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Nonverbal Communication Strategies in Second Language Learning Through Gestures and Facial Expressions

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Abstract - **Nonverbal communication is a crucial part of human interaction, but its pedagogical importance in second language acquisition is frequently ignored because of the prevalent consideration of verbal teaching. Gestures, facial expressions, and body language may greatly contribute to meaning-making, engagement by the learner, and memory. The paper is research that will focus on the systematic application of nonverbal communication, especially gestures or facial expressions, and its effect on vocabulary learning and speech performance in second language classrooms. An experimental research design was conducted over an eight-week period with 30 secondary school students aged 12–15. The participants were randomly placed in an experimental and a control group. The control group was taught using the conventional oral and written forms, whereas the experimental group was taught with the help of intentional gestures and facial expressions in accordance with the spoken. The data were gathered by use of vocabulary and speaking pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, a survey among students, and semi-structured interviews with the teacher. The analysis of quantitative results was done based on paired and independent sample t-tests, whereas qualitative data were analyzed descriptively to put the statistical results into perspective. The findings revealed that the experimental group recorded a much greater improvement in vocabulary retention and performance of speaking as compared to the control group ($p < .05$). It was also observed that there were increased motivation, attention, and confidence in oral expression among the learners. The teacher/student feedback revealed that nonverbal strategies improved comprehension and lessened communication anxiety. These results indicate that nonverbal communication, when incorporated as part of language teaching, induces cognitive processing, long-term retention, and communicative competence, which is why this process is highly significant in teaching a second language effectively.**

Keywords: **Nonverbal Communication, Gestures and Facial Expressions, Second Language Learning, Vocabulary Retention, Speaking Performance, Intercultural Communication**

I. INTRODUCTION

Nonverbal communication is a recognized element of human interaction, and its formal role in second language acquisition has not been thoroughly studied. Although teaching and learning languages have focused on the verbal input, there is scant research that reviews the direct effect of certain nonverbal skills, e.g., gestures and facial expressions, on vocabulary acquisition, speech acquisition, and student interaction in classroom contexts. Students' Performance and Perceptions of Authentic E-Learning Activities in English Intercultural Learning. This gap creates the necessity of conducting empirical research on the investigation of the instructional worthiness of carefully designed nonverbal strategies, especially in the culturally diverse learning setting.

Intercultural competence is also related to nonverbal communication. It is especially significant within the context of higher education, where English-medium instruction is gaining certain demands to make students gain intercultural communicative competence along with linguistic abilities (Vu et al., 2025). What would be viewed as a positive gesture or supportive gesture in one culture would be viewed in a different culture, perhaps as offensive. The recent studies in the context of intercultural communication prove that cultural norms have a strong influence on the interpretation of gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal messages in bilingual classrooms and, therefore, cultural sensitivity is a key condition of effective teaching of a second language to the learners (Burgoon et al., 2021; Jack et al., 2012). As a result, the role of cultural sensitivity is paramount to effective teaching of a second language to the learners, as the nonverbal interaction within the classroom provides the necessary awareness of cultural differences (B Such nonverbal acts in culturally diverse situation should be perceived as context-relevant communicative cue, implying the importance of intercultural awareness in instructional interaction (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2012). Body language, facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact are nonverbal behaviors that are important in supplementing and reinforcing verbal communication. It is also possible to interpret these nonverbal resources as multimodal information channels that facilitate the process of instructional communication and transfer of knowledge in learning institutions (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran, 2016). Such cues have the ability to facilitate comprehension, facilitate memory processes, alleviate anxiety in learners, and improve teacher-student rapport in an instructional setting. The classroom interaction can thus be considered as an active process of exchanging information, both verbal and nonverbal, where the interaction of verbal and nonverbal cues together determines learner comprehension and involvement (Walsh, 2011). The current research fills this gap in research by studying how gestures and facial expressions influence the vocabulary learning and speaking scores of learners, taking into account their intercultural effects. This was carried out using an experimental design of 30 learners of secondary school using eight weeks of experimental design, using classroom observations, teacher interviews conducted on semi-structured interviews, as well as student surveys to support the study. The study evaluates the influence of nonverbal communication on the motivation, comprehension, and engagement of learners in the form of hand movements, nodding, and facial expressions. The results indicate that the regular application of gestures improves memory use and promotes more confident oral talk, whereas expressions adjusted to the cultures decrease the instances of miscommunication and can make classroom communication easier. This is in line with the research on embodied learning that the gestures offer representational assistance that enhances memory and lowers cognitive load in language learning tasks (Hostetter and Alibali, 2019).

