

GESTURAL BEHAVIOR IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

“Why do we smile, when pleased, and not scowl?”

(William James¹)

By Tim Blankley

Interactive language learning focuses primarily on the acquisition of syntax, vocabulary and language functions, only paying cursory attention to the role non-verbal behavior plays in learning. Gestures are thought to serve an auxiliary function in interaction: enhancing the message. This paper will outline gestural behavior as it relates to the task of language learning. Gestures refer to the unrestrained movement of hands, arms, but also other bodily movements that directly modify, enhance or replace speech. Since facial expressions are integral in the expression of emotional content, this paper includes them as gestural behavior. It will show how gestures compensate for overloads in a speaker's working memory and as a result improve performance in interaction. During interaction, learning occurs when learners notice gaps in their knowledge. It is not enough to communicate meaning; learners have to notice language form. The conditions for noticing the form-meaning relationship are only possible when learners push themselves during interaction. The use of gestures forestalls stress that would otherwise arise as a result of a learner's inability to articulate a message fluently. Gestures therefore play an important role in enabling speakers to articulate themselves and achieve a reasonable degree of verbal acuity. Gestures also simultaneously reflect a style of interaction, an interlocutor's emotional engagement, and are indicative of rapport and a willingness to communicate. Gestures not only portray individuality but also cultural style. To that end, gestures are cultural-content and represent a valuable resource teachers can exploit in learning. I will argue that the strategic development of gestural behavior not only makes sense for enhancing performance in listening and speaking tasks but also influences performance and as a result relates directly to learning in the interactive method.

The seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes noted that those born without the ability to acquire speech invariably make themselves understood (Fromkin, *et al*, 2003). Indeed, modern sign languages are neither inferior in syntax or grammar and match any spoken language (ibid). It is universal to see a range of non-verbal behaviors in any communicative environment. Cognition and

speech events, says Atkinson *et al.* (1979), cannot take place without facial expressions, physical orientation, voice quality, language, social scene, and social actors. Mehrabian's controversial 1971 study (Knapp & Hall, 1997) concluded that body language accounts for most of the message in communication (55%), followed by tone of voice (38%) and words (only 7%). Rossini (2008b) cites Kendon's (1986) definition of gestures: 'those actions whose communicative intent is manifest'. Gestures express a person's engagement in or disengagement from the communicative event. However the definition doesn't go far enough. Unconscious gestural movements of the hands that accompany speech production are not communicative at all and as we will see below, serve a different function.

The types of gestural behavior

Expressive gestures are universal: fear and anger, disgust, joy and sadness (Ekman, 2003). Fear is often called the fight or flight emotion and is widely recognized to be an emotion triggered by the amygdala, the 'primitive' part of the human brain that responds to perceived danger (Solomon, 2007). The other expressive emotions of joy, sadness, disgust and contempt have universally recognizable facial expressions, irrespective of culture (Ekman, 2003). Symbolic gestures on the other hand differ from culture to culture (Morris, 2002). Gestural systems correspond more to provincial 'accents' and preferred usage patterns (Gullberg, *et al.*, 2008). "The expression of culture is so bound up in nonverbal communication that the barriers to culture learning are more nonverbal than verbal" (Brown, 2007, p. 237).

Gestures signal a speaker's level of engagement but also reflect a cultural style of interaction. Gestural behavior in heterogeneous and homogeneous populations is subject to variations or differences (Morris, 2002). In heterogeneous populations gestures play an important role in enhancing and clarifying the content of a message (*ibid.*). Gestures may substitute for expressions and their function in certain cases is expressly communicative and social. In homogeneous cultures such as Japan, speakers rely far less on gestures to communicate (Morris, 2002) as there is a lesser need.

Gesturing begins within days of birth

Expressive behavior begins within days of birth (Iverson and Goldin-Meadow, 2005). Babies are born gesturing: the first acts of communication are the expressive gestures of crying, typically within

moments of birth. By ten months of age, infants are using gesture-word combinations (*deictic gestures*) and by twelve months of age, they are using gestural behavior to add predicate information (*iconic gestures*). That is, words and gestures together make an infant's utterances meaningful. By 14 months infants have a vast repertoire of gestures and by 18 months gestures accompany 50% of speech (ibid). Gestures complement speech production and are integral to first language acquisition and the production of speech.

Gestural movement is primarily communicative but gestures also serve intrapersonal functions. Gestures aid the lexical retrieval processes that accompany speech production. Hand gestures aid in the production of speech and function to assist recall by compensating for overloads in a person's working memory. Werner & Kaplan (1963) (cited in Rossini, 2008) note that a primary function of gestures is to help a speaker cope with the demands of speech production. Their research concludes that spontaneous hand gestures are a result of an overflow into the motor system. During speech production, demands are placed on a speaker's cognitive processes as they work to produce and verbalize ideas of varying complexity in syntax that must be formed prior to the completion of the sentence as it unfolds in time. Speakers need pause to compensate for natural limitations in working memory and gestures serve to help speakers express their thoughts.

