



MULTILINGUAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.46886/MAJESS/v8-i1/7329>

DOI:10.46886/MAJESS/v8-i1/7329

Received: 07 October 2019, Revised: 10 November 2019, Accepted: 15 December 2019

Published Online: 18 January 2020

In-Text Citation: (Houssos, 2020)

To Cite this Article Houssos, V. (2020). Culture-specific nonverbal communication and the teaching of foreign language. *Multilingual Academic Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 8(1), 220–232.

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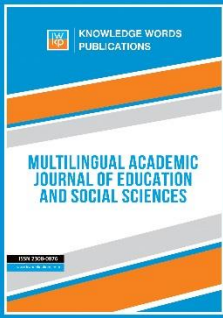
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Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2020, Pg. 220 – 232

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Culture-specific Nonverbal Communication and the Teaching of Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper investigates the notion of nonverbal communication from a culture-specific perspective and its impact on foreign language pedagogy. It explores the teaching of non-verbals as part of foreign culture as well as the impact of a teacher's culture-specific nonverbal behavior in the foreign language classroom.

Keywords: Culture, Nonverbal Communication, Proxemics, Competence.

Introduction

Traditionally language teaching has concentrated on the linguistic skills while the nonverbal aspects of discourse have generally been neglected. Over the recent years, however, the demand for explicit integration of the teaching of nonverbal and verbal communication has gained momentum. The cultural specificity of certain aspects of nonverbal communication has been highlighted and much is now being written on the link between culture and nonverbal communication used by people in their spoken discourse. Also, it is now realized that culture specific nonverbal communication should greatly influence what is being taught in the classroom. It is recognized that different cultural groups have specific gestures and emotions and due to the different background and culture, the same gesture and emotion can have different meaning for different people in certain contexts. Therefore, it is very useful to teach second language learners to understand the culture specific nonverbal communication of native speakers of the target language. But there is an area of great significance that is currently being neglected in the literature related to teaching of nonverbal communication: culture specific nonverbal communication should not only affect what is being taught but also how it is taught by the language teacher. The literature that is concerned with the role of teacher and nonverbal communication in classroom normally concentrates on the usage of gestures to signal and instigate changes in the class atmosphere and by doing so further their instructional goals. Barnett (1983) argues that "without speaking, a trained teacher can vary tempo, control participation, and signal changes in the classroom atmosphere" (p. 35) As with most (if not all) of the current literature on this topic, the cultural element linked to teacher behavior is missing. Since the

language teacher also comes from a specific culture, there is no guarantee that his/her behavior in the classroom will not create misunderstandings while teaching a language to foreign students. Much has been written on advising businesses about doing business with international clients. For example, The International Business Etiquette Internet Sourcebook (1999) gives the following advice:

"Doing business with international clients requires more than just financial acumen... The building of successful business relationships is a vital part of any international venture, and such relationships rely heavily on an understanding of each partner's expectations and intentions."

I believe this to be equally applicable to those teaching foreign languages.

This article examines the aforementioned points under the following headings:

- a) The link between culture and nonverbal communication.
- b) The teaching of nonverbals as part of foreign culture
- c) The impact of teacher's culture-specific nonverbal behavior in the classroom.

