

Review

Gestures and Facial Expressions in English Language Classroom-Essential Tips for Trainees

Veneranda Hajrulla¹, Mirela Skëndaj²

¹ Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University "Ismail Qemali", Vlorë, Albania

² Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University "Ismail Qemali", Vlorë, Albania

Corresponding author: veneranda.hajrulla@univlora.edu.al

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Abstract

Teacher training programs rarely address nonverbal pedagogy systematically, thus leaving many teachers unaware of its empirical impact or cross-cultural variability. This context spurred me to write about this issue. Working with trainees and pre service teachers, we often hear them, saying " *I'd like to use more gestures to help make my instructions and explanation better understood, but I can only ever think of one or two*". Effective use of gestures requires balance: *they should complement, not replace, verbal explanation*, their combination with visual media significantly enhance second language vocabulary retention and emotional engagement. This paper examines the pedagogical role of gestures and facial expressions in English language classrooms, providing essential tips of the types of gestures, their pedagogical functions, their contribution to meaning making, classroom management and emotional commitment. The paper investigates how both teachers and learners use gestures and facial expressions to

support comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and interaction, leading to specific recommendations for integrating nonverbal awareness into teacher training, daily lesson plans and multimodal learning.

Keywords: *gestures, emotional commitment, pedagogical functions, teacher training, cultural variability.*

Introduction

Communication in the language classroom goes far beyond spoken words. Teachers constantly make use of *expressions and gestures* to help reduce unhelpful or unclear teacher talk when giving instructions. They provide visual support that helps learners to understand what is being said. They also allow the teacher to say less, to construct meaning, to regulate interaction, and express affect. In English language teaching

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(ELT), when we start to use gestures, learners will learn to associate the gesture with an instruction. After we have used a gesture a number of times, we will find that we can actually reduce the words we need to say –or even say nothing. For example, the gesture for ‘*get into pairs*’ along with the word ‘*pairs*’ may well be sufficient to get the class organized. But a word of warning, for trainees needs to be stressed; gestures and movements do not always mean the same things internationally. If you are working outside your culture, or with students from other countries, try to learn which gestures have inappropriate or rude meanings. You can’t take anything for granted; in Albania, in Bulgaria and some other countries, nodding left/right means ‘yes’ and up/down means ‘no’. To sum it up, we can say that, gestures and facial expressions help teachers:

- clarify instructions,
- support comprehension,
- illustrate vocabulary,
- sustain classroom rapport.
- empower learners to express ideas they cannot yet verbalize,
- facilitate interaction in the target language.

This paper explores how gestures and facial expressions function in the English language classroom, their cognitive and pedagogical implications, and the challenges of using them effectively in multilingual contexts. It demonstrates & argues that developing nonverbal competence is as essential as verbal proficiency for successful language teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Nonverbal Communication and Second Language Acquisition

Nonverbal communication encompasses all behaviors that convey meaning without words, including body movement, eye gaze, spatial distance, posture, and prosody. Mehrabian (1972) suggested that a large portion of communicative meaning is transmitted through

nonverbal channels. In second language acquisition (SLA), nonverbal communication supports learners’ comprehension by providing additional contextual cues, especially when verbal input exceeds their current proficiency (Krashen, 1982).

Gestures and facial expressions thus serve as ‘scaffolding tools’ (Vygotsky, 1978), allowing learners to access meaning and participate actively in classroom discourse. For example, when a teacher mimics flying to explain the word ‘bird’ or flaps their hands to illustrate ‘butterfly’, they provide a visual and kinesthetic link that strengthens memory encoding.

Gestures as Linguistic Tools

McNeill (1992) emphasized that gestures are not merely communicative add-ons but integral to the cognitive process of language production. When speakers gesture, they externalize thought, supporting conceptualization and speech planning. This phenomenon is particularly beneficial for language learners who are developing lexical retrieval and syntactic fluency. Research by Gullberg (2006) found that learners who use gestures while speaking a foreign language demonstrate greater fluency and coherence than those who rely on speech alone. Facial expressions perform both cognitive and affective functions. They communicate emotion, signal comprehension, and regulate social dynamics (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). In language classrooms, teachers’ facial cues—such as smiles, raised eyebrows, or nodding—can reassure learners, convey feedback, or prompt responses. For instance, a teacher’s encouraging smile during a hesitant student’s speaking attempt can reduce anxiety and foster a supportive classroom atmosphere (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998).