It is well known that stress affects speech production adversely. Likewise, forcibly restricting a person's natural propensity to gesture has the same effect. Gullberg *et al.* (2008) designed a test to establish what effects restricting movement would have on speech production in descriptive tasks. They had participants describe a series of images under either free or restrained conditions. In one part of the test, subjects were required to describe pictures that were displayed on a screen but in another part, subjects were required to work from memory. Physically restrained subjects exhibited a slower rate of speech while subjects able to gesture freely were not only more verbally articulate but when required to describe the images from memory, showed an increase in gestural behavior. The results show that gestures not only support speech production but aid recall.

Signals emotional engagement

Being in the right affective state for learning is a key learning strategy (Oxford, 1990). Non-verbal behavior is one of the clearest ways in which teachers can perceive and judge the affective states of learners. Our physical behavior is a reflection of how we are 'tuned-in' to the world emotionally

(Solomon, 2007). Solomon (2007), who sees all behavior as intelligent, argues that the emotions are 'imbued with intelligence,' and are 'more or less insightful and knowledgeable ways of grappling with our world' (2007, p. 2.). In Solomon's (2007) view, it is because emotions are intelligent that we should accept responsibility for them. Certainly this seems a contentious point of view given that temper tantrums hardly seem intelligent. Solomon (2007) argues however that outbursts, however crude, are strategic if they are learned responses. Behavior therefore is to be understood as strategic when it is used to achieve ends in the same manner that it has been successful in achieving ends in the past.

If we accept this view: to what extent are learners willing to accept responsibility for their style of engagement in learning environments where they are required to learn? Such compulsory environments can be far from motivating. In Solomon's mind, reticence and non-engagement signals an intelligent response. Apparently, Knapp & Hall (1997) would agree and list non-engagement as an actual non-verbal strategy. 'Tuned-in', in Solomon's view, implies a conscious acknowledgment of one's approach, engagement, and purposeful behavior in response to others. Non-verbal behavior is therefore not only indicative of learners' emotional engagement but also signifies whether or not students are engaged in learning in the interactive style at all, cultural variations notwithstanding.

Rapport is one of the best indicators of successful interaction and positive affective states. Rapport in the language classroom is perhaps the starting point for effective communicative practice. Rosenthal (cited in Goleman, 2006) notes that rapport in conversation is evidenced by shared attention, turn-taking, and a neutral tone of voice. Such behavior is evidence of a *willingness to communicate*. Reticence, or inhibited non-verbal behavior, is undesirable and apparently represents a flagging motivation or at the very least a temporary inability to engage others meaningfully.

Gestures enhance the message

People who gesture a lot are often seen as charismatic communicators or perhaps even overly zealous. Another popular belief is that gestures make listening easier as they help to clarify meaning. A listener can better understand a verbal message by interpreting the gestures that accompany it. From this point of view, gestures accompany speech and assist the listener. A message supported by sincere, authentic and recognizable non-verbal behavior is compelling. Ekman (2001) points out that the non-verbal is judged by listeners to be more authentic than the verbal message if the message a

listener receives is of a contradictory nature, that is, if the verbal message and the non-verbal behavior do not match. When messages are contradictory, listeners will always judge in favor of the non-verbal one. The main reason for this implicit preference, Ekman notes (*ibid*), is that it is all the more difficult to lie non-verbally.

Society trains its members to act in certain ways and to mask or repress certain behaviors. Young boys for instance are encouraged to play rough sports and suppress their emotional responses while girls are encouraged to express themselves verbally and talk about how they feel. The psychologist Polce-Lynch (2002) notes that pre-adolescent boys are socialized to suppress their emotional responses when in rough group play. Adults, she explains, teach boys to turn their emotional responses on and off according to the situation and in doing so, boys are taught that emotions can be dismissed. This devaluing of a boy's emotional life can lead to a more or less permanent sublimation of emotional responses in individuals. As a result of socialization, emotional behavior, rather than developing, can become ignored. Inhibited behavior in many cases is a result of social conditioning in accordance with the rules of society (Polce-Lynch, 2002).

Inhibited or repressed behavior is detrimental to communicative learning and may be an expression of a learning style gone awry. Researchers into language acquisition have long noted that some learners will compensate for their own perceived inability by abandoning attempts to communicate. This avoidance behavior is strategic in that choices are made to avoid interaction, the cornerstone of language acquisition in oral communication classes. In other words, students, through lack of self-confidence, can purposefully withdraw with their whole physical body from any attempt to communicate. Knapp and Hall (1997) also refer a number of other strategies: learned helplessness (as a coping strategy), avoidance behavior, masking of sleeping and inattention, uncertainty, and absences. If a willingness to communicate describes the exemplary learner, inhibited behavior may be interpreted as a strategic 'action' set in place to avoid the challenge of learning.

