

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 501

FL 017 454

AUTHOR Davis, James J.  
 TITLE Teaching Cultural Gestures in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Review of Literature.  
 PUB DATE [88]  
 NOTE 13p.  
 PRT TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Body Language; Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Communication Problems; \*Communicative Competence (Languages); \*Cultural Education; Educational Strategies; Instructional Materials; \*Intercultural Communication; \*Nonverbal Communication; Second Language Instruction; Sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

The literature on foreign language instruction focuses on communicative competence and proficiency in producing culturally and situationally appropriate utterances. Traditionally, nonverbal aspects of communication have not been emphasized. Systematic study of this field is relatively recent in communication research. Both verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication are important to the sociolinguistic approach to language teaching. The status of gestures has been widely misinterpreted; they do not stand alone but substitute for linguistic behavior. More focused attention should be given to developing communicative competence through gestures. There are two opposing views about how and to what extent gestures should be taught, one emphasizing interpretation of gestures and the other stressing their active production. Lack of nonverbal expertise in another can lead to miscommunication despite substantial linguistic competence. Little information on the teaching of cross-cultural gestural comparisons is available, but the scattered suggestions in the literature concerning observation and use of instructional materials can be helpful in the classroom. (MSE)

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
 \* from the original document. \*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

Teaching Cultural Gestures in the Foreign Language  
Classroom: A Review of Literature

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS  
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as  
received from the person or organization  
originating it.  
 Minor changes have been made to improve  
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-  
ment do not necessarily represent official  
OERI position or policy.

J. Davis

James J. Davis  
Howard University

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED 295501

Presently, in the literature on foreign language teaching, there is much emphasis on communicative competency and proficiency. The communicative competency approach focuses on the development of skills which will allow the language learner to produce the necessary and appropriate utterances in a given situation or social context. Brown (1981) pointed out that: "communicative competence includes nonverbal--a knowledge of all the varying nonverbal semantics of the second culture, and an ability both to send and to receive nonverbal signals unambiguously" (p. 202).

Traditionally, the nonverbal communicative aspects of a foreign language has not been emphasized in language teaching and learning. Green (1971) wrote that: "In today's foreign language classroom, kinesics 1 is still relatively a stranger" (p. 62). Because of the lack of emphasis on nonverbal communication, students of foreign language often (1) do not change preconceived attitudes toward and stereotypical images of the target language speaker, (2) make faulty assumptions about a person or group of people of the target culture, and (3) are not able to interpret

FL017454

---

1 Kinesics is the study of the patterned body motion aspects of human communication. Gestures, facial expressions, posture, and walking style are usually included in the study of kinesics. In this paper, kinesics and gestures will be used interchangeably.

certain cultural cues which may lead to miscommunication and sometimes to embarrassing and uncomfortable situations (Morain, 1976).

#### NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: A BRIEF RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A systematic study of the nonverbal aspects of human communication is relatively recent in communication research. However, since the publication of Ray Birdwhistell's classic book, Introduction to Kinesics, in 1952, there has been a rapid increase in research in the vast subject of nonverbal communication (Condon & Yousef, 1975). Researchers have concluded that approximately fifty-five to sixty-five percent of all interpersonal communication is nonverbal (Birdwhistell, 1970). Interpersonal communication includes all human behavior, and most of what is communicated will not be written or spoken.

#### GESTURES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC POINT OF VIEW

Both nonverbal and verbal aspects of language are important to the sociolinguistic approach to language teaching. Sociolinguistics deals with those aspects of human communication that a speaker needs to understand in order to communicate effectively in a certain cultural environment. Kinesics, a form of nonverbal communication, is considered a legitimate subcategory of sociolinguistics. A study of kinesics within and across cultures is undeniably important, because, as Birdwhistell noted, we may rely more on nonverbal communication in

intercultural speech exchanges that we do in intracultural exchanges. Although many cultures share some of the same gestures, there is often not a direct pairing of all gestures in any two cultures (Harrison, 1983).