The study based on these findings suggests that nonverbal communication training should be incorporated in second language teaching by means of role-plays, task-based learning, cooperative interaction, and classroom projects that should be culturally oriented. These methods lead to better oral fluency, as well as the development of intercultural competence and social communicative abilities of the learners. This paper is important as it has put forward the pedagogical value of nonverbal communication as a component element of effective teaching of a second language. Although gestures and facial expressions are inherent in the interaction within the classroom, their methodical influence on quantifiable learning outcomes has not been properly studied. The current study is also unique because it integrates both the experimental test and the qualitative classroom results to prove that the nonverbal strategies can enhance the retention of vocabulary, performance during speaking, and confidence in learners (Erwin et al., 2012).

The paper is structured in the following way: introduction consists of the research problem and objectives, literature survey is a review of the recent research about the nonverbal communication in SLA, the methodology section describes the experiment design and the tools, results and discussion section is some statistical comparison of the groups, and the conclusion is a summary of the main findings, implications and future researches (Tekindal & Arsu, 2020).

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The most recent findings in the field of second language acquisition have stressed the idea that when it comes to effective language learning, verbal stimulation is not the only way, but nonverbal messages like gestures, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact should also be incorporated. Such paralinguistic attributes are very important in the construction of meaning, memorizing, and retaining material, involving the learner and emotional regulation during classroom interaction. These multimodal resources could also be perceived as an information channel of a meaning that is conveyed outside the verbal context (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran, 2016; Kress, 2015). The recent empirical research, during the past five years, shows that the use of gestures in the field of instruction in strengthening vocabulary learning and retention over a period of time is substantial. Indicatively, Andrä et al. (2020) discovered that learners who learned foreign language vocabulary using gestures-enhanced instructions became better at retaining lexical items several months after instruction relative to those learners who were informed by verbal input only. Likewise, in their meta-analysis, Oppici et al. (2023) affirmed that both sight and action of gesture during instruction have a positive effect on vocabulary and pronunciation accuracy. Morett (2018) also showed that gesture production and viewing can produce a considerable impact on vocabulary acquisition and longer vocabulary retention in the second language setting.Eye contact and

facial expressions have been found to have an effect on enhancing the learning and motivation of the learners. According to Barati (2015), over time, eye contact between teachers and students enhances their attention and minimises anxiety among the learners, especially when they are talking. Recent discoveries indicate that expressive facial expressions by teachers are also a part of emotional scaffolding and assist learners to derive meaning and build confidence in oral production (Tseng et al., 2025). Evnitskaya, N., & Morton, T. (2011) goes on to state that classroom interaction consists of multimodal components, which include learners developing meaning through integrative verbal and nonverbal communicative resources. Cognitively, gesture-speech integration theory is used in explaining how the gesture aids in mental reflection and processing of information. Psycholinguistics studies have shown that gestures decrease cognitive load as they visually ground abstract linguistic representations, which increases knowledge and memory (Mumford and Kita, 2014; Macedonia, 2014). The systematic review by Bergmann and Macedonia (2016) affirms that the gesture enactment is always effective in increasing vocabulary in all learning settings. Such results are especially applicable to the young and adolescent learners, whose cognitive development is advantageous with multimodal input.

Nonverbal cultural dimensions of communication have attracted literature in recent times. Recent research highlights the importance of nonverbal and artistic forms of communication in transferring cultural meaning and shared memory. According to Nuri et al. (2025), artistic expressions serve as strong carriers of cultural memory because they provide people with the opportunity to understand and internalize certain cultural experiences, which cannot be expressed in words. This point of view is extremely applicable to the context of second language learning since gestures and facial expressions also serve as semiotic devices that can be used to express cultural values, emotions, and social norms. The idea of incorporating nonverbal communication in teaching language, therefore, not only helps in linguistic acquisition but also in the cultural and intercultural awareness of the learners, too. Gestures and facial expressions are not universal, and instead, the meaning of each gesture and facial expression differs based on the culture. The intercultural pragmatics studies indicate that the perception of gestures among the learners is influenced by the cultural expectations and the rules of the discourse in the classroom; the understanding of nonverbal meaning should be explicitly taught (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2012). Knapp and Hall (2010) also note that nonverbal communication can create misunderstandings because of the use of culturally inappropriate nonverbal communication, and hence the need for intercultural awareness in teaching languages. Contrastive cultural tasks are also recommended in recent studies as they assist learners in recognizing and interpreting the differences in nonverbal behavior in different societies (Tseng et al., 2025).

