

## Paralinguistic Communication

Paralinguistics is the part of communication outside of the words themselves – the volume, speed, intonation of a voice along with gestures and other non-verbal cues.

Whenever there is confusion or stereotyping in cross-cultural communication, paralinguistics is most often responsible.

Paralinguistics can be broken down into categories. The following are the most important for the classroom.

- Gestures
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Kinesics or body language
- Proxemics

### **Gestures:**

Gestures are commonly used in the classroom to help convey a message to second language learners. Be careful! Gestures have different meanings in different cultures.

Let's look at a few examples. Here we have someone waving. In the United States, waving means a simple hello or goodbye. But in Mexico, this simple wave means "come here". Imagine how confusing that could be for students.

In our next scenario, we are watching a Brazilian woman (on the left) talking with an American woman (on the right). The women are discussing plans for the evening, and the American woman agrees to the plans by showing the OK sign (creating a circle with the thumb and fore finger). In the United States, this gesture signals approval, that you agree. In Brazil though, it's the same as giving someone the evil eye.

(video clips with music showing children in class, different types of gestures)

**Facial Expressions:**

Many facial expressions are universal, such as happiness, sadness, and surprise. Others though, are not. When reading a child's facial expressions, a teacher must be careful not to jump to conclusions. How cultures use facial expressions differ. For example, Japanese children often refrain from showing emotion through facial expression – especially negative emotions. Along the same lines, reading eyebrow movement is very telling in many cultures. What do your facial expressions communicate?

(video clips with music showing children in class, different types of facial expressions)

**Eye Contact:**

Eye contact provides necessary feedback for conversations to take place such as turn taking, as well as beginning and ending conversations. The amount of eye contact deemed appropriate is very culturally based – too much or too little can show boredom, intimidation, or disrespect.

(video clips with music showing children in class, different types of eye contact)

**Kinesics – Body Language:**

Postures give quite a bit of information. Is the listener open or closed to the speaker? Is the speaker showing dominance by being at a higher level? Are other objects used as a comfort?

(video clips with music showing children in class, different types of body language)

**Proxemics:**

Each person in each culture has a need for personal space that can vary greatly. How far apart do you sit or stand when you talk to a person? How do you feel when someone enters your personal space?

(video clips with music showing children in class, different types of proxemic examples)

What are some common paralinguistic miscues?

- Talking too loudly is often an American trait seen as a sign of aggression or tactless behavior.
- The British norm of speaking softly can be seen as secretive
- There is a Japanese proverb that says “Those who know do not speak – those who speak do not know.” What would this look like in the classroom?
- In American and Arabic cultures, silence is avoided.

**What effect does this have on your classroom?**