Types of Gestures and Their Pedagogical Functions

‘*Iconic gestures*’ represent concrete concepts through visual depiction. In TPR Method, which is used frequently in English language classrooms, teachers often use iconic gestures

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when teaching verbs or nouns. For example, to teach 'jump', a teacher may mimic jumping; to explain 'sleep', they might rest their hands together against their cheek. Such gestures link the lexical form to a visual image, enhancing retention (Macedonia & von Kriegstein, 2012).

'*Metaphoric gestures*' by contrast, illustrate abstract ideas. When explaining the concept of 'past tense', a teacher might move the hand at the back of their shoulder to symbolize chronological progression. Similarly, when describing 'increasing difficulty', a teacher could raise their hand gradually to represent escalation.

'*Deictic gestures*' involve pointing to objects, people, or spaces to direct learners' attention. Teachers frequently use them when giving instructions—pointing to the board while saying "Look here," or indicating a student while asking, "Can you give me an example, please?"

'*Beat gestures*', rhythmic movements that accompany speech, help structure discourse and emphasize important words. For instance, a teacher explaining grammar might tap their fingers in rhythm to stress each component: '*subject—verb—object*', or to attract students attention a teacher can '*drum their fingers*' on the table, or a hard book cover. These gestures aid learners in identifying linguistic patterns and maintaining attention (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005).

Facial Expressions as Pedagogical Tools

Express Emotion and Encouragement

Facial expressions are effective tools for classroom rapport. A simple smile communicates approval and approachability, encouraging students to start speaking and use English without hesitation. On the contrary, a puzzled expression can signal misunderstanding and prompt clarification. In oral communication activities, teachers who use expressive facial feedback (*such as nodding, raising eyebrows, or frowning thoughtfully*) bring up more spontaneous and confident student participation.

Support Comprehension

Facial tips also reinforce meaning. When teaching adjectives describing emotion—'*happy*', '*sad*', '*angry*', '*surprised*'—teachers can model corresponding facial expressions, allowing learners to associate lexical meaning with emotional experience. For example, exaggerating a "surprised" expression while saying 'surprised' helps learners connect linguistic form and emotional content. In listening comprehension tasks, teachers may use facial anticipation—such as widening eyes before a key point—to alert learners to upcoming information. These subtle cues improve concentration and processing efficiency.

Examples from English Language Classrooms

Teaching Vocabulary through Gestures

In beginner-level English classes, gestures are especially valuable for teaching action verbs and concrete nouns. For instance, when introducing verbs such as 'jump', 'eat', 'write', and 'read', the teacher performs each action while pronouncing the word. Learners then imitate the gestures and repeat the word aloud. This Total Physical Response (TPR) approach (Asher, 1977) links physical movement with auditory and verbal stimuli, improving recall through multisensory learning.

Teaching other verbs

I **stick** my tongue out/ I **blow** a kiss/ I **drum** my fingers/ I **bite** my lip

I **scratch** my head/ **raise** my eyebrow/ **wag** my finger/ I **clench** my fist/ **wrinkle** my nose.....

Teacher says, "*Sit down!*" while sitting and gesturing downward with palms. Learners *observe* and *imitate* both the movement and the phrase. After several repetitions, students can respond to commands without translation, demonstrating comprehension through action.

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Action songs as concrete examples of gestures and body language to teach verbs, adjectives and nouns.

The kids songs, 'If you're happy and you know it'...clap your hands/ stomp your feet/ shout hurray /do all three... or 'The wheels on the bus' go round and round/ the doors on the bus go open and shout, the wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish/ the signals on the bus go blink, blink, blink, the horn on the bus goes beep, beep, beep etc...