The status of gestures has been widely misinterpreted. Gestures are technically a substitute for linguistic behavior. Common examples are a pointing of the finger, nodding the head, hand-shaking, hand-waving, and bowing. It should be noted that a particular gesture may have a different meaning within the same culture. In other words, gestures do not have explicit and invariable meaning. For example, the appropriate gesture for "thumbing a ride" can mean "get lost" in another context. The meaning of a gesture must be, therefore, considered contextually (Hayes, 1964). Gestures cannot stand alone as what Birdwhistell called "behavior isolates".

Additionally, kinesic structure is parallel to language structure in that gestural forms function like words in spoken language. Poyatos (1970) summarized the five functions of conscious kinesic activities in the following manner: (1) to complement words; (2) to add emphasis to words; (3) to substitute words; (4) to complement a body movement such as changing one's body posture; and (5) to complement a social function such as nodding one's head or smiling as a greeting.

#### GESTURES AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The ultimate goal of the communicative competence approach

is to elicit from students meaningful and authentic communication. Foreign language teachers have devoted most of their efforts to developing students' grammar competence, but have not devoted enough attention to competency and proficiency in intercultural communication. Despite the importance of nonbehavioral patterns in interpersonal communication, they have generally not been systematically presented in the foreign language classroom. Harrison (1983) noted that if gestures are mentioned in the classroom, they are usually presented as an "aside" or a "footnote".

#### TEACHING GESTURES IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Heretofore, most language teachers, both native and non-native speakers, have avoided teaching foreign kinesic patterns in the language classroom. Nussenbaum (1983) suggested that the non-native teacher perhaps feels inadequate and afraid of enhancing negative stereotypes of the foreign culture. The native speaker, who brings to the classroom all the nonverbal patterns of their culture, do not present them in any planned or systematic manner, however.

Morain (1976) called for an emphasis on the teaching of "visual literacy" in the foreign language classroom. Students' ability to recognize and interpret visual as well as auditory cues is an integral part of achieving communicative competence. Most foreign language teachers agree on the importance of teaching foreign-culture gestures and other aspects of nonverbal

communication in the classroom, but there are essentially two opposing views regarding how and to what extent gestures should be taught (Morain, 1976). One view is that teachers should not attempt to teach their students to imitate gestures, rather they should teach them to recognize and interpret gestures in a social context. The other view is that students should be instructed in the active production of gestures.

Those who oppose the teaching of active production feel that non-native speakers will not be able to reproduce authentically the gestures of the target culture, and that an awkwardly mimicked gesture might confuse or offend members of the target culture. As a proponent of active production, Green (1971) wrote that: "from a strictly technical point of view, increased authenticity is itself sufficient justification for the inclusion of the kinesic dimension in the language classroom" (p. 64). Similarly, Nostrand (1967; 1974), Oales (1977) and Harrison (1983) indicated that students should be encouraged to learn and practice gestures in the classroom, and that they should try to act like native speakers during class activities in order to develop a second language personality. Brault (1963) noted that upon learning to model gestures, students will have a better sense of what is "proper" and "fitting" in the target culture. Another important outcome of teaching foreign-culture gestures is that language learning can be facilitated, and that gestures, if well explained and presented, may assist in the recall of certain language structures and vocabulary items (Galas, 1961).

In the foreign language classroom, a discussion of facial expressions and other gestures is crucial to an understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal and intercultural communication. An accurate sociocultural description of conscious gestural behavior will train students to distinguish members of other cultures from members of their culture. Also, a study of cultural gestures will help students understand why people act the way they do in order to satisfy their basic physical and psychological needs (Seelye, 1984). Furthermore, an understanding of culture-specific gestures can help students dispel the notion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between languages and cultures (Oates, 1977). Many foreign language learners think that gestures carry the same meaning across cultures, and are often surprised to learn that gestures are learned culturally (Heusinkveld, 1985). For example, the American hand gesture for "O.K." means "it's all over" in Cuba (Morain, 1976).

