

Acquisition of non-verbal behaviour by the foreign language learner

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Recent investigation has proved that FL acquisition naturally and necessarily entails error and that linguistic mistakes are much more tolerated than sociocultural incompetence on the part of the foreign language learner. Nevertheless the majority of language teachers have followed an isolationist approach in their classes, concentrating all their attention on linguistic forms and functions, and leaving sociocultural factors aside. The fact that different cultural communities employ and expect different patterns of non-verbal behaviour can frequently lead to serious misunderstandings in cross-cultural encounters unless the non-native language learner is sufficiently initiated into their subtleties. Obviously, it is much easier to be bilingual than bicultural. In order to bridge the gap between the linguistic input and the cultural component, in which non-verbal behaviour is included, some teachers present their students with texts that contain cultural information in the form of "cultural asides" or "cultural capsules", i.e. short notes describing the differences between the native and target cultures. But knowing a culture involves much more than the simple transmission of this kind of information.

Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) believe that foreign language learners must have an awareness of the culturally-determined patterns of verbal and non-

verbal communication which speakers of English follow. In order to become culturally fluent L2 teachers must devise activities to increase awareness of native speakers' common expectation of spoken and written communication in English. These authors claim that, 119

Language classes have traditionally emphasized verbal language. However, non-verbal language, which is closely connected with culture, needs to be dealt with as well. In order to communicate effectively in a culture, it is necessary to be familiar with that culture's non-verbal patterns of communication. For one thing, non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable in another. (105)

According to Goodenough (1957: 167) "a society's culture consists of whatever one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members." Lado (1957: 110) assumes that "cultures are structured systems of patterned behavior." For Hojjer (1953: 554), "traits, elements, or better, patterns of culture are organized or structured into a system or set of systems, which, because it is historically created, is therefore open and subject to constant change." Corder (1985: 36) thinks that "probably all our behaviour has a conventional element in it, because it is learned in society and, for that very reason, the

form it takes will be specific to the social group in which it is learned. This is part of what we mean by culture." Therefore, non-verbal behavior is a patterned system included within the cultural component of a particular language. This peripheral system of human communication is subdivided into other sub-systems, such as, paralinguage, kinesics and proxemics.

Abercrombie (1968: 55) defines paralinguistic phenomena as "non linguistic elements in conversation." Wardhaugh (1977: 19) considers that paralinguage is a system superimposed on the linguistic one which adds extra dimensions of meaning to utterances. According to this author, it refers to the paralinguistic system of voice modulation. In this sense, all of us are familiar with the saying "It wasn't what he said; it was the way he said it". For Gimson (1970: 57), paralinguistic features are related to the peculiar voice quality or "voice set" of a speaker and the special modifications he may make for a particular effect, eg. he may use a whisper or a breathy or creaky voice or falsetto. For Crystal (1974: 265) paralinguistics deals with prosodic features that do not affect the meaning of an utterance but can reveal the speaker's personality traits, his social origin, profession etc. Wardhaugh (1977: 19-20) mentions five scales within the paralinguistic system. In normal communication, utterances fall near the center point of each scale but for special types of communication speakers move up or down a particular scale. These scales are the following: 1.- The loudness-to-softness scale (overloudness is a characteristic of certain types of communication eg. a teacher in a big classroom; oversoftness, to create suspense when telling a story to a child). 2.- The pitch scale (extrahigh pitch is used in speaking to children or to indicate strain or excitement, whereas extralow pitch shows displeasure, disappointment or weariness). 3.-The rasping-to-openness scale (rasping refers to the presence of an unusual amount of friction in an utterance as in Uhg! Ugh!; openness is associated with political and religious orators speaking to huge crowds). 4.-The drawling-to-clipping scale (A drawled Ye-ah! can indicate insolence or reservation, whereas a clipped Nope! or Certainly not! is a signal of sharpness or irritation). 5.- The tempo scale (compare the smooth tempos of certain salesmen, or the student with the rehearsed story or lesson with the spat out: "Now - you - just - listen - to - me !)