Although nonverbal communication has recently become of interest, there are some gaps in research. Most of the current studies put more emphasis on vocabulary acquisition and little on speaking performance and classroom interaction. Additionally, not a lot of studies use experimental designs involving quantitative performance data and qualitative information provided by observations and interviews with teachers. This discrepancy indicates the necessity of empirical studies that will perform a qualitative analysis of the effects of gestures and facial expressions on the results of language and communicative skills.

It is based on the recent empirical research and thus closes the gaps identified by the present study, which will examine the impact of systematic use of gestures and facial expressions on vocabulary retention and the performance of speaking in second language classrooms. This study has a role to play in the existing discourse about multimodal instruction, as well as providing pedagogical implications that would be consistent with modern patterns of communicative and task-based language teaching.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design of this study was experimental, which investigated the impact of nonverbal expressions or gestures and facial expressions on learning a second language. The experimental design was chosen to enable the adoption of a systematic comparison of learners who received nonverbal instructional strategies and learners who received traditional instructions. Quantitative part was aimed at the measurement of the changes in vocabulary retention and speaking performance, and qualitative data gave the background information about the learner engagement and interaction in the classroom.

Participants

The sample size was 30 students in secondary schools whose ages ranged from 12 to 15. The students were chosen randomly in two groups: an experimental group (n = 15 and a control group (n = 15). Randomization was also done to reduce selection bias and the comparability of groups. The content of the curriculum, learning objectives, and time were the same in both groups, and the only difference was that nonverbal communication strategies were used in the experimental group.

Instructional Procedure

The research was performed over a period of eight weeks. At this period, the experimental group was instructed in the use of gestures, facial expressions, body movements, and eye contact in relation to verbal explanations, which was done deliberately and systematically. In this case, the hand gestures were made by teachers to demonstrate actions, facial expressions to show emotions or stress, and movement to emphasize. Conversely, conventional approaches of delivery

through oral explanations and written materials were used to teach the control group without deliberate application of nonverbal cues in teaching.

Data Collection Instruments

Several data collection tools were used in order to reinforce the dataset and overcome the concerns of the reviewer:

Test of Vocabulary and Speaking Tests.

Pre-tests and post-tests were used to test the vocabulary retention and speaking performance of the students. Tests on vocabulary were multiple choice, word-meaning matching, and sentence completion. Structured oral tasks based on fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and coherence were used to evaluate speaking performance. All analyses were done with a statistical significance of $p < .05$.

Classroom Observations

A structured observation checklist was used in the classroom observations during the intervention period. The observation criteria were the attention level, level of participation by students, responsiveness to teacher cues, gestures used when speaking, and the general engagement of the students when undertaking activities in the classroom.

Student Surveys

The student surveys were to gather the perceptions of the learners concerning the nonverbal classroom communication. Questions in the survey were Likert-scale questions on the perceived comprehension, motivation, confidence in speaking, and usefulness of gestures and facial expressions in teaching new vocabulary.

Teacher Interviews

The participating teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The topics to be discussed during interviews were instructional strategies, perceived efficacy of nonverbal communication, classroom interactional patterns, and challenges associated with the use of culturally appropriate gestures and facial expressions.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

A conceptual framework was created in order to illustrate the research process. The model shows the correlation between the input of instruction and learning outcomes. The nonverbal communication strategies (facial expressions, gestures, body language) are the mediator variables: they increase the level of engagement, decrease cognitive load, and facilitate meaning construction in learners. The result of the mediation processes is a better vocabulary retention, better performance in speaking, and communicative competence. Fig. 1 represents the conceptual model of the research. The framework illustrates how the nonverbal communication strategies, including gestures, facial expressions, body language, and eye contact, can serve as mediating variables between instructional input and the outcome of learning. The strategies increase the attention and decrease the cognitive load of learners, increasing the emotional engagement that, consequently, promotes the vocabulary retention and speaking performance. The framework also emphasizes the more general education outcomes, such as the enhanced confidence of the learners, the enhanced classroom interaction, and the progression of intercultural awareness.