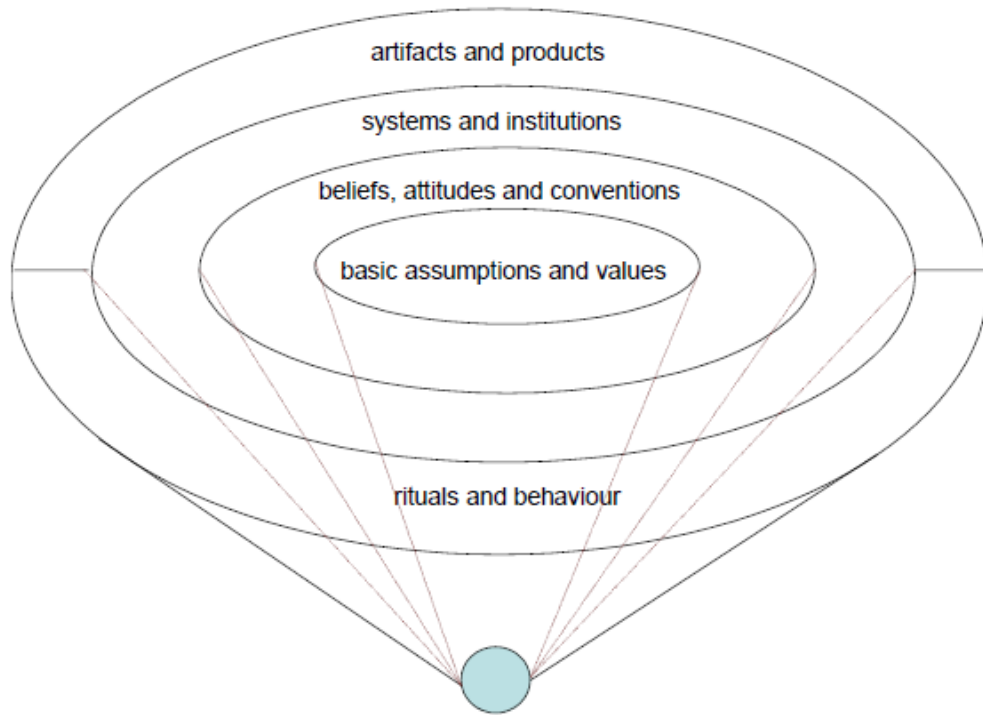
In order to proceed with the discussion on the relevance of 'culture' and 'nonverbal communication' to language teaching, it is important to have a clear idea as to what these terms mean in this particular context since these two terms can be highly ambiguous.

Culture

As Spencer-Oatey (2000) points out that culture is difficult to define, Apte (1994); Khalid, Islam & Ahmed (2019); Alzgool (2019); Umrani, Ahmed & Memon (2015); Zin & Ibrahim (2020), writing in the ten-volume *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, summarizes the problem as follows: "Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature" (p. 2001). However, in this article the following definition has been adopted:

Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behavior and each member's interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior. (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p.4).

The following diagram is a representation of the different layers of culture. The sub-surface aspects of culture influence people's behavior and the meanings they attribute to other people's behavior (along with other factors such as personality).



Much has been written on how culture variations influence the manner in which people communicate nonverbally. Although there are many variants, the following five tend to be the ones that are mostly quoted.

Immediacy and expressiveness	These demonstrate availability for communication. High immediacy cultures are called contact cultures, and are mostly located in warm-temperature areas like Arab countries. Low immediacy cultures are low-contact cultures, and are found in cool climates like most North European countries.
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Individualistic cultures are more remote and display less non-verbal communication. Collectivistic cultures stress cohesion as a group, and spend time in close proximity to one another.
Masculinity	Women in low-masculinity cultures show more synchrony in their movement than those in high-masculinity cultures.
Power distance	Research shows that high-power distance cultures tend to be more “untouchable,” tend to be more tense in subordinates’ body movement, tend to smile more for subordinates to appease superiors or to be polite, and tend to be more aware that vocal loudness may be offensive to others.
High and low context	Research has found that people in high context cultures tend to be more implicit in verbal codes, perceive highly verbal persons less attractive, tend to be more reliant on and tuned into non-verbal communication, and expect to have more non-verbal codes in communication. The table below shows the ideas of the two variant cultures:

	Low-Context Culture	High-Context culture
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Overtly displays meanings through direct communication forms. 2. Values individualism. 3. Tends to develop transitory personal relationship. 4. Emphasizes linear logic. 5. Values direct verbal interaction and is less able to read nonverbal expressions. 6. Tends to use "logic" to present ideas. 7. Tends to emphasize highly structured messages, give details, and place great stress on words and technical signs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implicitly embeds meanings at different levels of the socio-cultural context. 2. Values group sense. 3. Tends to take time to cultivate and establish a permanent personal relationship. 4. Emphasizes spiral logic. 5. Values indirect verbal interaction and is more able to read nonverbal expressions. 6. Tends to use more "feeling" in expression. 7. Tends to give simple, ambiguous, noncontexting messages.