Individuals are subject to peer pressure so often adopt a group behavior reflecting the attitudes of a group. A cultural divide becomes evident in a foreign language-learning (EFL) situation when the native-speaker teacher advances an interactive learning style that seems unnatural to the learners. That is the peer group may not accept or understand the learning style. Students in a foreign language-learning situation have their own culture with its own gestural dialect to manage during

learning tasks. There is no question that gestures aid communication enhancing output and input, but are the differences in gestural systems from culture to culture different to such a degree that learning styles are incompatible with certain cultures? The question that has to be brought up is should learners be expected to contend with the gestural nuances of a foreign culture? Dornyei (2001) notes that cultural input makes language learning more interesting. Williams & Burden (1998) also include cultural content as one of key elements in motivational teaching practices.

Cultural knowledge may interfere and prejudice learners' judgments about the meanings of gestures. This may lead to uncertainty or the misinterpretation of the gestures their foreign teachers make in EFL learning. Since misinterpretation is a real possibility, even if learners cannot acquire the native gestures, the teacher should at least explain the gestures they commonly use and the tripartite function of gestural behavior: to enhance the message (symbolic gestures and expressive gestures), to enhance comprehension (paying attention to the gestures others make), and to compensate for limitations in working memory (unrestrained use of automatic hand gestures).

People don't read gestures they interpret them. Attributing meaning to the gestures of other speakers is in itself an act of interpretation based on perception. This means learners will invariably attempt to interpret the gestures of foreigners just as they will invariably interpret the gestures of their peers. On the other hand, learners will all interpret situations slightly differently and while we are willing interpreters, we also apparently get it wrong-at least some of the time. Ekman (2003) says that while the facial expressions of universal emotions are innate, reading facial expressions is a skill we have to learn and unless we are trained how, we will inevitably make mistakes. The main part of Ekman's training regimen involves learning to recognize masking and learning to read emotional content before it is masked. Masking, or the conscious concealment of facial expressions, is a ubiquitous occurrence in interaction. Skillful communicators however learn to read or establish empathy with others by reading the micro-expressions that precede masking behavior.

This approach to teaching gestures can also narrow the focus on specific strategic use of gestures. Non-verbal behavior, conscious or not is strategic behavior. Oxford (1990) argues that gestures can function to overcome limitations in speaking. The moment learners perceive a barrier in communication they have several choices: one is reverting to their native language, or they can negotiate their way through using verbal communication strategies or they can use gestures.

Gullberg, *et al.* (2008, p.157) suggest that gestures should be seen both as a resource to exploit in learning and as a component of efficient language learning.

Teachers cannot take for granted that learners recognize the important role gestural behavior plays both in terms of aiding comprehension and in enhancing the verbal message. Teachers can begin by assuming learners are not confident when it comes to understanding the precise meanings of gestures; rather they tend to have a limited understanding of the role gestures play in learning. When it comes to understanding the communicative gestures (i.e., symbolic gestures) native speakers of a target language make, learners are apparently less confident about what they mean.

Gestural behavior represents rich cultural content and is relevant to the communicative exigencies of interactive learning practice both in terms of supporting the demands of speaking but also enhancing the message. Instructors can gauge whether learners are at the task of learning in classrooms by observing gestural behavior. Gestural behavior can be strategically exploited to support the communicative needs of interactive learning practice. Interlocutors who use gestures take advantage of an important learning resource and are better able to overcome difficulties in the production of speech. Besides enhancing the message and aiding cognition, gestural behavior relates to emotional engagement and supports language acquisition. Witnessing overt gestural behavior is possibly a strong indicator of a learner's likelihood of success in learning.

Appendix

Learner beliefs and promoting gestural awareness

The following questionnaire is designed to promote learner awareness of the role gestures play in foreign language learning and addresses key issues surrounding the relationship between language learning and gestural behavior.

A = strongly agree, B = agree, C = neutral, D = disagree, E = strongly disagree

1. I understand most of the gestures people make in my own culture.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | *Disagree*

2. I think the gestures I make help me to communicate more clearly.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

3. When I am listening to others, the gestures they make help me to understand what they mean.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

4. English speakers and Japanese speakers gesture differently.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

5. I understand the gestures English native speakers make.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

6. When learning English, I pay special attention to the gestures native speakers make.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

7. When learning English, I try to gesture using the English native gestures.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

8. I use automatic hand gestures when speaking to help me express my thoughts.

Agree | A | B | C | D | E | Disagree

[Author's data]

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ⁱ Cited in Pinker, S., *The language instinct* (1994; 2007, p. 7)