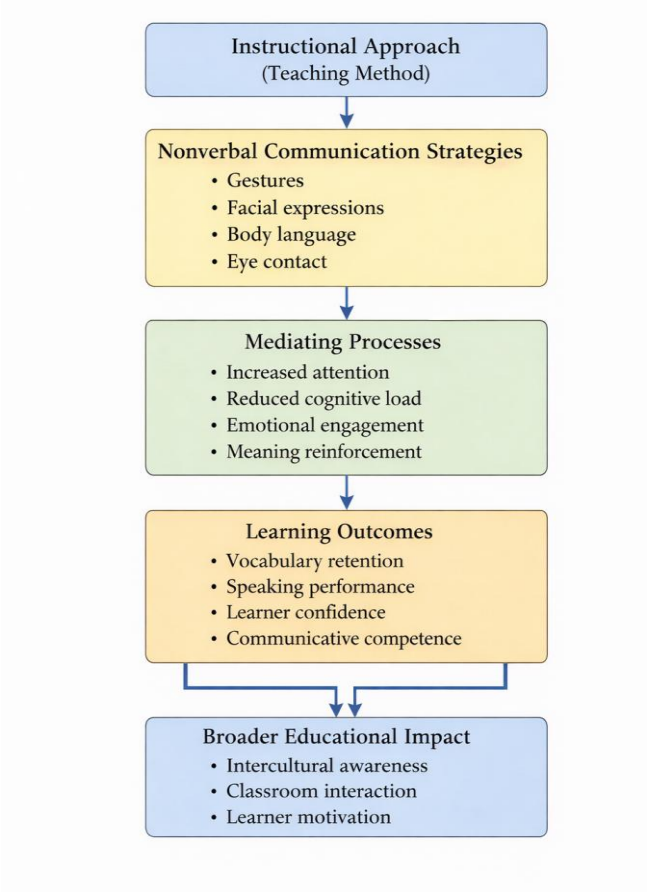

Fig. 1 Flow Diagram of Instructional Strategies, Cognitive–affective Processes, and Learning Outcomes

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from vocabulary and speaking tests were analyzed using SPSS software. Paired sample t-tests were used to compare the pre-test and post-test scores in each of the groups, whereas independent samples t-tests were used to compare the difference in performance between the experimental and the control group. The descriptive analysis of qualitative data through observation, survey, and interview data was used to back up and interpret the quantitative results.

IV. Results And Discussion

Quantitative Results

In the quantitative analysis, the differences in retention of vocabulary and speaking performance between the experimental and the control group throughout the eight-week intervention period were analyzed. Pre-test results indicated that both groups started at comparable proficiency levels, confirming group equivalence prior to the intervention. As shown in table I, the experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary performance from pre-test (M = 45.2, SD = 5.1) to post-test (M = 78.4, SD = 6.2; p = 0.0001), whereas the control group showed no significant gain (p = 0.07).

Fig. 2 visually illustrates the vocabulary score gains between the experimental and control groups, confirming the stronger effect of gesture-supported instruction.

TABLE I VOCABULARY PERFORMANCE: PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST COMPARISON

Group	Test	Mean	SD	p-value
Experimental	Pre-test	45.2	5.1	—
Experimental	Post-test	78.4	6.2	0.0001
Control	Pre-test	44.9	4.8	—
Control	Post-test	59.3	6.7	0.07

Note: p-values indicate within-group differences between pre-test and post-test scores. Statistical significance was set at p < .05.

The experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary retention (p < .05), whereas the improvement observed in the control group did not reach statistical significance. This indicates that gesture- and facial expression–enhanced instruction had a substantial effect on learners' ability to acquire and retain new vocabulary. Table II presents the speaking performance results. The experimental group was much better on post-test speaking (M = 4.1, SD = 0.7; p <.05), whereas the control did not do much better.