(adapted from <http://www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/nonverbal/Culture.htm>)

Culture is associated with social groups and can be applicable to various types of groups such as gender groups, generational group, ethnic groups, national groups, regional groups and so on. The above table shows that there are cultural variations associated with different social groups. In order to eradicate ambiguity and also taking into account the limited scope of this discussion, culture will be viewed solely in terms of national political identity. Therefore, the discussion of nonverbal communication is in relation to people having separate national identities.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is communication between people by means other than speech but it is nevertheless inextricably linked to speech. Antes (1996) in his article presents Applbaum's (1979) findings that nonverbal messages account for 65 percent of the meaning we obtain in communication, while verbal language accounts for only 35 percent. Stevick (1980) states that "People do not communicate by words alone. Tone of voice, body language and many other channels carry at all times messages that either confirm the words, or are irrelevant to them, or contradict them" (p. 5). In his definition of speaking Widdowson (1978) includes nonverbal communication: "If one thinks of speaking solely as the overt manifestation of the phonological and grammatical features of a language by means of the vocal organs, then, of course, it must be uniquely associated with the aural medium. But when we speak normally in the course of a natural communicative interaction, we do not only use our vocal organs. The act of speaking involves not only the production of sounds but also the use of gesture, the movements of the muscles of the face, and indeed of the whole body. All of these nonverbal accompaniments of speaking as a communicative activity are transmitted through the visual medium. When we think

of speaking in this way, therefore, it is no longer true that it is associated solely with the aural medium" (p. 56).

In daily interaction verbal and nonverbal systems are interdependent. For this reason, it is not easy to dissect verbal from nonverbal communication. Instead of attempting to categorise behaviour as verbal or nonverbal, Mehrabian (1972) uses an "explicit-implicit" dichotomy which Knapp (1980) explains that "Mehrabian believed that it was the subtlety of a signal that brought it into the nonverbal realm-and subtlety seemed to be directly linked to a lack of explicit rules for decoding" (p. 78).

The theoretical writings and research on nonverbal communication can be broken down into the following seven areas (Knapp, 1980):

- 1) *Body motion or Kinesics (emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulation and adaptors).*
- 2) *Physical characteristics.*
- 3) *Touching behaviour (e.g. stroking, holding, hitting.)*
- 4) *Paralanguage (vocal qualities and vocalization)*
- 5) *Proxemics (use and perception of social and personal space).*
- 6) *Artifacts.*
- 7) *Environmental Factors (elements that impinge on the human relationship, but not directly part of it sac] as furniture, architectural style).*




There are different types of nonverbal behaviour in the same way as there are various kinds of verbal behaviour. Some convey specific meanings and some are rather general. Some are intended to communicate while others are expressive only. Nonverbal behaviour can also give information about emotions, personality traits and even attitudes. Nonverbal communication is essential in communicative interaction, and forms an integral part of the presentation of language in use.

The Link between Culture and Nonverbal Communication

According to Brown (1994a) "The expression of culture is so bound up in nonverbal communication that the barriers to culture learning are more nonverbal than verbal" (p. 166). Allan (1999) points out that culturally inappropriate body language manifests a foreign accent as much as inadequate phonological knowledge. Culture affects almost every aspect of nonverbal communication. Below are just a few of the examples relating to emblems, paralanguage and proxemics to highlight the link between culture and nonverbal communication.

