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Literature Review on Gesture Studies in Language Teaching/Learning

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Abstract:

Teaching/learning a foreign language is an activity that calls for creativity and innovativeness on the part of the teacher for his/her set objectives to be met. The main goal for such an activity is to enable the learner to communicate in the target language both in writing and speaking. Many are the strategies that have been used the world over by those in this practice of teaching foreign languages. It is in this regard that we examine how gestures have been used as a strategy among others and the extent to which they impacted on learning. Reference is made to the works of researchers in the world as a whole, and in Africa in particular.

Keywords: Gestures, teaching, learning, foreign language

1. Introduction

Studies on gesture use in communication and in the classroom set-up are based on various aspects of communication. The researchers' main objective has been to explore the role gestures play in communication and in teaching/learning. The studies have so far shown that gestures have their indisputable place in social as well as classroom interactions. A number of these studies demonstrate that the essential role of gestures is to help the learner in the acquisition of knowledge. They have also indicated that gestures can become a hindrance to communication in a case where they are unknown to the interlocutor. In this article, we seek to explore the effect of gestures of the teacher on learning. We look at gestures of teachers as support tools in teaching/learning while examining ways in which gesture use can impact this practice. Reference is made to the works of researchers in the world.

2. Studies Carried Out on Gesture Use in the Classroom

Studies on gestures have shown that a beginner of a foreign language does not have sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself. He/she cannot understand fully the words of the teacher and it's for this reason that many researchers carried out studies in order to divulge information regarding the role played by gestures, generally an aspect that allows presentation of pedagogical content through a modality other than the words of the teacher in learning among many other strategies. Generally, they affirmed that the use of gestures facilitates different aspects of learning of concepts of a given discipline, the gestures serving as a support tool to the class practice. CALMY-GUYOT (1973) indicates that children do not understand all the words of the teacher. This researcher proposes the use of gestures as a strategy of its kind when learning a new language. Nevertheless, the gesture has to be appropriately used for it to give expected results.

3. Gesture as a Support Tool of Learning/Communication

PECHOU & LANGE (1988) carried out a research on "the gesture and the mimics in the language class". They observed the teacher with two different groups of learners, the objective being measuring the impact of learning by verbal expression as well as the participation of the learners, this in relation to the nonverbal behavior of the teacher. The groups were named A and B. To group A, the teacher presented the content by means of mimics such as itching the head, playing with a pen... as well as negative reinforcements. To group B, the content was presented with the aid of facial expressions, such as laughter, shaking the head, smiling broadly, generally, mimics of positive reinforcement. The results revealed that group A was less receptive, the verbal exchanges were insufficient and there were cases of absenteeism. Group B was more active and motivated; the members were regular in class and participated readily. It was noted that Group B had good results, where the teacher presented content not only by the movement of parts of the body but also by positive visual reinforcement. This study showed the relation between the nonverbal elements of pedagogical communication and the success or failure of learning.

MOHAN & HELMER (1988) carried out a study on "the acquisition of emblems in L2". They were interested in establishing if the learners acquired gestures by immersion in a natural context or otherwise. Their sample was made of children of preschool age having been exposed to the English language. They found out that this group did not decipher emblems in the same way as the children to whom English was their L1. In a similar study, JUNGHEIM (2006) researched on the ability to interpret the "hand sign", a refusal gesture, a Japanese emblem frequently used with adult Japanese students learning in Japan. The students showed a high degree of comprehension of this particular emblem than those to

whom the language was a L2. In his study, ALLEN (1995), while researching on the relation of retention of vocabulary in students of foreign languages concluded that students exposed to emblems during learning retained more vocabulary than those who learnt it with no reference whatsoever to emblems.

CALBRIS & PORCHER (1989) carried out a comparative study testing the cultural character of the gesture. They presented facial-gestural expressions to 3 groups: French, Western and Asiatic. The expressions were filmed out of context and without words in a studio and then filmed simultaneously by 2 cameras, the first taking the gesture and the second the whole expression. The subjects were to associate each filmed expression to an object. It was noted that some expressions did not correspond to the proposed facial gestural expressions and that some verbal expressions were associated to concepts by attitude or context. A total of 34 signifiers were divided into 2 groups of about 30 each and equivalent to the subjects (subjects A and B) who were then asked to pair them with their signified. Each subject in A saw attitudes, the same number of partial and complete views and one sole view by attitude. It was the same with each subject in group B. Each saw very short numbered sequences, separated by empty spaces with stoppages of the film after each sequence to enable him to indicate the sentence which he thought corresponded to the observed sequence. The average acknowledgement was at 84%. Pursuing the same objective, the film was presented to small groups of students of Hungarian origin from Budapest and Japanese from Tokyo. With the same experimental method, the verbal items were varied. Each translator chose the verbal expression that was identical or the closest to the meaning in French. The 34 mimic expressions were presented in descending order of the scores of the French subjects. Intercultural difference was very remarkable. 85% correct identification by the French, 46, 5% by the Hungarian, and only 29% by the Japanese. The role of the facial mimic expression, if the gesture was already known or when the culture totally differed is relatively remarkable for the Hungarian; certain facial mimics, shared with the French, seemed to indicate attitude of unknown verbal cliché illustrated by the gesture. It was observed that the subjects could not understand all the gestures that were presented to them but that the facial mimic that accompanied the cultural gesture enabled the elucidation of the meaning of certain gestures, thus lowering cases of misunderstanding. The significant cases of misunderstanding led the researchers to conclude that the cultural gesture is conventional and meaningful in particular social groups.