Lacking nonverbal expertise or 'literacy' in another culture can lead to miscommunication even if the non-native speaker is highly competent linguistically in the language of the host culture. In Latin America, for example, a North American who stands "too far" away when shaking hands or pulls away from a gentle hug offered as a cordial greeting may be considered impolite or offensive. Oates (1977) pointed out that the way in which the French knock on the door is culturally significant. According to him, the French knock with the back of the hand,

allowing the index and middle fingers to do the knocking. On the contrary, Americans generally knock with a closed-fist. The closed-fist American pattern is used by the French only when they are angry with the person on the other side of the door.

Although foreign language teachers presently have available to them some information on cross-cultural gestural (kinesic) comparisons, there exists little information on the teaching of these patterns in the classroom. A number of suggestions, however, has appeared in scattered-fashion in journal articles and books on the teaching of language and culture.

Nussenbaum (1983) and Rivers (1981) indicated that foreign language students should be exposed to television programs, live theater, and films in the language that they study. These media are helpful in providing native examples of interpersonal communication in the target culture. Modern technology has facilitated the use of television, films, and sophisticated video equipment in the classroom. However, since students are generally unaware of the foreign cultural patterns, teachers must provide them with sufficient insight and background knowledge to allow them to interpret what they observe. For example, before viewing a foreign language film, students should be told to pay attention to the physical and emotional distance between speakers and to the gestural patterns. Through arm movements, facial expressions, and eye contact speakers send messages to their dialogue partners. Students should be made aware that gestures serve as meaningful indicators of one's moods and emotions.



Language learning involves more than words, syntax, and meaning; it also involves the full range of human emotions and relationships (Lonerger, 1984).

Language teachers may ask students to write the descriptions of nonverbal behavior that they observe during the showing of a film. Lonerger (1984) suggested that scenes from a film or a television program should be replayed without the volume so as to force students to observe only nonverbal cues. A simple question like "what does the speaker do in addition to speaking?" can stimulate a discussion of gestural behavior, and will also allow students to explore on their own the role that kinesics plays in the overall communication process.

Other suggestions for teaching gestures and other aspects of nonverbal behavior have included the use of photographs or printed foreign advertisements. Upon carefully observing these materials, the teacher might ask students to note items that are similar or different with regard to their own culture. Fitch (1985) suggested that games can be useful in teaching foreign gestures. She recommended "Charades", for example, if the teacher is aware of the kinesic patterns of the foreign culture.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Foreign language teachers, teacher educators, and supporters have long claimed that one of the most important outcomes of foreign language study is that students will learn to understand and appreciate people of another culture. This particular claim,

however, has become, in recent years, the object of attack both in and outside the profession. A survey of the current literature related to the teaching of culture will indicate that there has been considerable progress in this area. There is, nonetheless, a general consensus among foreign language educators that the cultural goals have not yet been attained. This is in part due to the unrealistic goals of foreign language programs and to the mistraining or lack of training of foreign language teachers in the area of teaching culture (Seelye, 1984).

Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) have called for an "integrative approach" to teaching language and culture. The integrative approach calls for the inclusion of sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of communication. The overall suggestion is that foreign language teachers develop a systematic approach to teaching culture in the classroom. Culture should not be taught as an "aside" or as a "footnote". To teach the multifaceted aspects of culture, patterns of nonverbal communication, especially gestural behavior, should be included. To conclude, a statement by Green (1971) will serve as a summary of the ideas presented above: "foreign-culture gestures --used authentically and intelligently--can serve to heighten pupil interest in the foreign language" (p. 64).