Emblems

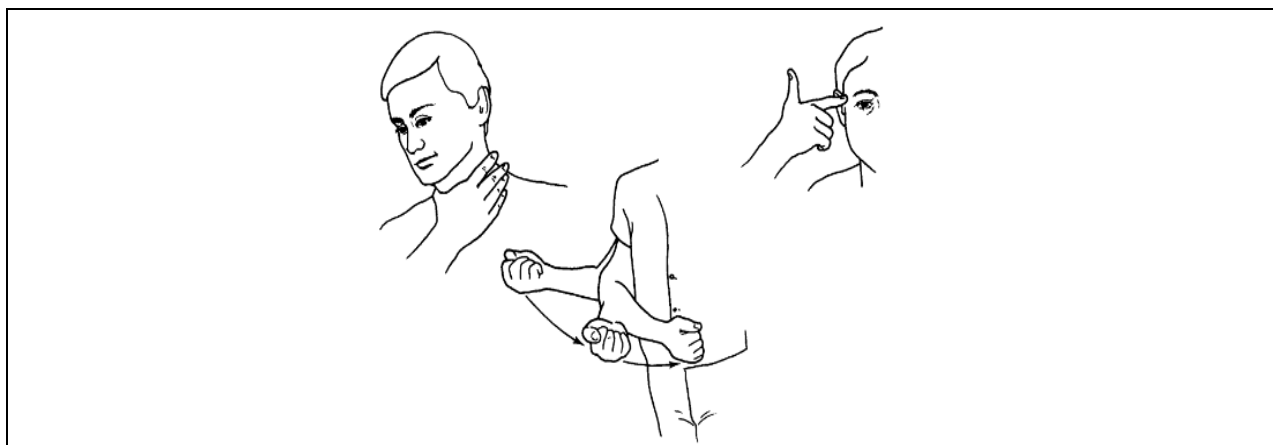
Emblems are those actions that have a direct verbal translation or dictionary definition, usually consisting of a word or two or a phrase (Knapp, 1980). The following examples show the connection between certain emblems and culture.

1. Japanese gesture	2. French gesture	3. Iranian gesture
		

1) The Japanese gesture means “angry” 2) The French gesture means, "I don't believe you." 3) The Iran and Nigeria this gesture is extremely obscene.

The same gesture may exist in one or more cultures, but will carry a completely different meaning. For example in the UK the Japanese gesture would normally be interpreted as making fun of somebody. Most likely the Iranians and the Nigerians will have no idea that their most obscene gesture (the "thumbs up" gesture) actually means "good luck" in the U.S. and in many European nations. This gesture is also used for hitch-hiking in America.

To further highlight the culture specificity of certain emblems, the following figure depicting variations in suicide emblems has been taken from Knapp (1980).



Paralanguage (in some works known as Paraverbal Features) (See Knapp:1980, Pennycook: 1985)

"Simply put, paralanguage deals with how something is said and not what is said. It deals with the range of nonverbal cues surrounding common speech behaviour" (Knapp. 1980, p. 95). Pennycook (1985) gives the example of Loveday's (1981) work which is a study of pitch variation. It shows the difference in pitch range of standard English speakers of both sexes and the pitch range employed by Japanese male and female: while standard English speakers of both sexes tend to employ a relatively high pitch to impress politeness, there is a significant divergence between male and female pitch range in Japanese. In Japan, men have traditionally used low, gruff voices, whereas women have used high-pitched, dainty voices. If this distinction is carried

over into English, Japanese men will tend to sound bored, monotonous, or rude. If English males carry their customary pitch range over to Japanese, they may sound strangely feminine. Cammack and Van Buren (1967) comment that the nearest equivalent in English to Japanese female paraverbal features denoting politeness, marked by a distinct “breathiness,” is a kind of feminine baby talk usually associated with lack of intelligence or intimate male/female relationships. On the other hand, female English speakers often sound harsh, raucous, rude, or overly masculine to a Japanese ear (Pennycook, 1985).

Proxemics

Generally, proxemics is considered to be the study of people's use and perception of social and personal space (Knapp, 1980). In China, personal space is much less. The Chinese will stand much closer than the people of the UK. Different understandings of what are private and public domains have a huge impact on spatial and touching behaviour. Pennycook points out that “Germans tend to keep doors closed, while Americans prefer to leave them open. To an Arab, public space is exactly that, so that the North American's perceived right to personal space would not be upheld” (p. 265).

Nonverbal communication is a powerful form of communication that varies across cultural boundaries. Different cultures will have their own unique gestures and occasionally the same gesture may exist in one or more cultures, but will carry a completely different meaning.

