

Raising Students' Awareness of the Role of Nonverbal Communication in Professional Environments

Yolanda-Mirela Catelly
Politehnica University Bucharest
Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages
Department of Communication and Modern Languages

Abstract

The study reflects the concern for sensitizing master students on nonverbal communication main aspects and raising their awareness of its roles, which are multiple, with the most important being those of strengthening, repeating or reinforcing the verbal message, express and add (emotional) nuances beyond the verbal elements, support the social interactions among participants in the communication act. The context described is that of teaching a soft skills oriented CLIL type of course called "Scientific and Technical Communication in English - STCE". The aspects included in this course and discussed in the study refer to nonverbal communication in meetings and in delivering professional oral presentations.

Key words

professional communication, nonverbal communication, awareness raising activities, tertiary education, soft skills course

MOTTO:

'The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said.'
Peter F. Drucker (American Educator and Writer)

1. Verbal vs nonverbal communication

A theoretical discussion on the characteristics, similarities and differences between verbal and nonverbal communication should start from an attempt of defining them. As our focus in this paper is mainly on what the latter means and the best ways of embedding it in a course of communication, we will start from emphasizing the main aspects concerning nonverbal communication. Thus, as shown in [2], the key elements in defining this means of communication includes words such as: sending wordless messages, gestures and touch, body language, facial expression, eye contact, object communication, architecture, symbols and

infographics. Similarly, in verbal communication there are nonverbal elements (paralanguage), e.g. voice quality, emotion and speaking style, and prosodic features, e.g. rhythm, intonation and stress. Moreover, nonverbal elements included in written texts, for instance handwriting style, spatial arrangements of words or, in e-mail messages – the use of emoticons, are also to be considered. In all, there are three main areas of significance in the study of nonverbal communication: (i) the conditions where communication takes place; (ii) the physical specific features of the participants in communication processes; (iii) the communicators' patterns of behaviour during the process. As pointed out in [2], for some scientists nonverbal communication can, in effect, occur via any channel of the five senses. It should be emphasized, though, that the audience processes both verbal and nonverbal cues at the same time.

The experts in communication of an American university [3] make a very interesting distinction between the vocal and nonvocal components of nonverbal communication, where the latter includes, besides written communication proper, sign language, finger spelling, Braille and other of the same kind. It is emphasized that in order for communication to take place there should exist transmission of information via 'mutually understood signs', hence the interest of semiotics in the study of the signs and symbols used in the transmission of information/messages. It is interesting to note that, in fact, any branch of science connected with the study of communication forms, be it focused on language or non linguistic elements, makes use of the same principles of linguistics, emphasizing both the significance of language in assigning and deriving meaning, as well as its codification.

As shown in [6], there are numerous uses of nonverbal communication, representing as many options for presenting the intended message. We prefer to group them in a tabular form (see table 10), for a better and clear understanding of the main elements of nonverbal communication:

Nonverbal communication forms and uses

Table 1

FORMS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION	USES
Kinesics; Chronemics; Vocalics; Environment	To create impressions beyond the verbal element of communication
Occulesics; Kinesics	To repeat/reinforce what is said verbally
Kinesics; Occulesics; Proxemics; Haptics; Vocalics	To express emotion beyond the verbal element
Kinesics; Occulesics; Proxemics; Synchrony	To manage and regulate the interactions among participants in communication
Proxemics; Occulesics; Haptics	To convey relational messages of affection, power, dominance a.s.o.
Kinesics; Occulesics, Vocalics	To promote honest communication by detecting/conveying suspicion
Kinesics; Vocalics; Chronemics	To provide social leadership by sending messages of power/persuasion

Why should we attach importance to the study of nonverbal communication after all? Perhaps because, as numerous studies point out, according to recent estimations, it is the so-called body language that accounts for at least 60-65% of human communication, while words score a modest 10%, the rest being represented by paravocal elements.

Naturally, there are cultural differences in these values, particularly as far as the following are concerned:

- speech versus silence;
- talk versus action;
- social role of small talk/gossip;
- role of animation, rhyme and exaggeration in speech.