COHEN RONALD & OTTERBEIN (1992) carried out a research on "the mnemonic effect of speech gestures: pantomimic and non-pantomimic gestures compared". They sought to identify the modality that would facilitate recall of words. With a sample population of 3 groups of adults, they presented a video showing sentences in different conditions. The groups were asked to recall the sentences and write them after watching the video. The first group watched a video showing sentences only. The second group was presented with a video showing sentences accompanied by pantomimic/illustrative gestures and the third group watched sentences accompanied by non-pantomimic gestures. The results indicated that the group which watched sentences accompanied by illustrative gestures recalled the most number of sentences than the other groups. It was then concluded that illustrative gestures help promote memorization.

A study by ALLEN (1995) focused on "the effects of emblematic gestures on the development and access of mental representations of French expressions". With a sample population of 112 students of French at university level, the researcher sought to examine the effects of gestures on learning. The subjects were divided into two groups: treatment and control groups. 10 sentences in French and their equivalents in English were presented to the groups on a screen and the subjects were asked to repeat them after the teacher pronounced them three times. The control group read the sentences while watching an illustrative gesture for each sentence (3 times). Asked to repeat them, the subjects were only able to reproduce the gesture that accompanied the sentences. A post-test was carried out on the subjects. This time, the teacher presented the ten sentences in a different order. The subjects were then asked to write the equivalents of the sentences, one after the other. The gestures were presented to the two groups. The results indicated that the group that had visualized the sentences accompanied by gestures remembered more sentences than the group that had visualized the sentences without gestures. The group that reproduced gestures worked better than the comparison group who only saw the gestures during the post-test.

ADAM (1998), in the study on "gesture in foreigner talk", concluded that in a situation of narration, speakers used more gestures while speaking to non-native speakers than with native speakers, which is likely to be observed in the case of teaching/learning a foreign language to non-natives. This is affirmed by CIRCUREL (2005) who underlines that teachers apply language teaching strategies, including non-verbal communication when teaching a group that is less conversant with the language.

HAUGE (1999) undertook a study on "some common emblems used by British English teachers in EFL classes", gestures used in class for pedagogical purposes. He was interested in identifying emblematic gestures used in class. From a video corpus, varied gestures used in class of English by Britannic teachers were selected. These were then categorized into 2 groups: pedagogical gestures and emblems. The researcher observed that gestures used by the teacher in teaching English as a foreign language are not necessarily typical for teaching English, but can also be used to teach other foreign languages and even teaching in other domains. It was noted that Britannic emblems can as well be found in other cultures but with different meanings differing from those assigned to them in the Britannic set up or in some cases, they were found to have similar meaning. This led to the conclusion that it is necessary to learn emblems in order to facilitate learning a foreign language as well as communication with native speakers of the target language.

On their part, BEATTIE & SHOVELTON (1999), in their study on "do iconic hand gestures really contribute anything to the semantic information conveyed by speech? An experimental investigation" and basing their study on the Dual Coding theory proposed by PAIVIO (1971), they sought to demonstrate the role gestures played in comprehension. Their population was comprised of 2 groups of people: those who could hear and see and those able to hear but could not see. A story, well-illustrated by gestures, was narrated to the 2 groups. The results indicated that the group hearing and seeing

the narrator was able to decode the information to a greater extent thanks to the gestures used than the group which only heard the narrator. It was then concluded that gestures promoted high comprehension of information in such a context.

ALLEN (2000) carried out a study on the teacher's gestures and their effect on learning. The sample consisted of one teacher of L2. This teacher used gestures for varied functions including that of helping the learners to understand the vocabulary in L2. The researcher studied the response of the learners following the teacher's gestures. The learners found the nonverbal behavior of the teacher instrumental in the comprehension of a foreign language.