The Teaching of Nonverbals as Part of Foreign Culture

Many authorities in the field of language teaching have acknowledged the necessity of teaching nonverbal communication as part of the foreign culture. Not sensitising students to the nonverbal communication in the target language from the beginning of their language learning can lead to students' transferring inappropriate gestures from their native cultures. Allen (1999) in his excellent review on the functions of nonverbal communication in teaching and learning a foreign language cites the works of Nostrand, Lafayette and Wylie who have written on this highly relevant topic. Nostrand's (1967) Model regarding the teaching of French includes paralanguage and kinesics. Lafayette's (1988) set of thirteen goals statement related to integrating the teaching of culture into the foreign language classroom includes the goal that students be able to use appropriate common gestures.

Wylie (1985) emphasizes the inseparable relationship between verbal and nonverbal components of communication: “The real question... concerns communication. We all but isolate language and assume it is an independent entity to be defined, taught and learned by itself. But language is only one element in the whole phenomenon of communication, and it can most effectively be taught and learned in this greater context... We communicate with every means at our disposal, so the whole body, not just the parts that produce speech, must be trained to communicate in a foreign culture” (pp. 777-778).

Even works that are not related to teaching of foreign language acknowledge the need for people to be aware of the impact and power of nonverbal communication. Spencer-Oatey (2000), while discussing the domains that play an important role in the management of rapport, writes

about the non-verbal domain stating that “Non-verbal aspects also need to be handled appropriately if harmonious relations are to be created and/or maintained” (p. 63).

Antes (1996) states that to be a native-like speaker of a language means not only being fluent verbally but also having command of the gestures that normally accompany that language. The influence of nonverbal communication on acquiring communicative competence has also been dealt by many. Widdowson (1978) for instance, writes, “To begin with, it will be generally acknowledged that the ultimate aim of language learning is to acquire communicative competence, to interpret, whether this is made own in talking or corresponding or whether it remains covert as a psychological activity underlying the ability to say, listen, write and read” (p. 67). Summarized by Allen (1999), Hymes’s definition of communicative competence include the following nonverbals: a) haptics-permissible physical contact *between speakers*, b) *Proxemics*. c) *Kinesics* and d) *nonverbal cues used to manage conversations*. Again summarized in Allen's (1999) work, three of four competencies which make up Canale and Swain's (1980) framework of communicative competence specifically refer to knowledge and use of nonverbals:

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE - this is not only concerned with the rules of grammar but is also concerned with the knowledge of paralinguistic and kinesic features of the language such as intonation, facial expression and gestures.

SOCIOLINGUISTICS COMPETENCE - this includes appropriate use of nonverbal signals such as eye Contact, respect for personal space and so on.

STRATEGIC COMPETENCE - this includes nonverbal strategies which are used when communication breaks Down or to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Much of the discussion on nonverbals in the teaching of a foreign language refers to emblems. As it has already been shown, the use and meaning of specific emblems can vary among different cultures and misunderstanding and failure to communicate may occur if non-members of a culture attempt to use or interpret emblems according to the meaning given to the emblems in their own culture. Antes (1996) and Pennycook (1985) present some suggestions on how teachers can teach the importance of gestures within the language items the students are learning. One simple and yet crucial way of teaching nonverbal communications to directly speak to the students about a particular gesture and at the same time act out that gesture. Occasionally this can be done to clarify meaning of a particular word or a gesture can be performed instead of uttering the sentence that possesses its equivalent meaning. Students can also be called up to the front of the class in order to guess the meaning of what was said in a gesture and then they might be asked to give an equivalent gesture in their own culture. This style will serve three purposes (Antes, 1996):

1. *It will sharpen the appetite to solve a puzzle that they have been confronted with.*
2. *It will point out the systematicity with which the gesture is used in language.*
3. *It will show that gestures are as culture-specific as language itself and cannot be readily transferred.*

Students can greatly benefit by the recent introduction of videocassettes into the language classroom. “Access to television and feature films should also be exploited whenever possible. While this requires viewing time on the part of the teacher, these simulated situations provide perhaps the best evidence we can obtain on native gestures, short of bringing native informants into the classroom” (Antes, 1996, p. 98). Green and Saitz (1966) suggest that presenting dialogues with appropriate foreign cultural gestures heightens students' attention. Making a list of gestures

or other features of paralinguistics may be given as homework assignments to the students. If the students are ESL students, they can be told to gather information from the surrounding community. If, however, the students are EFL students, they can be told to gather data from television programmes, movies and even books (Pennycook, 1985). As Antes (1996) points out by quoting (Rivers, 1983, p. 15), the students must also be taught "when and how to use appropriate gestures and body language." This could be done through role-plays. Once students have gained familiarity with certain gestures, they can be told to act out the gestures along with using relevant language items. Students can also work in pairs, small groups or even as a whole class in their endeavour to work out the context in which these gestures will be applied.