Or the 'Deep deep, deep' song, 'Every move I make' song, 'The Dance Freeze Song' 'Parts of the Body, one little finger tap, tap, tap, point your finger up to show your head, point your finger down to put it on your nose...../ 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' or other nursery rhymes that teachers use in their daily classes and activities help them to achieve understanding, attention, perception and short term memory.

Teaching Grammar

In intermediate English classes, gestures can represent grammatical structures. When explaining verb tenses, a teacher might move their hand backward for the past, keep it steady for the present, and move it forward for the future. This visual metaphor helps students conceptualize temporal relationships in English grammar. Similarly, to clarify sentence structure, the teacher can align gestures with speech: pointing to the left for the 'subject', the middle for the 'verb', and the right for the 'object'.

Teaching Pronunciation

Gestures and facial expressions can also aid pronunciation teaching. For example, when demonstrating the difference between /p/ and /b/, teachers may place a hand near the mouth to show the aspiration burst of /p/. When teaching stress patterns, teachers might use hand movements to indicate syllable prominence—raising the hand for the stressed syllable and lowering it for unstressed ones. Facial gestures like opening the mouth widely for long vowels or

tightening lips for rounded vowels offer visual feedback, allowing learners to imitate articulation more accurately.

Helping in Classroom Interaction

During pair work or discussions, teachers use gestures and facial expressions to manage interaction smoothly. Thus cupped hand at ears, **means** listen to me. A raised hand **can signal** the need for silence; an open palm encourages a student to continue speaking. Nodding and smiling serve as positive feedback, while a slight head tilt **can indicate** that a student *should elaborate or clarify* their response. For example, in an English speaking class, when a student hesitates mid-sentence - "Yesterday I go... uh...looking at the teacher perplexed" - the teacher's expectant look and gentle hand-rolling gesture can encourage continuation: "...went to the park." This nonverbal prompting supports fluency development without interrupting the learner's thought process. Placing a hand firmly and decisively on the desk in front of a student(and make eye contact), - **meaning** *everyone else has stopped talking, I want you too as well*, or both hands held out and wide, palms up, quizzical look, eyebrows raised,-**meaning** 'Does anyone have an answer?.'

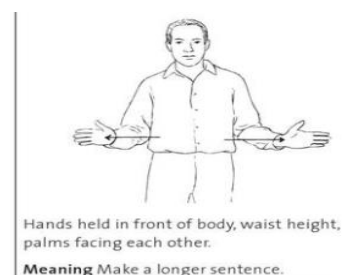
Acquiring feedback on language and errors

A simple rule for using hand gestures that our trainees must know is POWERSPHERE – *gesturing within power sphere*- which means make sure your hand gestures are used in the area between your belly button and your eyes. Great teachers keep their body open, there is no barrier between the teachers and the students. Having said this, teachers should keep their body open, have their palms open towards the audience, and get comfortable with the space in the class:

1. 'Hand stretched out, waist height, **meaning**, -Not quite right.

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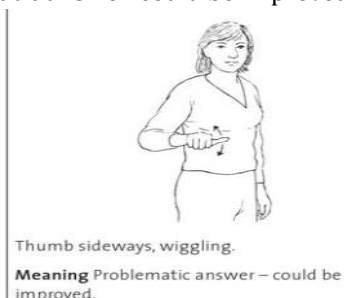
2. 'Hands held in front of body, waist height, palms facing each other' **meaning**,- Make a longer sentence.



3. 'Hand doing rolling gesture' **meaning**,- Say it again.



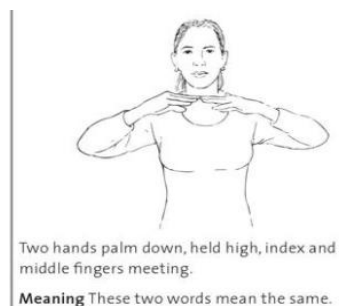
4. 'Thumb sideways, wiggling' **meaning** - Problematic answer-could be improved.