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Kinesics deals with Body Language, comprising movement, gesture, posture, facial expression, gaze, distancing etc. Schnapper (1969: 137) proposes the terms: Oculistics (eye-to- eye contact or avoidance) and Haptics (the tactile form of communication), which are included in the more general term Kinesics.

Proxemics refers to the uses of space: comfortable distances exist for various activities and these distances must be learnt. There are appropriate distances for talking to friends, to strangers or superiors. In all these activities feelings of "territoriality", that is, of rights to certain spaces emerge, however, the exact dimensions of these spaces and the uses to which they may be put must be learnt afresh by foreign language learners if they want to achieve effective communication. Corder (1985) includes kinesics and proxemics within the term "paralinguistic phenomena":

Any deliberate manipulation of bodily behaviour for communicative purposes within the conventions, other than what I have called linguistic, is generally called paralinguistic: gesture, posture, facial expression, and the tempo, pitch and quality of speech. (36)

As the non-verbal channels (paralinguage, kinesics and proxemics) are culturally relative, FL teachers should introduce their students gradually to the basic aspects of these target culture patterns. Let's analyse some of these contrastive elements.

According to a research conducted by Birdwhistell (1970), middle class Americans display about thirty-three "kinemes" (single communicative movements) in the face area. Within these, considerable attention has been paid to eye movement. A skimming of differences across cultures reveals that there is great variation in this aspect of communication. Eye contact behaviour carries the meaning of honest dealings in Anglo culture while it is rude and disrespectful in many other cultures. British etiquette decrees that the speaker and listener focus attentively on each other. While an American listener nods and murmurs to signal that he is listening, the Englishman remains silent and merely blinks his eyes. Hall (1966: 122) says:

The gaze of the American directed toward his conversational partner often wanders from one eye to the other and even leaves the face for long periods. Proper English listening behavior includes immobilization of the eyes at social distance, so that whichever eye one looks at gives the appearance of looking

straight at you. In order to accomplish this feat, the Englishman must be eight or more feet away. He is too close when the 12-degree horizontal span of the macula won't permit a steady gaze. At less than eight feet, one must look at either one eye or the other.

Hayes (1940: 240) divides gestures into three categories: autistic gestures, technical gestures, and folk gestures. Within the first category he considers nervous gestures made by individuals in response to their inner turmoil and therefore not strictly conditioned by culture, i.e. biting of the lips or fingernails, cracking the knuckles, jiggling a leg, or twitching a facial muscle.

Technical gestures include such complex systems of communication as the sign language of the deaf, the gestures of umpires and referees, military salutes, the signals of music conductors, traffic directors, etc. Folk gestures are the property of an entire culture and are passed on by imitation. These are the gestures that are more profitably learned by those who intend to interact with members of another culture. Gestures used for "yes" or "no", for showing approval or disapproval and for making and refusing requests would be useful. We have to bear in mind that different cultures employ different gestures, i.e. the hand gesture which means "Okay" to Americans often means "zero" to the French; the French gesture for "Okay" is "thumbs up." In Japan, the extension of the right-hand palm upwards and flapping the fingers up and down is a beckoning signal; Seward (1968) describes an amusing incident where Anglo-Americans miscoded it: One day in Hakone, I was watching a Japanese girl-guide whose American tourist charges had become separated from her by a considerable distance and saw her use this gesture [described above] to try to gather her flock of about twenty, elderly, bewildered-looking souls about her. The diverse effects were amusing. Some thought they had been abandoned by their girl-guide and began to mill about like worried sheep. Others appeared to think that it was a signal for a drink and started to straggle back toward the bar of the hotel. Still others apparently interpreted it to mean that they were now on their own and began to disperse through the town. (42)

Some other interesting conflicting patterns can be observed between Latin Americans and Englishmen. Argentines show affection spontaneously: women kiss each other on the cheek (only once

and not twice as in Spain) and shake hands with both hands; men, usually after a long absence, give a full embrace and there is also a considerable amount of backslapping. In conversation, they speak in a relaxed manner, keep shorter distances, and one man conversing with another will often finger the other's lapel or touch his shoulder. They maintain eye contact and cross their legs in the following fashion: the right ankle is placed on the left knee; but crossing legs is considered unladylike for women. On the other hand, the English consider backslapping, fingering the interlocutor's lapel and keeping short distances inappropriate. Demonstrative hand gestures should be used sparingly and in general conversation, one should act naturally, avoiding excessive warmth or friendliness.