Integrating nonverbal communication into the language teaching classroom is by no means an easy task. Several thought provoking questions arise for the teacher to solve while attempting to implement such a humungous task (Antes, 1996): How much time should be devoted to the teaching of gestures? How can these gestures best be taught? Should students, as outsiders to the culture they are learning, be taught to use or only to understand the gestures selected? And how exactly does one choose which gestures to teach?

Pennycook (1985), however, cites Von Raffler-Engel's (1980) argument that the inclusion of paralinguistics in the classroom does not necessarily lead to increasing of burden of the teacher; it can in fact, simplify the whole process of learning by increasing the ways for acquiring comprehension and expression.

Although much has been written on the importance of teaching nonverbal communication as part of the foreign culture in the classroom, yet not enough research has been done on how precisely teaching of this crucial topic can be integrated into the teaching syllabus. Foreign language teaching experts concerned with the whole phenomenon of communication must explore further the practical ways in which this can be accomplished since nonverbal behavior is an integral part of effective communication. With the ever-increasing interaction between various cultures, the need for such a venture has become crucial.

The Impact of Teacher's Culture-Specific Nonverbal behavior in the Classroom

The literature available on the teacher's usage of nonverbal communication in the classroom tends to focus entirely on the role of nonverbals in classroom management and their role as effective teaching strategies. These two aspects are no doubt an integral part of teacher's job and therefore, it is not surprising that teachers use nonverbal communication in the classroom mainly to fulfil these purposes. In fact, it is estimated that 82 percent of teacher's communication in classroom is nonverbal (Allen, 1999). Many feel that teacher's need to be made more conscious of their own verbal behavior in the classroom so that they can utilize it more effectively. Barnett (1983) is among those who believes that discussing the variety of nonverbal gestures and their potential in enhancing teaching can alert the teachers to their own gestures and to the possibilities of improvement.

While acknowledging the importance of the above elements, I believe there is another aspect to the issue of nonverbal communication and the teacher that has not yet been thoroughly looked into. None of the works that I have come across deal with the impact of teacher's culture-specific nonverbal behavior in the classroom. Knowing how influential nonverbal communication can be informing (mainly negative) opinions of those belonging to other cultures if their nonverbal behavior is not understood, I believe it is necessary to make teachers aware of the

importance of their nonverbal behavior (that might emanate from their culture) in the classroom. Since the teachers themselves come from specific cultural backgrounds, there needs to be some form of training given to teachers in order to prevent misunderstandings from occurring between themselves and their 'foreign' students. This point is not in reference to the teaching methods applied by teachers: for example, in certain parts of the world Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is preferred to the Communicative Language Teaching approach, so therefore, teachers should use GTM while teaching those familiar with GTM. But rather it is to do with how certain culture specific elements of nonverbal communication might be interpreted by those from another culture. It is assumed by some that teacher's nonverbal behavior will be interpreted in the same way by all the students. Stevick (1980), for example, discusses five aspects in which the teacher "may rightfully demand, and must accept, the center of the stage in language instruction." One issue that he deals with is the teacher's ability to give 'good vibes'. "These are indications of confidence in one self and in the student, of acceptance of the student, and of pleasure in the encounter...vibes are explained in ways of which the student is not consciously aware, or which he is dimly aware. They take the form of facial expressions, body postures, tones of voice, and inferences which the student may draw for himself from what the teacher says or how she says it".

