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Recognizing Paralanguage in Teaching

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Recognizing Paralanguage in Teaching

Introduction

This paper seeks to define paralanguage and the importance it holds as a whole and in the education field. This discussion will include how paralanguage is used in everyday interactions, in the classroom with teachers and students, and with parent/guardian interactions. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize information found into strategies for educators to use in the field.

Defining Paralanguage

Paralanguage encompasses nonverbal aspects of speech such as intonation, vocalization, gestures, body movements, eye-contact, speed, pitch, and facial expressions. Paralanguage accounts for 93% of understood communication, with 55% from the face, 38% tone, and shockingly 7% from words¹. Communication is an important aspect of everyday life and necessary for the world we live in. There are many ways to communicate, with our words being somewhat of a commonality between cultures due to its direct nature. Think of how many different voices you hear in a day and how those voices change tones or speed, and how those people use hand signals or gestures to further communication. These are all paralanguage skills being utilized to signal communication. Paralanguage skills can be rehearsed but most often they are spur of the moment expressions that can contradict spoken words. This contradiction is referred to as “non-verbal leakage” where one’s facial expressions or tone conflict with verbal communication². These facial expressions and gestures differ for cultures and exploring how gestures and body language translate across cultures shows how easily miscommunications can happen.

Kinesthetic Communication Across Cultures

There are many hand signals or facial expressions that are distinct to different cultures and therefore many misunderstandings can take place if there’s a dispute among a common signal or display. For example, there are “seven different handshakes varying according to respect, age, and friendliness” in East Africa³. There are also differences between high-touch and low-touch cultures where “the backslapping and touching used by Americans as a sign of friendship might easily give offense in Japan or China” due to differences in acceptable body behavior and

¹ Alastair Pennycook, “Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Paralanguage, Communication, and Education,” *TESOL Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1985): 261, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586829>.

² Pennycook, 265.

³ Pennycook, 262.

gestures⁴. A few other miscommunications that can take place include the traditional eyebrow flash of recognition in the US, but considered indecent in Japanese culture. Silence is another example as it signals compliance or agreement in some countries but disagreement in others where it's considered rude or disrespectful to verbalize disagreement. When dissecting cross-cultural communications, body gestures are important factors because they carry most of the information. However, facial expressions help remove ambiguousness of an isolated body gesture—so the two must be used jointly to eliminate much potential miscommunication⁵. This information is extremely relevant in English Language Learner (ELL) classrooms where students may come from different cultural backgrounds and may misunderstand common cultural signals or other cultural norms. ELL classrooms offer the unique dynamic of other languages being present, and although verbal cues and phrases are often the focus, they should not negate the importance of taught paralinguistic skills. For example, if a student is acting out of place, but understands minimal English, the teacher can choose to use by English words like “no thank you” or “please don't do that”, however these terms could be confusing to an ELL if they learned “thank you” and “please” are terms said after a nice thing happens to encourage behavior. It's the use of a harsh tone that would signal ELL students to stop the behavior or the use of a calm tone for ELL to continue that behavior. This example not only demonstrates the importance of tone across cultures, but also generically in the classroom.

Paralanguage Across Teaching Relationships

Paralanguage and Co-teaching

Since kinesthetic communication is an important part of paralanguage, it's arguably one of the most important parts of non-verbal co-teaching communication. Co-teaching is very difficult because teaching and communication styles can merge or clash, and the reasons for some clashes are cultural differences in how communication occurs. This includes gestural and other kinesthetic communications that take place in the classroom. Gestures towards students have the power to send out robust signals for students to carry out instruction or settle down if they are in a coordinated manner between teachers⁶. Gestures are overall important in the classroom as they instruct student actions and can help clarify what

⁴ Pennycook, 266.

⁵ Dominique Bouchet, “Communication and Cultural Specificity: The Importance of Gestures and Face Expressions,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 13, no. 1 (February 1989): 112, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(89\)90112-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(89)90112-4).

⁶ Gahye Song, “Co-Teachers' Coordinated Gestures as Resources for Giving Instructions in the EFL Classroom,” *Applied Linguistics* 16, no. 2 (n.d.): 5.

is expected (especially in the ELL classroom). Gestures and other paralanguage play a large role in co-teaching because of how misunderstandings can occur. Consider the following situation

“If the co-teacher says, ‘I am very excited about this activity we are planning together,’ but her voice holds no animation or enthusiasm, the listener might wonder if the stated excitement is genuine and how much support they can actually expect from their partner for the upcoming activity”⁷

This situation brings up the importance of tone’s role within paralanguage and how it can cause confusion if the words and expected tone do not match. This confusion can be clarified with facial expression or knowing how the co-teacher usually sounds, but if there is distrust between spoken words and the unspoken meaning then co-teaching relationships can begin to falter. Tone is also important for conflict resolution so one can convey empathetic emotions towards their co-teacher. It is best to have deep conversations with one’s co-teacher about their style of communication so any conversations held can be properly communicated for one’s message to come across appropriately⁸. A few starter questions can include asking how they look when stressed/upset or sharing how you appear when stressed/upset and asking what nonverbal signals can be used when a break is needed in class.