The idea to be derived is that the study of both verbal and nonverbal communication forms should be done within and/or against the specific social and cultural background. One can learn a lot from the study of nonverbal cues about aspects of human behaviour in various cultures; for instance one can decrypt feelings and/or attitudes of confidence, honesty, nervousness, defensiveness, but also frustration, boredom and suspicion.

The main categories included within nonverbal communication are as follows - we synthetically present them in a tabular form (see Table 2), as this is part of the information included in the CLIL type course of *Scientific And Technical Communication In English* that we teach in our concrete educational context, i.e. POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest master students):

Main categories of nonverbal communication

Table 2

CATEGORY	CATEGORY PRESENTATION	REMARKS
Kinesics (body language)	Deals with physical movement: the body as a whole or specific parts: face, hands, arms. Deals posture in standing/sitting, eye and facial expressions. Reinforces verbal communication.	Cultural variations. However, some emblems are universally known/used.
Occulesics	Eye behaviour as an element of communication (static vs dynamic eye movement). Importance of eye contact	Culturally bound.
Proxemics	Involves the social use of space (closeness between/among people): intimate/personal/social/public space.	Culturally bound.
Haptics	Touching (type, frequency, intensity).	Culturally bound.
Vocalics (paralanguage)	Deals with vocal cues: accent, tempo, loudness, pitch, cadence, rate of speech, nasality and tone, from the point of view of conveying meaning. Categories: - vocal characterizers: laughing, crying, yawning etc.;	Culturally bound.

CATEGORY	CATEGORY PRESENTATION	REMARKS
	- vocal qualifiers: volume, pitch, rhythm, tempo; - vocal segregates: sounds such as mmmm, uh-huh, oooo; - vocal rate, i.e. the speed at which people talk.	
Chronemics	The use of time as an element of communication: punctuality, patterns of dominance or deference within communication situations, monochronemics (doing one thing at a time) vs polychronemics (several things at a time)	Monochronemic vs polychronemic cultures.
Appearance	A person's look/physical appearance - role in communication. Deals with: physical aspects (body shape, hair colour, skin tone, grooming, dress – clothing and jewelry) and use of appearance enhancements (body piercing, tattoos etc.)	Marked cultural differences.
Environment	Involves the communicative value of the physical space: room size, colour, accessibility and location.	Very important in business.
Artifacts	Deals with the communicative aspect of apparent objects visible in the room: art, possessions etc. as an indicative of: status, personality, lifestyle	E.g.: choice of automobile; pets; rugs – in Arabic cultures.
Olfactics	Deals with smells: use of perfumes and spices. Associated with proxemics; the closer people are in communication, the more likely that the smell becomes relevant.	High-contact cultures, e.g. Arabic – large use of perfumes
Synchrony	Focuses on the amount of coordination in people's behaviour when their nonverbal cues are in synchrony with one another: mirroring, mimicry, behavioural meshing.	

2. The importance of raising students' awareness of non verbal communication

In the concrete educational context described, the course was delivered as a Power point presentation of selected elements concerning nonverbal communication considered as useful to a future professional in engineering who will work in a business environment. In what follows, some of these course slides will be presented in point of selected content and the rationale underlying the choices operated.

As the course has an interactive component, the initial slide is a challenging one, asking how much is represented by verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal language in a communication situation. This generally generates an animated discussion in class.

When elements of oral presentations and meetings are presented, a range of aspects concerning nonverbal cues are included, as follows:

- style in delivering oral presentations; cultural differences;
- main aspects of body language in meetings: (i) what to do with the eyes; (ii) what the facial expressions indicate; (iii) the positioning and movement of the body and limbs; (iv) hand gestures;
- attention is paid to the *how* something is presented, rather than to the *what*;

Then a series of dictionary definitions are displayed and the students are asked to comment on them in the seminar. Some sources of further information in this field are provided (e.g. <http://members.aol.com/nonverbal2/diction1.htm>). This procedure is widely used; it is meant to encourage the students to study more resources at the after-course stage, thus contributing to their becoming independent learners. The same principle is reflected in some task types they are assigned as part of their Portfolios of course activities.