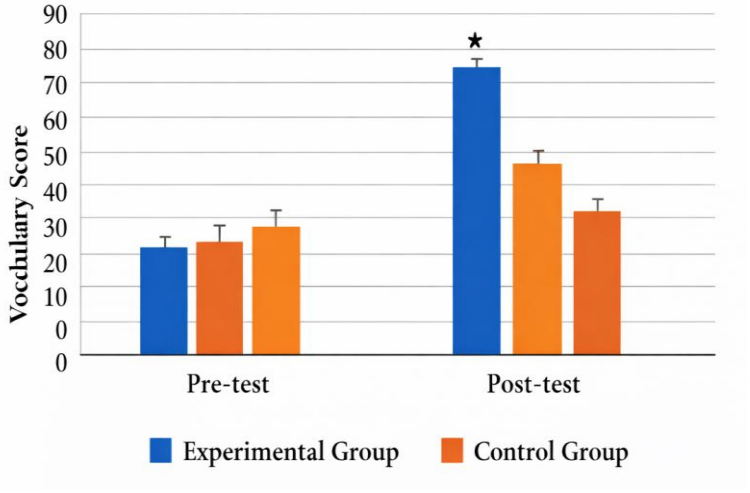

Fig. 2. Vocabulary Improvement by Group

TABLE II SPEAKING PERFORMANCE: PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST COMPARISON

Group	Test	Mean	SD	p-value
Experimental	Pre-test	2.8	0.6	—
Experimental	Post-test	4.1	0.6	p < .05*
Control	Pre-test	2.9	0.5	—
Control	Post-test	3.2	0.5	0.08

Note: p-values indicate within-group differences between pre-test and post-test scores. Statistical significance was set at p < .05.

Fig. 3 shows that learners who were subjected to nonverbal strategies showed better results in the aspect of speaking fluency than the control group.

The same was the case with speaking performance results. The experimental group demonstrated considerably greater improvement in fluency, pronunciation, and coherence than the control group. These results indicate that nonverbal communication contributes to vocabulary acquisition, as well as encourages more self-assured and more natural oral speech.

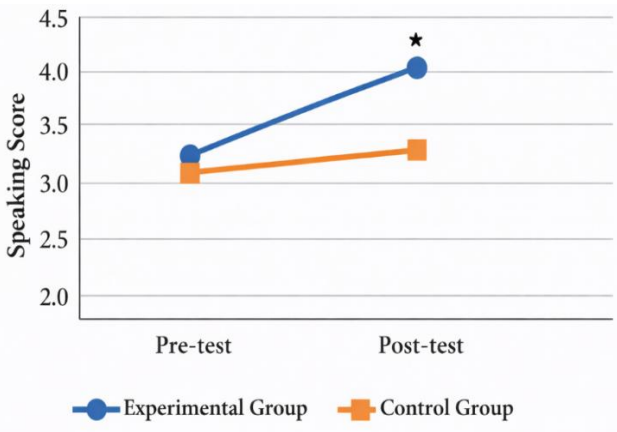

Fig. 3 Comparison of Speaking Performance

Qualitative Findings

Observations of classrooms showed that there were significant differences between the two groups in terms of engagement of the learners. Students of the experimental group showed a higher level of attention, more voluntary participation, and more frequent use of gestures when they were doing speaking tasks. On the contrary, the participants in the control group were more inclined to memorize, and their interactions were less intensive.

These observations were further supported by the results of the survey. About 87 % of the students in the experimental group noted that they could comprehend the new words more easily with the help of gestures and facial expressions, and 82% of the students indicated that it gave them confidence in speaking activities. These results were replicated in teacher interviews, in which nonverbal communication was found to decrease communication anxiety and make the classroom more supportive.

Discussion

The results of the current research agree with the existing studies that have shown the cognitive and pedagogical advantages of nonverbal communication in the process of learning a second language. These results are consistent with Andrä et al. (2020), who have found a long-term vocabulary improvement using gestural-based instruction, as well as with the results of the meta-analysis conducted by Oppici et al. (2023), who have also confirmed the cognitive advantages of enacting gestures during learning a foreign language. The current research contributes to this literature because it shows that the vocabulary, speaking fluency, and confidence that the learners have improved significantly. These results also justify the recent findings that the instructional strategies with interactions and multimodality, including educational games and embodied classroom settings, are a key contributor to the acquisition of speaking skills in the environment of foreign language learning (Ismayilli et al., 2025). The main contribution of the given study is its mixed vocabulary and speaking outcomes analysis conducted in the experimental format. Although a significant number of previous works paid much attention to lexical acquisition, the current research illustrates that gestures and facial expressions are equally significant to the production of effective language. Furthermore, the quantitative results are supplemented with the observational and perceptual data that bring the quantitative findings to a new level and emphasize the affective aspect of learning.

