Non-Verbal Communication for Better English

Joseph Montagna

How does a teacher feel when he/she sees a student waving his/her hand enthusiastically in response to a question? Usually it’s a good feeling since the teacher views it as confirmation a student is engaged in the lesson. From a student’s perspective, receiving non-verbal signs and gestures also is beneficial since it assists in getting a better read on the teacher. The instructor’s use of improvisational body language for conveying meaning can be crucial in the language acquisition process of students. In brief, the following will describe the importance of non-verbal communication for English as a Foreign Language students, and a few examples of the technique in practice.

Not many people realize the significance of non-verbal communication in everyday interaction. Some feel it’s just as crucial to give off the right body language as it is to communicate clearly orally. In the classroom, and in particular, the EFL class, the same is true. According to Susan Goldin-Meadow in her article, “The few experimental studies that have been done suggest that a lesson accompanied by gesture is more effective than that same lesson not accompanied by gesture.” Furthermore, in a study by Carl L. Garrot, the use of positive body language promotes student receptivity toward the subject matter by making the teacher appear more approachable, warm and caring.

In addition, facilitating communication and vocabulary building are the results of effective non-verbal cues. Some examples include simply using counting fingers for numbers, or cupping an ear to get a student to speak louder, or twirling of the arms to get a student to explain more in a complete sentence. In addition, the acquisition of vocabulary through gestures allows for students to internalize meaning more rapidly. For example, a game of classroom charades, in which students are placed in groups to mimic actions centered on certain topics such as travel or sports or school, can be both enjoyable and educationally valuable. Acting out the meaning of words makes the language acquisition process more comprehensible as well.

Using improvisational body language adds another visual component to the learning process. This is a benefit to students with strong visual intelligence, but teachers need to be aware that not all students are strong visual learners. Furthermore, non-verbal communication differs sometimes largely in different cultures. For example, giving the symbol to come closer in U.S. culture by bending ones’ finger quickly would be considered rude in some Asian cultures, which prefer to signal such meaning with the palm down.
Finally, can teachers be made aware of effective non-verbal cues for communication, and improve their rate and clarity of gestures? To answer in simple terms—Why not? If business managers and sales representatives can receive training in non-verbal communication, so can language teachers.

References

Joseph Montagna is originally from Massachusetts, USA. He is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Boston College in Boston. He taught for 4 years at Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka and 1 year at University Del Mar in Oaxaca, Mexico. He has been teaching at Showa Boston since 2007.