The students are made to understand the importance of nonverbal communication in enhancing the force of their speeches, oral presentations or contributions in meetings, by means of slides like that in Figure 1:

Components Of Nonverbal Communication ➤ A system consisting of a range of features often used together to aid <i>expression</i>. ➤ The combination of these features is often a <i>subconscious</i> choice made by native speakers or even sub-groups/sub-cultures within a language group. ➤ Can either <i>reassure</i> our audience and therefore reinforce our spoken message, or <i>detract</i> from our credibility and in so doing dramatically reduce our effectiveness.

Figure 1. Components of Non-verbal Communication

The main components of nonverbal communication are presented, illustrated with images and comments on the intercultural differences; examples are provided. Then, the most important ones are studied in detail, insofar as they are relevant for enhancing the quality of oral presentations, with particular focus on body language, eye contact, proximity and posture. The aim is to increase the learners' awareness of the role of such aspects in conveying meaning, avoiding misunderstandings and fitting in with the audience's culture.

The students are given a series of *Body Language Guidelines* – as concrete practical advice of the general type, as follows: dress appropriately; your appearance is part of your (non-verbal) message; make eye contact with various people in your audience, but do not look at any one person for too long; to keep yourself on track, use cue cards with a few key words instead of a complete text, this will allow you to maintain audience eye contact; speak naturally, clearly and in your regular voice; leave your hands free, so that you can emphasize points naturally; when using slides, do not turn your back to your audience to read the screen; do not shift your weight back and forth from leg to leg, or pace; be enthusiastic about your topic, but not unnaturally so; try to enjoy the experience;

people can sense this and it is contagious; know your topic well -- you will be (and will appear) more relaxed; when using a podium, lectern or table, periodically move out from behind it to remove the barrier between you and your audience; try to adopt a relaxed posture, but not so relaxed that you look sloppy or unprofessional; avoid nervous gestures, such as waving hands around, clicking pens, or swinging a pointer; hold your hands loosely crossed in front of you, with one hand holding your cue cards, and occasionally make a gesture with the other, to avoid looking too stiff.

Similarly, students are presented key aspects to consider in delivering their presentations: space, physical presence and vocal presence, as well as the main problem areas they will have to deal with in communication situations: timing, volume, pacing, gestures and posture – as many criteria in assessing the quality of a good - or not so good - oral presentation.

The aims of the seminar tasks that complement the lectures are, as pointed out in [1] and [4], should be focused both on awareness raising of the importance of nonverbal communication, presenting and teaching a variety of verbal clues, enabling learners to practice and produce aspects of nonverbal communication, but also on developing and integrating the four main skills.

The tasks range from (a) *elicitation and discussion* (e.g. define the space zones in your own words; provide examples of observance or trespassing them; identify problems in communication, such as lack of clarity of the message and its causes, differences between verbal message and that conveyed by nonverbal communication elements, such as body language) and (b) *watching images/films and interpreting meaning via nonverbal communication* – as shown in [5], through the ‘classical’ (c) *reading tasks* on the topic of nonverbal communication, introducing the necessary *vocabulary*, and up to (d) *playing games of pantomime* and guessing meaning, based on teacher/student written scripts.

Finally, here are some originally created tasks that were used with our students:

- *searches on the Internet* to identify cultural differences for some aspects of nonverbal communication, followed by *presentation in class*, which generated discussion of the meaning of – for instance - gestures in various cultures, which is particularly productive with multicultural groups of students;
- organizing *poster presentation mini sessions*, with each student selecting one aspect of nonverbal communication, designing a poster with representative elements and justifying their options by presenting the poster in a session of oral presentations in class – as part of their mid-term evaluation, for instance.

To conclude, we consider that, in order to support our students to become professionals with good communication skills at their workplace, it is important to increase their awareness of the importance of nonverbal communication, to create

opportunities for them to analyze the topic and to give them time for organized practice by creating appropriate tasks to the group needs and profile.

Bibliography

1. Darn S.: *Aspects of Non-verbal Communication* The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XI, No. 2, 2005, <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Darn-Nonverbal/>
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonverbal_communication
3. <http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/smithrd/UAE%20Communication/Unit2.pdf>
4. http://www.developingteachers.com/articles_tchtraining/nonverbalpf.htm
5. <http://www.exforsys.com/career-center/job-search-tips/why-nonverbal-communication-is-important-during-interviews.html>
6. <http://www.slideshare.net/Terry34/verbal-and-nonverbal-communication>