Another researcher, SIME (2001), in a study on "the use and perception of illustrators in the foreign language classroom" sought to analyze how learners interpreted gestures produced by their teachers in the course of their lessons. 2 lessons of English as a foreign language (ESL), whose learners were natives were recorded. The sample population comprised of 15 learners, aged between 20 and 25 and of Japanese and European nationalities. These were of intermediate/advanced levels. The researcher observed two lessons, the first comprising of a group of 10 learners of Japanese nationality and the second comprising of 5 learners of European origin. She presented two extracts of a video lasting 3 minutes in which the teacher explained new vocabulary to learners. The subjects had two tasks: first, to watch individually these extracts and to stop the video if they noticed a considerable behavior of their teacher, next, describe it and then comment on it. It was found out that gestures aided the learners in paying attention to the teacher. Nevertheless, some gestures (cultural gestures) were confusing, a factor which could lead to errors. From this study, it was concluded that the learners not only failed to understand all gestures but that these gestures also carried different meanings, a factor of individual or cultural differences and a response to the way gestures were perceived by a given social group.

TELLIER (2004) carried out a study on "the impact of gestures on the comprehension of a foreign language". The sample population comprised of children of 5 years, natives of the French language and completely ignorant of the English language. These were asked, first of all, to listen to a story narrated in English and illustrated with gestures and then, to re-narrate the same story to an adult in the French language. The stories from the children were analyzed and indicated that more than 2/3 of the 19 children participating mentioned the 5 key words of the story. The children acquired the meaning of the story in English, a language that was unfamiliar and foreign to them. The researcher concluded that the gesture aided in comprehension of terms of unknown languages.

LAZARATHON (2004) studied the lexical acquisition in learners of L2. With a sample population of one teacher, it was established that the use of illustrative gestures by the teacher was a way of facilitating comprehension of nuances of words by learners, easing comprehension of new vocabulary.

KIDA (2005), in his doctoral research studied the subject of "learning the foreigner's gesture: the case study of students of Japanese origin learning French". The sample comprised of students, natives and non-natives of the French language, 8 students of Japanese origin learning French as a second language (L2) at university level, their competency levels in the French language being very varied. The researcher sought to determine the role of gesture in the understanding of a discourse. He presented a traditional recipe and asked the students to discuss. The native students interacted with the rest of the students on the given topic, first on face to face and then in a situation where the groups were away one from the other. He observed that the students benefited from the gestures which accompanied words in L2, indicating better comprehension particularly where their competency was fairly low. It was concluded that visual information played an important role of interpretation and contributed to the comprehension of discourse and that in the case where such information is hidden from the students, they would have more difficulties in comprehending especially if the language items are unknown or ambiguous.

TELLIER (2006) carried out a research on the interpretation of gestures by children. The sample comprised of 28 children aged 5 years averagely. The children were divided into 2 groups each of 14, each of the groups required to interpret gestures presented to them in a video and out of context. The gestures had been selected following a study on 40 adults asked to produce gestures to illustrate lexical terms such as the verbs, swim, eat, drink, cry or even animals like a bird, a snake etc. 15 children out of 28 had participated in this exercise some months earlier where the researcher had sought to evaluate how the gestures could aid a child in understanding a story in a language unknown to him/her. One of the important actions in the story was "to open a door", symbolized by a gesture close to those proposed in the current experimentation. The author had assumed that the children would not remember or would not link what they had seen earlier. In a total of 13 children who had not participated in the earlier experiment, only one identified the gesture "to open a door" and out of 15 who had done it, 9 gave the correct response. This confirms that children can memorize gestures and concepts associated with them.

TELLIER (2008a) carried out a research on the gesture and memorization. With a sample of 20 children aged 5 years and who had no knowledge of the English language, she wanted to establish the effect of the gesture on long term memorization of lexical items in a foreign language. The children were divided in 2 groups of 10 each and were asked to learn 8 words in English in a period of 4 weeks through repetitions (5 in total) and tests (4 in total). Each child worked individually with the researcher and was required to repeat the words in order to learn the same number of times and in the same conditions. The first group learnt the items while visualizing images representing each word whereas the second group only visualized the illustrative gestures in order to reproduce them. At the end of 4 weeks, it was observed that the group that had learnt with gestures memorized more words than the group that had only visualized the gestures. It was concluded that the gesture is a support tool. Repeated by the child, it has a significant impact on the memorization due to multi sensorial coding of items.