Another aspect that adds to the interpretation of the results is cultural considerations. Gestures and expressions used in one culture might have a different meaning in another culture, and therefore, the proper use of nonverbal strategies should be culturally sensitive. It is also indicated that the identity of learners is constantly negotiated within multicultural learning environments, which is why it is important to consider culturally appropriate interaction in language classrooms (Ali et al., 2022). Provided that the contrastive activities are used, teachers should be conscious of intercultural distinctions to promote the pragmatic competence of learners and avoid any misunderstanding.

On the whole, the broadened comparative analysis proves that systematic implementation of the nonverbal communication strategies is associated with higher learning results than traditional instruction. Such results highlight the importance of multimodal teaching methods in language teaching today.

Practical Implications for Language Teachers

The results of this research have a number of valuable pedagogical implications for teachers of the second language. First, the gestures may not be seen as accidental classroom behavior but as ones that can be used intentionally in strengthening vocabulary learning and retention. The teachers are able to include meaningful hand gestures systematically in presenting new lexical items, especially action verbs, emotions, and abstract concepts, which are enhanced by visual reinforcement. Second, eye contact and facial expressions are also important to emotional scaffolding. Facial expressions can be used to aid in understanding, lessen anxiety among learners, and prompt them to engage in speaking activities. Teachers may use positive nonverbal feedback—such as nodding, smiling, and supportive facial expressions—to create a classroom atmosphere that fosters confidence and willingness to communicate.

Third, nonverbal strategies can be effectively implemented through communicative teaching approaches such as role-play, storytelling, task-based interaction, and cooperative learning activities. As an illustration, students can be advised to use gestures when rehearsing the dialogues or telling the stories, which might increase the fluency and pronunciation via embodied activity.

Also, educators need to know that gestures and facial expressions can lead to different meanings in different cultures. That is why it is necessary to incorporate the activity of intercultural awareness into instruction in order to avoid misunderstandings and to train pragmatic competence in learners. Another way in which teachers can provide telecollaborative exchanges or cross-cultural communication activities is to enhance the intercultural communicative competence of learners in the field of nonverbal awareness (Al Khateeb and Hassan, 2023).

Lastly, multimodal teaching techniques must be taught during teacher education and professional development programs. By building awareness of the way nonverbal communication contributes to the cognitive processing and motivation of the learner, educators can create more interactive, inclusive, and effective language learning environments.

Moreover, the consideration of nonverbal communication strategies must be considered not only as a classroom method but also as a segment of professional development and identity formation of teachers because the ability to communicate with multimodality is an indicator of the changing pedagogical skills in various learning settings (Nigar, 2025).

V. CONCLUSION

The study examined the role of nonverbal communication strategies, specifically gestures and facial expressions, regarding their contribution to the learning outcome in the second language. The findings clearly reveal that systematic nonverbal instructional cues integration has a tremendous effect on improving the vocabulary, memory, and speech of the learners. The quantitative data indicated that the students who received the experimental intervention experienced significant vocabulary gains in the experimental condition when the pre-test scores (M= 45.2; SD = 5.1) and the post-test scores (M= 78.4; SD = 6.2); thus, $p = 0.0001$; the control group registered low gains, which were not statistically significant ($p = 0.07$). Performance in speaking was also like this. Students who received the intervention of gesture and facial expression-based teaching increased their mean score of 2.8 to reach 4.1 ($p < .05$), but there were insignificant improvements in the control group ($p = 0.08$). Such findings prove that nonverbal strategies serve as effective cognitive and affective facilitators that enhance understanding, anxiety, and oral production.

In addition to the statistical benefits, the qualitative data, which were obtained via classroom observations, student survey results, and teacher interviews, showed that the learners of the experimental group were much more motivated, attentive, and confident in their speaking activities. Gestures and facial expressions were used, which enhanced a more interactive and facilitating classroom atmosphere, which in turn makes the role of multimodal communication in effective language teaching a priority.

The paper also highlights the importance of the use of nonverbal cues in a culturally sensitive manner because the use of gestures and expressions can also have different meanings in different societies. The teachers are thus advised to incorporate intercultural awareness in classroom practice to facilitate the development of communicative competence in order to avoid confusion.

The study has its limitations; in spite of its input, the sample is relatively small, the period of intervention is limited, and the educational setting is isolated. Further studies are needed that are based on larger and more diverse learners, should focus on retention in the long-term, and study the functioning of nonverbal strategies at various levels of proficiency and across age groups. The research can also focus on the effectiveness of the gesture-based instruction in digital and online learning. All in all, this study offers excellent empirical evidence that second language teaching and learning revolve around nonverbal communication.

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