaningful subgroup comparisons. The use of SPSS also enhanced the analysis process by minimising human errors and generating outputs in a transparent manner to obtain valid conclusions.

### Validity and Reliability

The research instrument was validated for its construct relevance through an expert review. This process is important for examining the clarity, relevancy, and alignment of the survey items with the objectives of the study (Estremera, 2024; Masuwai et al., 2024). Feedback from the expert review led to revisions that enhanced the credibility of the questionnaire and assured the items were accurately constructed to reflect the constructs that the instrument was meant to measure.

Cronbach’s Alpha was used to determine the reliability by measuring internal consistency of the scales. This is a statistical measure commonly used in educational and language research and assesses whether the items across the new scale measure a single construct (Ahmad et al., 2024; Zhao & Aryadoust, 2024). Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated for each section of the existing questionnaire in SPSS, with acceptable values concerning reliability being considered a value greater than .70. Establishing reliability ensured that the instrument would be reliable and stable, a necessary condition for making warranted, defensible, and valid conclusions about learners.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ESL Learners’ Perceptions of Body Language in Communication

Table 1 ESL learners’ perceptions of body language in communication

Survey Item	Mean (M)
I believe body language helps make conversation more engaging and effective.	3.5733
Nonverbal communication is as important as verbal communication in conveying a message	3.5667
Lack of body language in a conversation makes it harder for me to understand the speakers’ intent.	3.5667



I am aware of the role body language plays in effective communication.	3.5067
Mastering body language can improve my overall communication skills in English.	3.5067
Body language helps me to express ideas when I cannot find the right word in English.	3.2867

The first research question investigated ESL learners’ general perceptions of the role of body language in enhancing communication. Descriptive statistics, as summarised in the provided data (Table 1), show that learners rated the importance of body language moderately to strongly, with mean scores ranging from 3.29 to 3.57.

The highest mean score (M = 3.57) was for the statement that body language makes conversations "more engaging and effective," while the lowest mean (M = 3.29) was for using body language "to express ideas when I cannot find the right word in English." The data consistently indicate that students perceive nonverbal cues as valuable tools for clarity and engagement, rather than as simple substitutes for speech.

This pattern aligns with multimodal communication research, which shows that gestures and other visible cues reduce a listener's cognitive load and improve comprehension, especially for second language listeners (Zhang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). The findings also mirror classroom-based studies where students link a teacher’s purposeful movements and expressive cues to higher perceived teaching quality and greater attention (Keelson et al., 2024; Wulandari et al., 2024). Overall, the results suggest that ESL learners primarily view nonverbal communication as a complementary scaffold that makes spoken English easier to follow, rather than a mere fallback for when words fail. This perspective fits with the idea that visible cues and linguistic input work together to facilitate communication.

### ESL Learners’ Perceptions of Body Language Based on Gender

Table 2 Perceptions of body language: Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	58	3.3353	1.12121	.14722
Female	92	3.5375	1.34684	.14042

Table 3 Independent sample T-Test (for perceptions based on gender)

	Lavene’s Test for Equality of Variances		t	df	Significance	
	F.	Sig.			One-Sided p	Two-sided p
Equal variances assumed	4.406	0.38	-.953	148	.171	.342
Equal variances not assumed			-.994	136.909	.161	.322

The second research question examined whether perceptions of body language differed between male (n=58) and female (n=92) learners. An independent samples t-test was conducted, which revealed no statistically significant difference between the two groups,  $t(136.91) = -0.994, p = .322$ . Male learners had a mean perception score of 3.34 (SD=1.12), while female learners scored slightly higher at 3.54 (SD=1.35).

The null finding suggests that gender does not substantially influence how learners perceive the role of body language in communication. This may appear to contrast with laboratory-based research where women often show advantages in processing nonverbal cues (Lin et al., 2021). However, the present study measured general perceptions of body language’s usefulness in everyday classroom talk, not a fine-grained, moment-by-moment

decoding of nonverbal signals. It is also possible that the larger variability in both groups may have attenuated small effects that are more apparent in tightly controlled tasks (Keelson et al., 2024). From a practical standpoint, this finding is reassuring, since both male and female learners value nonverbal support to a similar degree, instructional strategies that incorporate nonverbal cues (e.g., meaningful gestures, open posture, and clear gaze) can be applied broadly to benefit the entire class without the need for gender-specific adjustments.