Gorden (1974) has found out that the hand-shaking pattern in Latin America differs widely from the current one in U.S. He mentions the following differences:

- Latin Americans shake hands more frequently
- They shake hands with more people (eg. on entering a place where a social gathering is taking place they tend to shake hands with each person, whereas the American simply says "hello")
- They shake hands on more occasions
- Men do not wait for women to take initiative
- The woman-to-woman handshake is different.

With respect to the third non-verbal channel, proxemics, Hall (1966) has found out that middle class Americans have established a personal distance from one to four feet when talking between friends; whereas this distance increases from four to twelve feet in the case of casual interaction between acquaintances and strangers, i.e. in business meetings, classrooms, and impersonal social affairs. Observance of these interaction zones is critical to harmonious relations, and satisfactory social interaction; but because these zones exist at a subconscious level, they are often violated by nonmembers of a culture. More often than not, confusion and irritation may be caused by the differential decoding of these non-verbal patterns.

Schnapper (1969) considers that South Americans, Greeks and others find comfort in standing, sitting, or talking to people at a distance which Americans find intolerably close. Americans interpret this unusual closeness as aggressive and too intimate, causing in them feelings of discomfort,

hostility or intimidation so they usually and unconsciously back away to their usual distance of comfort.

The research of Gardner and Lambert (1972) determined that integrative motivation (the intention of becoming a part of the target culture as well as speaking the target language) resulted in more effective language learning than did instrumental motivation (the intention of learning the language to serve a purpose, such as getting a job, with no wish to mix socially with speakers of the language). Even though our students belong to the second group, the teaching of culture in general, and non-verbal behavior in particular, is still essential to any depth of understanding of the language, to achieve communicative competence and therefore avoid cultural misunderstanding, to the motivation and attitude of the student, and to the interest of the course.

Prospective primary school teachers in Spain have a new subject in their curriculum: English Culture and Civilization, in which a specific course that concentrates on these aspects, among others, is offered. The role of the foreign language teacher in charge of this course is that of Cross-cultural interpreter, Advisor and Organizer. Among the most fruitful activities to acquire foreign patterns of non-verbal behaviour we can mention the following:

1.- The use of Video, T.V (soap operas), films: This kind of presentation adds variety to the foreign language class and helps students to concentrate on paralinguistic features, kinesics and proxemics. Besides, students enjoy these classes a lot. Telatnik & Kruse (1982: 171-181) provide an interesting example of the use of cultural videotapes for the foreign language classroom. At Colorado State University it was decided to tackle the problem of cultural misunderstanding through video. These videotapes dramatised situations in which the foreign student encounters conflict due to cultural bias or ignorance of American values, customs or non-verbal behaviour. Pragmatic situations were emphasised: renting an apartment, meeting and making friends, giving appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses in greetings and goodbyes. These situations are relatively easy to dramatise and are among the most important to help the foreign student cope with and adjust to the foreign cultural environment.

- 2.- Role Play: Long (1977: 1-50) offers forty dialogues (with their corresponding transfer situations) for students to role play, in which non-verbal behaviour has been included. At the end of the book he gives a brief description of the verbal and non-verbal items included in each dialogue.
- 3.- Culture Assimilators: Developed by social psychologists for facilitating adjustment to a foreign culture, the culture assimilator is a brief description of a critical incident of crosscultural interaction that would probably be misunderstood. It can include the use of both verbal and non-verbal behaviour.
- 4.- Comparison method: the teacher begins each discussion period with the presentation of one or more items in the target culture that are distinctly different from the students' culture. The discussion then centers on why these differences might cause problems.

Even though it is advisable to help our learners to acquire non-verbal patterns of behaviour we have to bear in mind that some students, who are rather ethnocentric might feel threatened. They will probably think that they are being forced to change their ways. Therefore, certain sociolinguists, advise foreign language educators to talk about these cultural patterns but leave the learners free "to adopt them or not for productive use." (Saville-Troike, 1992: 280).

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