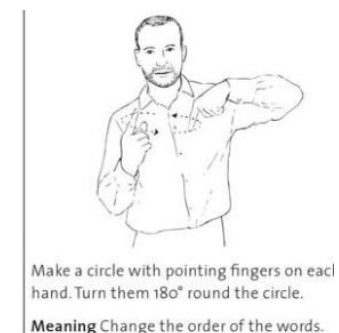
5. 'Two fingers-other hand squashes them together' **meaning**,- Use a contraction.



6. 'Two hands palm down, held high, index and middle fingers meeting' **meaning**,- These two words mean the same



7. 'Make a circle with pointing fingers on each hand. Turn them 180° round the circle' **meaning**,- Change the order of the words .



8. 'Finger in the air, drawing 'S'' **meaning**,- You forgot the third person 's' in the present simple.

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Finger in the air drawing 's'.
Meaning You forgot the third person 's' in the Present Simple.

9. 'Finger pinching in midair gesture', **meaning**, -It's a little word.



Finger pinching in midair gesture.
Meaning It's a little word.

But despite their pedagogical value, gestures and facial expressions can also create ambiguity or misunderstanding. We know that nonverbal communication is *culture-specific*. For instance, the "thumbs-up" gesture, often used to indicate approval in Western contexts, may be offensive in parts of the Middle East. Similarly, prolonged eye contact may be interpreted as confidence in some cultures but disrespectful in others. In multicultural English classrooms, excessive gesturing may distract students or reduce focus on linguistic input. Effective use of gestures requires balance: *they should complement, not replace, verbal explanation*.

General Guidance for using Gestures

Pre-service teachers and trainees should be encouraged to reflect on their own gesture habits. Workshops can include video analysis of classroom interaction, highlighting how gestures

influence comprehension and engagement. Incorporating *gesture-based activities* in lessons can also *promote active learning*. For example:

- '*Be sure your gestures are clear*': Make them confidentially, don't half do them because of embarrassment.
- '*Gesture coding*': Learners invent gestures for new vocabulary and teach them to peers.
- '*Mimic games*': Students guess words or expressions based on classmates' gestures or facial expressions. (*Example*: If you yourself model saying: " *I can't stand broccoli*" with a face that reflects your negative reaction and perhaps an appropriate ' *Keep it away from me*' hand movement, this is so enjoyable for the students to copy and mimic it to each other- and also far more memorable.
- '*Storytelling with gestures*': Learners narrate short stories using both English and gestures, reinforcing verbal-visual associations.
- '*Digital tools*', such as video-based instruction and *virtual reality environments*, further expand possibilities for multimodal learning. Studies by Tellier (2008) and Morett (2014) suggest that gestures combined with visual media significantly enhance second language vocabulary retention and emotional engagement.
- '*Think of making gestures in three moves*': 1) Making the gesture, 2) Holding it as if '*on pause*', 3) Stopping the gesture. It is stage 2 (holding it) that is often the crucial one that goes wrong because it is done too quickly.
- '*Eyebrows*': Are very helpful for conveying reactions, especially for showing interest and encouraging further speaking. Exaggerate your normal eyebrow movements in class. And please don't use *raised eyebrows* only to convey 'That was *bad behavior*'.

Eye contact

One of the most important tools at teacher's disposal is eye contact- it's definitely one to work on improving if trainees find it hard. Some key techniques are to:

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1. Make eye contact with students (rather than avoiding it) Don't use pieces of paper or books as a way of hiding. Try to keep in regular eye contact with people in the class, even when doing focused tasks such as writing on the board.
2. Allow your eye contact to remain relaxed, warm and unthreatening(rather than cold or staring).
3. Express how you feel, showing the person behind the eyes, your warmth, your changing reactions, sense of interest and enjoyment (rather than just mechanically moving the eyes).
A few suggestions here:
 - You cannot make eye contact with a whole class at once, but you can make eye contact with a number of individuals in it. When you teach the whole class from the front, don't speak to 'the room in general' or a 'space slightly above everyone's heads' or ' the back wall of the room'. Similarly, don't lock your gaze on to one or two individuals and stay with them all the time you talk. Try making eye contact with one student, holding it for five seconds to ten seconds, then gently bouncing your gaze round the room to a random different person and so on through the time you are speaking. Make sure you catch the eye of people in different parts of the room: back, middle and front, left centre and right.
 - When you talk with students working in pairs or groups, try the same technique, looking at one for a while and then undramatically shifting your focus to another.
 - When you talk with an individual, use your eye contact to show that you are ' with them' – listening and interested.
 - Use eye contact to indicate who you want to talk to. Sometimes this can do away with the need for verbal instruction.