What may be termed as 'good vibes' in one culture may not necessarily be so in another. As McGovern (1998) points out in her narration of an incident that caused a major misunderstanding to occur between an American business woman and a Japanese supplier, "... similar gestures and facial expressions are often used differently across cultures. The meaning of a smile is not universal. Neither is a frown" (p. 24). Another example of cross-cultural differences is shown by the differences in the understanding of the required behavior of the students when a teacher is speaking to them. The common expectation of the teachers in the UK is to have their gaze returned. However, in most of the South Asian countries, students (mostly children) would look away or stare at the floor as a sign of respect for the teacher. As far as I am aware no thorough research has been done on the impact of the culture specific aspect of teacher's nonverbal communication in the classroom. Therefore, it is impossible to know to what extent this is in fact a problem. Considering the fact that there is more intermingling between people of various cultures due to the fact that increasing number of people throughout the world are now studying English, it is highly unlikely that the problem does not exist.

The situation of EFL teachers is very similar to those involved in conducting business with people of different cultures. Ample amount of literature can be found written specifically for the business community in the form of general information and guidelines. Businesses are made aware of their prospective clients' cultures and their regional etiquettes. In its introduction, The International Business Etiquette Internet Sourcebook writes, "The building of successful business relationships is a vital part of any international venture, and such relationships rely heavily on an understanding of each partner's expectations and intentions." Mu Zhiling and Li Guanhui writing for the School of Commercial and Economic Laws in Gothenburg about China say, "Nonverbal communication includes facial expression, tones of voice, gestures, and eye contact. It plays an important role in our daily life, sometimes it is even more powerful than the verbal interaction. Different gestures have different meanings. Different nationalities have specific gestures and emotions. However, due to different background and culture, even the same gesture and emotion has different meaning for different people in certain contexts. Thus it is very useful for

us to understand people by understanding their basic nonverbal communication skills." McGovern (1998) gives the following example to show the misunderstandings that can arise due to misinterpretations of gestures:

"An American businesswoman comes away from a meeting, delighted; she finally got her Japanese supplier to agree to a price. A few days later, she receives questions about price. It's almost as if she imagined the meeting. "What's going on here?" she asks, "We agreed on the price already, didn't we?" The business woman recalls all the Um-hmms and yeses she heard in the meeting. "They agreed to the price, they said 'Yes,' " she mutters to herself. "They even nodded and smiled." Welcome to the world of intercultural business communication, ...This American businesswoman is not the first or last to feel frustrated in this way. Other people have misunderstood a "yes" response. Ways of Communication: The business woman needs to understand that irrespective of language, different cultures communicate in different ways..." (p. 23).

I believe such information is equally applicable to teachers of foreign languages. There is then an urgent need for research to be undertaken in the following two areas:

- 1) to what extent is the interference of teacher's culture-specific nonverbal communication in the classroom a cause for concern? and
- 2) how to integrate (or should we integrate- depending on the immensity of the problem) this element of nonverbal communication in teacher training courses?

Conclusion

In the current day and age, the world has become a very small place and as a consequence, there is continuous interaction between people of different cultures. Successful cross-cultural communication, whether it is in the field of language teaching or business, requires people to recognise and understand the cross-cultural differences in nonverbal communication. When we encounter people from other cultures, we may find it difficult to understand them because of the differences in tone of our voices, gestures, facial expressions and so on. In order to eradicate inaccuracy in perception of others as well as to become effective communicators, students of foreign languages need to be made aware of nonverbal behaviour in the culture of the target language. Further investigation needs to be taken in order to achieve this vital goal. This investigation should include the ways in which nonverbal communication can be integrated in the language teaching syllabuses and the teacher training courses. Perhaps guidance and advice can be gathered from the field of business where nonverbal communication is part of the study.

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Bio

Velissarios Houssos holds a B.A. degree from the University of Athens in English Language and Literature and a B.A degree from the same University in Italian Language and Literature. He also holds an M.A. in Applied Linguistics-TEFL from the University of Bedfordshire. Moreover, he has received training in teaching EFL from the universities of Brighton and Edinburgh. He has been actively involved in TEFL, as a researcher and as a Mentor in cooperation with the Department of English Studies of the University of Athens. He has published articles and he has experience in curriculum development for adults in the public sector. He speaks Italian and he is engaged in TEFL in the secondary education.