### ESL Learners’ Perceptions of Body Language Based on Personality Traits

Table 4 Perceptions of body language: Personality traits

Personality types	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Introvert	108	3.3676	1.26053	.12129
Extrovert	42	3.6952	1.25833	.19416

Table 5 Independent sample T-Test (for perceptions based on personality traits)

	Lavene’s Test for Equality of Variances		t	df	Significance	
	F.	Sig.			One-Sided p	Two-sided p
Equal variances assumed	.226	.635	-1.430	148	.077	.155
Equal variances not assumed			-1.431	74.875	.078	.157

The third research question examined whether perceptions of body language differed between introverts and extroverts. The results of an independent samples t-test showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups,  $t(148) = -1.430, p = .155$ . Introverted learners ( $n=108$ ) had a mean score of 3.37( $SD=1.26$ ), whereas extroverted learners ( $n=42$ ) scored slightly higher at 3.70 ( $SD=1.26$ ). This finding suggests that personality type does not strongly affect a learner's overall perception of body language in communication. While research in L2 learning has shown a small positive association between extraversion and achievement (Chen et al., 2022), and nonverbal cues can communicate personality to an observer (Sabeti et al., 2021), this does not mean that extroverts necessarily value nonverbal cues more than introverts. A plausible explanation for this is that the study's measure captured the perceived usefulness of body language for comprehension, which both groups may endorse similarly, even if their actual use or comfort with expressive behaviour differs. The broader multimodal literature indicates that L2 learners, regardless of subgroup, benefit from cues such as meaningful gestures and informative mouth movements, as they reduce processing load (Zhang et al., 2023). This shared benefit may cause perceptions to converge across personality types.

Overall, the findings suggest that learners consistently perceive body language as a valuable tool for enhancing communication. Although minor differences in perception were observed between genders and personality types, these were not statistically significant, suggesting that body language functions as a common good in the classroom. The lack of significant findings may be due to methodological factors, such as the imbalanced sample size or the binary categorisation of personality, which may have obscured more subtle distinctions (Chen et al., 2022). Still, the practical message is clear, teachers can design nonverbal scaffolds that are broadly effective, from using iconic gestures to clarify meaning to using beat gestures to mark stress without tailoring them strictly by subgroup. However, nuanced adjustments can still be made. For example, quickly previewing a gesture rich explanation, or providing opportunities to engage in low-stakes practice, could aid an introverted student to engage in class without having to be put on the spot. Conversely, tasks that are interactive and movement-based keep extroverted students engaged (Yusuf et al., 2024). Overall, these findings indicate that ESL learners from

different backgrounds perceive body language as a useful tool for learning, which supports multimodal theories of communication because the use of body language has shown to make spoken English easier to comprehend.

## CONCLUSION

The study yields two key insights. Theoretically speaking, the evidence of body language as a form of support, across groups of students, confirms that nonverbal cueing does not replace speech but instead offers a complementary form of meaning-making. This supports multimodal communication theories, which suggest gestures and visible movements reduce mental processing load for second language learners and promote comprehensibility (Zhang et al., 2023).

From a practical standpoint, the implications suggest teacher could enhance classroom instructions by utilising purposeful nonverbal strategies, such as employing gestures to clarify meaning, or using purposeful body movements to get students' attention. Because students perceive these cues as indicators of quality of teaching and attentiveness (Keelson et al., 2024), program leaders may want to consider offering teachers training in nonverbal communication. However, once again, attention to cultural awareness is suggested. In summary, body language may be considered a simple powerful tool to enhance understanding in ESL classrooms.

In future studies, it would be crucial to move beyond self-report data and utilise richer methods like classroom video analysis, timed tasks, or at least more balanced samples of data. Continuous personality measures, such as the Big Five personality inventory in Chen et al. (2022), would provide a more nuanced understanding than simple binary categories. Another interesting avenue involves the design and tracking of interventions utilising gesture training over time, which may allow researchers to see how these expletive shapes or comes to shape comprehension and student participation.

It would also be beneficial to test predictions derived from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) in actual classroom settings to comprehend more fully when nonverbal cues take precedence or fade into the background given different contexts. Using both experimental and longitudinal designs, research can provide clearer identification of which nonverbal cues are most effective, and with which learners, in the ESL classroom (Lin et al., 2021). Again, this research promotes the idea that body language is a universal tool that promotes clearer, more inclusive communication with diverse learner profiles.

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