

Lesson 2.5

Nonverbal Communication



Rationale

Research indicates that about 80 percent of our communication is nonverbal. Being able to communicate effectively means understanding both verbal and nonverbal interactions. In this activity, participants experience what it is like to interact without words to understand the complexity of communication.

Objectives

1. To identify the various types of nonverbal communication.
2. To understand the importance of nonverbal communication in communication generally.

Standards

- ◆ Culture

Time: 70 minutes

Materials

- Common Gestures* Overhead
- Enough to Make Your Head Spin* Handout
- Mood Strips* Handout



70 minutes

Procedures

1. Explain that effective communication is an essential skill in managing conflicts. Today, the class will study nonverbal communication—ways that people communicate without using words. Tell students that they will arrange themselves in a line according to the month and day (not year) of their birthdays. But they will do this without talking, whispering, writing, or using any props. In other words, students must find another way to communicate. The exercise must be done with the month followed by the day; it will not work if they arrange themselves by day, then month. You may choose to start the exercise by indicating which part of the classroom is January 1, and which is December 31, or you can let them determine this on their own.
2. Give students a moment to think of a strategy to use, but do not let them share strategies out loud, and then tell them to begin. From the moment you say “start,” the class should be completely silent.
3. When the group believes it has accomplished the task, check how well they did by having each student in line state their birth month and day starting with the person closest to January 1 (at the start of the line). Students who are in the incorrect place should find their correct place in the line. Once they are in the correct order, have them sit in this order for the remainder of class.
4. Debrief this opener with the following questions:
 - ◆ How did you find your place in line?
 - ◆ Was it difficult? Why or why not?
 - ◆ What strategies did you use? How well do you think they worked? Why or why not?
 - ◆ What did you do when you tried to communicate with someone who was using a different system of communication? Share with students the importance of finding a common language, especially when trying to manage conflicts.
 - ◆ Have any of you ever had an experience when you tried to communicate with someone, but were misunderstood because of a language barrier? How did you respond?
 - ◆ Remind students that what they have just done is to use nonverbal communication—relating to one another without using words.
 - ◆ Why is it important to be aware of how you communicate nonverbally? How can it be helpful to pay attention to how others communicate nonverbally when in a conflict situation?
5. Share with students the idea that gestures are a frequent form of nonverbal communication. Have students share some common (appropriate) gestures—thumbs-up, wink, etc.—and what they mean. Then show them the Overhead *Common Gestures*, which shows how a gesture is interpreted in different countries. Ask students whether they have ever made a simple gesture which was misinterpreted. Give examples from your own experience. Review with students how prior knowledge/study of another party’s culture may help to ease communication, verbal and nonverbal, particularly in the case of conflict, and how this can help with peacebuilding.
6. Tell students that now they will practice using nonverbal communication to see how it affects their understanding. Separate students into groups of two and assign one Student A and the other, Student B. Give Student A a mood strip from the *Mood Strips* Handout. Ask Student B to speak for two minutes about an international issue that troubles them (the use of child soldiers in conflict zones, landmines, refugee crises, etc.). While Student B

Note: Paying attention to your own nonverbal communication can help ensure that you project openness to the person with whom you are in conflict. Noting the nonverbal communication of others can help you identify when someone feels uncomfortable and may lead you to adjust how you interact with them so they feel more secure.

is talking, Student A should respond to them while acting out (without words) the mood they have been given. When the two minutes is over, have Student A summarize what they heard from Student B, again while demonstrating their mood.

7. After the students finish their dialogues, debrief the exercise with the following questions:
 - ◆ How does Student B think Student A felt during the exercise? Why do you think this?
 - ◆ What nonverbal cues led you to this conclusion?
 - ◆ How did Student B feel in reaction to Student A's responses?
 - ◆ How do nonverbal cues affect the listener as well as the speaker?
8. Tell the students that they are going to read a story about an American Peace Corps Volunteer in Bulgaria who faced a problem with the mixed messages of head-shaking listeners. Begin by locating Bulgaria on a map or globe, and asking students what they know about the country or the region from history. Then, share with them a bit of the description provided by the volunteer, Elizabeth Vernon Kelley, in her biography.
9. Read the story with the class. Have students address the following questions in small groups or as a whole class:
 - ◆ What challenges to communication did Elizabeth face?
 - ◆ How did she work around these challenges?
 - ◆ What gestures did she assume were universal? Do you agree that "A smile is a smile the world over?"
10. Lead a class discussion using some or all of the following questions:
 - ◆ How might nonverbal cues affect the course of a negotiation between parties who do not know or trust each other?
 - ◆ How can nonverbal communication impact negotiations where parties are from different cultures or countries?
 - ◆ How could a peacebuilder prepare him/herself to use nonverbal communication for a negotiation?