#### SOME ILLUSTRATED WORKS FOR TEACHERS OF FRENCH AND SPANISH

In addition to the works by Harrison and Green (1968) cited in the references, the list of works below is illustrated by drawings or photographs:

- Bunker, S. (1978). An illustrated gestural inventory: Latin American Gestures for English speaking students of Spanish. M.A. Thesis, Brigham Young University.
- Canfield, D. L. (1968). Spanish with a flourish: American Association of Teachers of Spanish Cultural Unit 1.
- Miller, J.D. (1969). Gestural language: French Teaching Aids. Provo, Utah.
- Saitz, R. & Cervenka, E. (1972). Handbook of gestures: Colombia and the United States. The Hague: Mouton.
- Saitz, R. & Cervenka, E. (1962). Colombian and North American gestures: A contrastive inventory. Bogota: Centro Colombo-Americano.
- Tsoutsos, T. (1970). A tentative inventory for the teaching of French. M.S. Thesis: Queens College.

#### REFERENCES

- Birdwhistell, R.L. (1952). Introduction to kinesics. Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service Institute, Department of State.
- Birdwhistell, R.L. (1970). Kinesics and context. Essays on body motion communication. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brown, H.D. (1981). Principles of language learning and teaching. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Brault, G.J. (1963). Kinesics in the classroom: Some typical French gestures. French Review, 36, 374-382.
- Condon, J.C. & Yousef, F. (1975). An introduction to intercultural communication. Indiana: Bobb Merrill.
- Crawford-Lange, L. & Lange, D.L. (1984). Doing the unthinkable in the second language classroom: A process for the integration of language and culture. In T. Higgs (Ed.) Teaching for proficiency: The organizing principle, pp. 139-178, Illinois: National Textbook Company.
- Fitch, K.L. (1985). Teaching nonverbal communication in the ESL classroom. Cross Currents, 12(1), 15-25.
- Fleming, G. (1971a). Gestures and body movement as mediators of meaning in our new language teaching system. Contact 16, 15-21.

- Fleming, G. (1971b). The role of gesture in language teaching. Pensiero e linguaggio (Milan), 2, 31-43.
- Galas, E.M. (1961). The language teacher as choral director: Suggestions for the use of gestures. Hispania, 44, 787-789.
- Green, J.R. (1971). A focus report. Kinesics in the foreign language class. Foreign Language Annals, 5, 62-68.
- Green, J.R. (1968). A gestural inventory for the teaching of Spanish. Philadelphia: Chilton.
- Harrison, P.A. (1983). Behaving Brazilian: A comparison of Brazilian and North American social behavior. Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Hayes, A.S. (1964). Paralinguistics and kinesics: Pedagogical perspectives. In T.A. Seboek, A.S. Hayes, & M. Bateson (Eds.) Approaches to semiotics, (pp. 145-172). The Hague: Mouton.
- Heusinkveld, P. (1985). The foreign language classroom: A forum for understanding cultural stereotypes. Foreign Language Annals, 18, 4, 321-325.
- Loneragan, J. (1984). Video in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nostrand, H. (1967). La kinésique. Background data for the teaching of French. Part A. La culture et la société française au XXe siècle. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Nostrand, H. (1974). Empathy for a second culture: Motivations and techniques. In G. A. Jarvis, Responding to new realities. Illinois: National Textbook Company.
- Morain, G. (1976). Visual literacy. Reading signs and designs in the foreign culture. Foreign language Annals, 16(2), 210-216.
- Morain, G. (1978). Kinesics and cross-culture understanding. Language in Education: Theory and practice. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Morain, G. (1983). Commitment to the teaching of foreign culture. Modern Language Journal, 67, 401-412.
- Nussenbaum, G. (1983). Sociolinguistics dimensions of foreign language teaching. Foreign Language Annals, 16(2), 121-124.

Oates, M. (1977). Should we train our students to be spies?, Cedar Falls, Iowa. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 152 077).

Poyatos, F. (1970). La kinésica del español actual. Hispania, 53, 444-454.

Rivers, W. (1981). Teaching foreign language skills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Seelye, N. (1984). Teaching culture. Strategies for intercultural communication. Illinois: National Textbook Company.