Conclusion

Gestures and facial expressions are indispensable resources in English language teaching, functioning as cognitive, communicative, and affective tools. They make abstract concepts visible, bridge linguistic gaps, and foster emotional connection. When strategically employed, they enhance comprehension, support

grammar and pronunciation teaching, and create a dynamic and inclusive classroom atmosphere. However, the pedagogical use of gestures must be culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate. Teachers should cultivate awareness of their nonverbal repertoire, integrate gesture-based techniques intentionally, and guide learners to interpret nonverbal cues critically. Trainees need to master these gesture techniques in their training courses and use '*hands on experience*' during their practicum, that is the best time to show their abilities. To help them we *suggest a lesson plan* in the *appendix* further down. They should be aware of the fact that gesture training influences teacher effectiveness and how digital classrooms can manifest integrated communication for enhanced learning outcomes.

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Appendix

Model of a Lesson Plan for Trainees

Lesson Plan 1 – Beginner Level (A2)

Topic: Understanding and Using Gestures in English Communication

Duration: 60 minutes

Focus Skills: Speaking, Listening, Vocabulary, Nonverbal Awareness

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify and interpret common English gestures (e.g., nodding, waving, shrugging).

- Use simple gestures appropriately in short conversations.
- Understand how gestures support verbal communication in English.

Materials

- Flashcards or slides with pictures of common gestures
 - Short video clips of people using gestures while speaking English
 - Whiteboard and markers
 - Handout with gesture descriptions and matching activity
- Warm-Up (10 minutes)
 Activity: "Guess the Gesture"

The teacher performs simple gestures (e.g., waving, thumbs up, shrugging). Students guess what each gesture means in English ("hello," "good job," "I don't know").

Brief discussion: "Do these gestures mean the same in your language?"

Purpose: Activates prior knowledge and introduces cultural awareness.

Presentation (15 minutes)

Activity: 'Video Observation'

Show a 2-minute video of English speakers using gestures during conversation (e.g., interviews or talk shows). Students note what gestures they see and when they appear.

Discuss meanings:

Nodding = 'agreement' / Shaking head = 'disagreement'

Hand to ear = 'I can't hear you' / Pointing to self = "me"

Teacher Focus: Explain cultural differences in gesture meaning. Emphasize that gestures can support communication even when words are unclear.

Practice (20 minutes)

Activity 1: 'Gesture Matching'

Students work in pairs. Each pair receives cards with gesture pictures and matching phrases (e.g., "I don't understand," "Come here," "Great job!"). Students match gestures to expressions and then act them out together.

Activity 2: 'Mini Dialogues' Pairs create short role-plays (e.g., meeting a friend, saying goodbye, asking for help) using both speech and gestures. Teacher observes and provides feedback on both verbal and nonverbal performance.

Production (10 minutes)

Activity: "Silent Movie" Game

Students act out an emotion or situation using only facial expressions and gestures. Class

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guesses the meaning (“angry,” “surprised,” “sad,” etc.).

Purpose: Reinforces nonverbal expression and comprehension through play.

Assessment: ‘Observation checklist’: correct use and interpretation of gestures.

Short reflection question: “*Which English gesture do you find most interesting or different from your culture?*”

Homework:

Watch an English video (*YouTube interview, movie clip, etc.*) and note 3 *gestures* used by speakers.

Write a short paragraph describing what each gesture might mean.