Extension Activity

Have students pretend to be anthropologists collecting data about nonverbal communication. Explain the scenario below and have them report their findings in class when they are done with the activity.

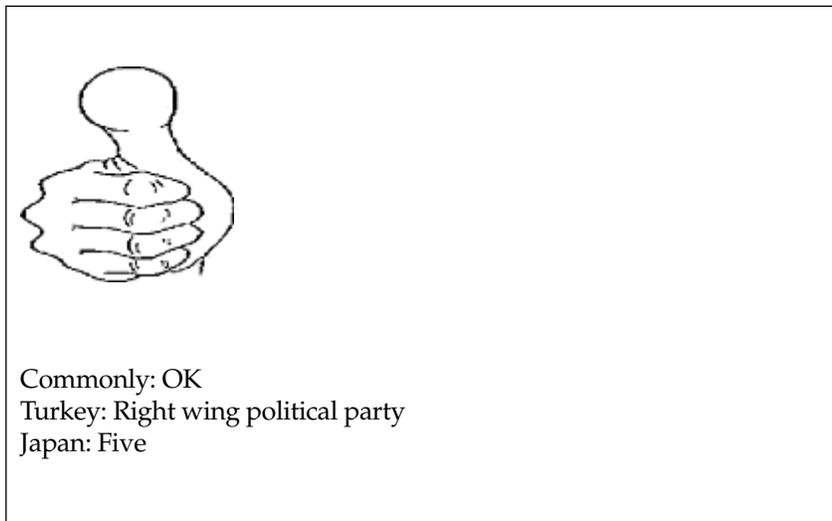
Assignment:

You are an anthropologist studying nonverbal communication. Go through your day observing how people communicate nonverbally in class and outside of school. Write field notes in which you collect at least three examples of nonverbal communication. What did each person do to communicate nonverbally? How did the other person seem to interpret this communication? How did they respond?

Assessment:

Participation in small group work and whole class discussions

Lesson 2.5 OVERHEAD: COMMON GESTURES



Source: Darn, Steven. "A Nonverbal Communication Lesson Plan 2."
http://www.developingteachers.com/articles_tchtraining/nonverbal2.htm.

Lesson 2.5 HANDOUT: ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR HEAD SPIN

Elizabeth Vernon, Peace Corps Volunteer, Bulgaria (2003–2005)

Biography

“Welcome, Isabelle!” said the sign the children held as they greeted me when I arrived in my Bulgarian town. On paper, my name is Elizabeth Vernon, but in Bulgaria, I answer to all sorts of names. Among them are *gospozha* (“Mrs.” in Bulgarian—never mind that I’m not married), Miss, Missus, teacher, and Elli. Having many names and wearing many hats—English teacher, project organizer, translator, and token American—is what keeps life here interesting. I get to do all sorts of things I never did back in the United States, where my main title was editor. I worked as a newspaper copy editor—editing stories, writing headlines, and designing pages—for five years before I decided it was time to stop sitting in front of a computer. I wanted to see more of the world and do something to help people improve their own lives in the process. When I’m not working or socializing with my Bulgarian neighbors, I enjoy reading, cooking, hiking, visiting other volunteers around the country, and keeping in touch with family and friends in America through e-mail. I’m an only child in America, but here I’m lucky to have become part of many families. I grew up in Northern California, then went to Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, where I studied communications, Spanish, and religion. After a short jaunt to southwestern United States, I headed back to Washington State for several years, so I’m not quite sure where to call home. But if home is where the heart is, this little corner of Bulgaria will always be one of my homes.