JAO & KAZADI (2007) carried out a research on « Communication Through Gestures: An Interactive and Cross-Cultural Perspective ». They sought to establish if the gestures used by learners from different ethnic communities were polysemic or monosemic and to compare their interpretations of these gestures by the natives and nonnatives. Basing

their study on the theory of social communication, they presented seven (7) images drawn from the book of BAYLON & FABRE (1990) to the students of French of Maseno University (a public Kenyan university), the images showed people communicating via gestures. Among 132 students of French in the institution, the third-year group was selected for the study since it is this group that was present on campus, the rest being on holiday and/or on school/industrial attachment. The sample of study consisted 27 students whose ages ranged between 20 and 25 years and among whom were three boys and 24 girls. These students belonged to 6 different ethnic groups: Luo (10), Luhya (9), Kalenjin (3), Kikuyu (2), Kisii (2), et Turkana (1). The group was asked to interpret the images in relation to their cultures. Below are the gestures:

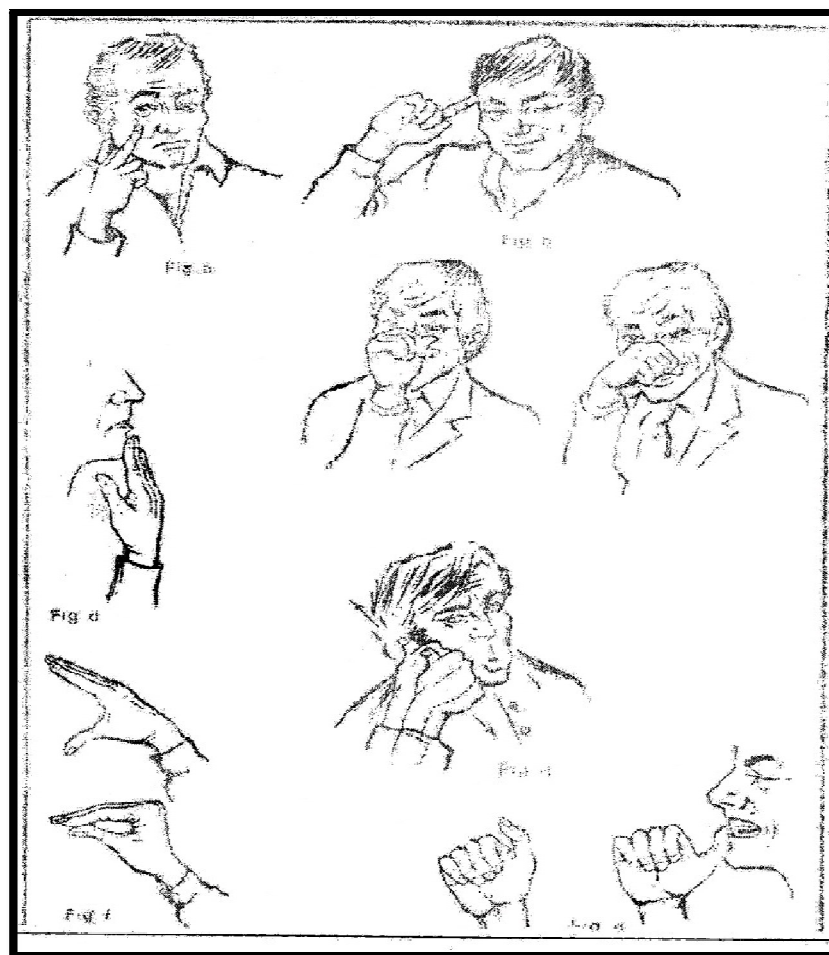


Figure 6: Images De Communication Par Gestes

The interpretation of one gesture was very varied, a reflection of cultural differences. It was however observed that all the gestures carried more than one meaning, a partial response to the question posed at the start of the study. The meanings of these same gestures were compared to those given by the French, the natives of the language. It was established that:

- A gesture, carrying more than one meaning in Kenya carried only one in France, polysemy versus monosemy.
- The meaning of a gesture for the French was not necessarily the meaning attributed to the same gesture by Kenyans;
- Certain gestures existing in Kenyan languages do not exist in the French language, they are therefore not understood. They can then be interpreted wrongly from the point of view of the natives of the language.

4. Conclusion

The existing literature review reveals that gestures take a big proportion in day to day communication. Gestures, facial expressions, body movements among many others form part of this communication. These elements have been studied considering their contribution in day to day interactions as well as in particular contexts like that of the classroom. In class, the gesture, specifically the pedagogical gesture, has been deemed an indispensable tool in learning. Studies in this domain focused on teaching/learning foreign languages, and particularly English (EFL), whose results could be generalized to the learning of languages in general and of foreign languages in particular. Nevertheless, studies were on homogenous linguistic groups where the teacher and his learners were natives of the source language. This leaves room for other studies on the role of pedagogical gestures (and other forms of non-verbal communication) in the class of French in particular, the public comprising of non-natives.

That said, the pedagogical gesture has not been exhaustively studied given that there are few studies in this domain. Nevertheless, in the existing studies, there is scanty information regarding which pedagogical gesture to use and

for which purpose. Information on how to benefit from pedagogical gestures generally in a class of French as a foreign language and more specifically in a heterogeneous linguistic context where the actors are both non-natives is lacking. As it is, other elements of non-verbal communication (touch, proximity, silence, vocal gesture...) have not been given their place in teaching/learning. This calls for future studies.

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