A few more strategies that can be used for good paralanguage between co-teachers can be small things like asking for support with a head nod and eye contact. You can allow spotlight trades so students know who to focus on instead of two teachers trying to compete for control of the classroom. This practice also models good relationships for students. It also helps to know your co-teacher’s presentation style so you know how to support them best. Eye-contact across the room accompanied by facial expression is also a fantastic way to silently communicate when there is a problem or when additional support is needed. The biggest strategy is to get to know your co-teacher so you can be a team for the classroom and so you know what paralanguage signals they need to be supported or for communication to be effective.

Paralanguage and Parents

Positive parent-teacher relationships can benefit student growth and learning; paralanguage helps strengthen this relationship. Most teachers will see parents face-to-face for conferences or classroom volunteering which are two distinct relationships that require paralanguage. Parent-teacher conferences invites open

⁷ Greg Conderman, Sarah Johnston- Rodriguez, and Paula Hartman, “Communicating and Collaborating in Co-Taught Classrooms,” May 5, 2009, 10–11.

⁸ Conderman, Rodriguez, and Hartman, 14.

communication so the student can benefit; as the teacher, you want to be actively listening by using kinesthetic language such as head nodding, eyebrow raises, or other facial expressions. Another important aspect of active listening is to “observe the other person’s behavior and body language” so you can read their signals to make the conversation more comfortable or ask additional questions so they can elaborate⁹. Conferences are a way for parents to voice their concerns but are also opportunities to bring up concerns teachers may have. It’s important to approach these talks with neutrality and objectivity so the point can be communicated to parents. Classroom volunteering is a more casual relationship as the parent may be focused on the event rather than their child’s academics. Teachers want to be sure the parent feels welcome in the room which is where body language and tone can come into play. Having a more open stance with a lighter tone gives off the impression of welcomeness and belonging that parent volunteers will appreciate. For parents who do not participate in either of the events, choosing the wording of materials sent home is important so they know they are not judged for non-participation. It’s also important because of the cultural differences in our world, some families may think it’s rude or disrespectful to voice concerns they have about their student or disagreements they have with teaching styles. Understanding your student’s families’ backgrounds can help teachers to communicate better and clarify everything so no misunderstandings can occur.

Other tips for effective communication with parents includes greeting parents at the door for conferences or volunteering events. This simple gesture can show them you are welcoming to both them and their thoughts. Having an open posture and stance can also help them feel comfortable sharing. Again, lots of nodding and eye-contact can show parents you care about their opinions and help them share additional information or concerns. Forging a healthy bond between teacher and parents/guardians is a combination of reading others non-verbal cues and having a respectful yet firm tone for conversations.

Paralanguage and Students

Grasping how paralanguage impacts teacher-student relationships involves looking into perceived power dynamics in the classroom and how teachers can use their knowledge of paralanguage to read students and their skills. Power dynamics within the classroom are dictated by actions and words but also aspects of paralanguage like tone and body language. These power dynamics can come across when teachers speak in an entitled or patronizing tone towards students, and students perceive this power. One study explored the assumption that power is needed to control students

⁹ Loizos Symeou, Eleni Roussounidou, and Michalis Michaelides, “I Feel Much More Confident Now to Talk With Parents’: An Evaluation of In-Service Training on Teacher–Parent Communication,” n.d., 70.

so learning can take place and found that “the more power is employed by the teacher as a means of control, the more likely it will be required as a means of control”¹⁰. Power within this study was perceived from tone and facial expression and it stands that if teachers tried to coerce students by using punishments, students would respond negatively versus reward power or expert power, where students expected a reward or respected their teacher based on their expertise¹¹. Students pick up on teacher’s tones. Classrooms based in mutual respect operate more openly and expressively compared to those operated based on controlling students as shown by the study. So teachers can use their paralanguage skills to create an open, welcoming environment for students to contribute to. Teachers can also use these skills to read their students. For example, if a child does not verbally show a skill but can perform it, they have issues verbalizing not performing (a student can’t count to 5 when asked but can retrieve 5 toy cars). Gestures and body language can conflict with spoken words, especially with children. Think of a child who is not telling the truth, they often look downwards, avoid eye-contact, and are trying to walk away from you and these are signs their verbal answer is not truthful. Understanding your students body language is important so you can make them feel welcome in the classroom.

Some tips on using paralanguage efficiently in the classroom with students involves speaking clearly with a straight posture when command of the classroom is needed but having a more relaxed pose when trying to empathize with students. Shaking your head and pursing the lips also helps to discourage behavior, especially accompanied by a harsh tone. Allowing yourself to be yourself with your students also eliminates the need to cover unexpected paralanguage (i.e. trying to mask when you’re upset but your tone comes out harsh on students) because this can model healthy regulation for students and make you feel better while working. Speaking on kid level is also a way to show you’re not seeking control over students and value them as individuals.

Conclusion

Humans use paralanguage everyday within the nonverbal cues and tones of communication. One can think about the facial expressions, tone of voice, small noises, posture, and gestures they use with others daily. What different forms does one use daily? Kinesthetic communication takes the form of facial expressions, gestures, and verbal cues. These forms can be misinterpreted across different cultures based on what the traditional norms are. Becoming aware of how paralanguage is used in the classroom allows teachers to note their students

¹⁰ James C McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond, “Power in the Classroom I: Teacher and Student Perceptions,” May 1982, 3, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED215389.pdf>.

¹¹ McCroskey and Richmond, 10.

unspoken behaviors and cues. Awareness also allows the teacher to communicate effectively with other teachers, parents, and students. To summarize, paralanguage is relevant to everyone and a general awareness of cultural differences in paralanguage will lead to more effective communication.

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