Site Assignment

My town is in north-central Bulgaria, where the Balkan Mountains slope down onto the Danubian Plain. Winters are cold, icy, and snowy, and summers are super hot. About 10,000 people call this town home, but it’s the municipal center for many villages, so that bumps the area population to about 30,000 people. About 70 percent of the residents here are Turkish, 20 percent are Roma, and 10 percent are ethnically Bulgarian. This means I’m more likely to hear Turkish on the streets—and in the classroom—than Bulgarian. The diversity of the area and the fact that the majority of children speak Turkish at home makes my job of teaching English to fifth through seventh graders at Academician Daki Yordanov Junior High School challenging. But my students have lots of questions about America and love hearing stories from my home. I also work on a variety of small projects, including seeking donations of books in English for my school, helping an orphanage in the region, teaching an English class for adults, and working on summer camps.

Article

Enough to Make Your Head Spin

By Elizabeth Vernon

"I'll have coffee," I tell the waitress at a cafe during my first week in Bulgaria. She shakes her head from side to side. "OK, tea," I say, thinking that maybe there's something wrong with the coffee machine. Again, she shakes her head. "Um . . . cola?" Once more, she shakes her head. By now, she's looking at me like I'm crazy, and I'm totally confused. Then I remember, a shake of the head by a Bulgarian means "yes," and a nod, what the rest of the world does for "yes," means "no."

I knew about this before I arrived in Bulgaria, but it's amazing how something that seems simple and easy enough to remember can lead to so much confusion, and so many funny moments. Early on, when I communicated with Bulgarians, it seemed like my head was moving in ways my brain hadn't told it to. Sometimes I wanted to grab my ears and use them as controls. Learning a language with a completely different alphabet was challenging enough, without trying to figure out whether to nod or shake.

When I began teaching, all this head-bobbing made communication in the classroom interesting. Although I had made sure my students knew about this cultural difference on the first day of school, we all frequently forgot what we were doing. My students would answer a question correctly or say something really great, and I'd nod. A second later, they were trying to change their answer, since they thought the nod meant they had been wrong. But the confusion went both ways. Sometimes I'd ask a student a yes-or-no question and he or she would answer with a nod or a shake, without saying anything. Not remembering the difference, we'd have to go through the motions several times before I understood. Frequently I found myself saying: "*Da or ne*—just tell me one or the other!"

I also had to deal with confused colleagues who couldn't figure out why I kept nodding my head while they talked, as if I were arguing with them. In truth, I was just trying to show that I understood and was following along with the story. And then there was the even greater problem of how to act with Bulgarians who spoke English and were aware of the nodding/shaking problem. Was I supposed to nod or shake for "yes" when I was speaking English with them? And what was I supposed to do when we were speaking Bulgarian? What if we were in a situation where both languages were being spoken? To make matters even more complicated, after going a couple of weeks without any contact with other Americans, we'd finally get together and I'd find myself shaking when I should have been nodding. My head was spinning!

After a year of living here, the gestures have become second nature, and I rarely have to think about what my body language should be. Once in a while, if I'm really tired or not thinking clearly, I find my head moving in a semi-circular nod/shake wobble, which the Bulgarians find quite amusing.

Along with all the funny moments this cultural difference has provided me and my Bulgarian friends, I've come to understand the importance of using all my senses in a new culture, and not making assumptions that a gesture or other form of communication, even one that seems very simple and universal—means the same thing everywhere. Beyond being conscious of the yes–no difference, I must make sure I am really listening and watching for other clues when someone is communicating with me. Here, a sound along the lines of a cluck of the tongue often accompanies a "no," and being aware of that helps me steer clear of confusion. Tuning in to how the people around me communicate has brought me closer to the people and the culture here. And whenever we slip up and forget to control our heads, the laughter that follows brings us together. Luckily, a smile is a smile the world over.

Sources: <http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/crossingcultures/pdf/crossingcultures.pdf>. <http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/publications/crossingcultures/>.

Lesson 2.5 HANDOUT: MOOD STRIPS (cut into strips)

Directions: Cut the handout into strips so there is one mood on each strip or write them on index cards, one mood per card.

Guilty

Happy

Impatient

Paranoid

Insulted

Insecure

Tired

Annoyed

Bored

Detached

Distracted

Gullible