Non-verbal communication and intercultural dialogue – An educative perspective

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Abstract

The study analyses the importance of non-verbal communication (NvC) for academic education process. From this perspective, we have emphasised how essential NvC is, what a competences ensemble is to the education process and that we must use it. Drawing from theory and practice, the paper proposes several didactic modalities, more attractive, which improve the students' communicational and proactive competences, and their interest to learn. In addition, these didactical modalities contribute to developing positive students' interactions, social collaborations, desire of knowing and working with others, which are different. Due to the importance of NvC, the paper proposes it as one of the best recommended strategies to develop communication between people, especially for people from different cultural spaces.

Keywords: Learning, teaching strategies, communication competences, cultural communication, motivation.

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1. Introduction

Scientific researches and practical approaches are focused more and more on interculturality, a concept seemed as a condition, but is also a consequence of globalisation. Increasing mobility for all people, larger opening of borders between states and perfecting the communication techniques require new concepts, values and attitudes like inter-, multiculturalism, community and professional integration, tolerance and appreciation of differences. This means that having linguistic competences in international foreign languages is not enough to stimulate communication, interrelation and integration. Speaking, reading and writing in a foreign language do not encourage real communication with people from different geographic spaces and, especially, a real integration in a different cultural space. For that, the non-verbal communication (NvC) can be a good solution for optimising both the intercultural communication and cultural, social and professional integration.

Generally, NvC completes, enhances and strengthens the human communication, but quite frequently is a substitute of it. Very often people pay more attention to the gestures and attitudes than the verbal messages; they have more confidence in body language and facial expressions (how somebody speaks to them) than in what they are speaking. But not all gestures and attitudes are involuntary and, in this way considered to be sincere and honest. Most of them are 'educated' (by *the enculturation* and *socialisation*) to express an intention or to enforce a message. From this perspective, the expressivity of NvC (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, physical posture and attitudes) must be correlated with two components: the expressing emotions, feelings (the *affective component of NvC*), and the respecting sociocultural rules, values and principles (the *social and cultural components of NvC*). The proportion of manifestation of each component depends on many aspects such as individual interest, motivation, personality and education, personal, social and political expectations. That is why NvC is an important issue of social, cultural and psycho-pedagogical researches. Culture has an essential contribution in NvC, conveying values and norms, also influencing interpersonal interactions.

It is accepted that the first study about NvC started in 1872 and belongs to Charles Darwin (referring to animals' gestures and expressions as a modality to communicate with each other). After that, studies were more and more centred on interaction between individuals (Barrett, Niedenthal & Winkielman, 2005; Poyatos, 2002).

A lot of studies describe the forms of NvC from the social and professional behaviour perspectives like the formal and polite rules (what are the affects agreed by the society and professional community and how can they be expressed, respecting the social and professional expectations). These perspectives are useful for a good professional and interpersonal communication. But it is not useful for learning by personal emotional experience. As a consequence, the affective component of NvC is more controlled by the social and professional intents than emotions.

Another direction of studies is proposed in behavioural sciences. There are physiological, neurological and cognitive theories which explain the forming human emotions (defined as a complex state of feeling) according to the responses within the body, activity within the brain and mental activity. Very often, it is focused on the emotions and expressing of them (Deonna & Teroni, 2008; Gross, 2002; Lambie & Marcel, 2002; Reisenzein, 2020). From all of them, it can be concluded that the emotions are connected with personal thoughts and behaviour (Carroll, 2009; Moors, 2009).

As expected, a new direction of studies analyses NvC in relation to the cultural communication. The most frequent topics are linked to the role of culture in NvC, the importance of non-verbal codes in cross-cultural communication and the role of NvC in intercultural communication (Doncheva, 2015; Frankel, Flanagan & Ebright, 2012; LaFrance & Mayo, 1978; Lorie, Reinero, Phillips, Zhang & Riess, 2017; Poyatos, 2002).

Limited to the instructive-educative process, NvC is not so well represented in the theoretical and methodological researches (Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018; Scharfe, 2000). Majority of the

approaches separate the cultural and intercultural communication from NvC, with a focus on the intercultural strategies and learning activities (Cerghit, 2008; Fredrickson, 1998; Goleman, 2001). Certainly, NvC is a task for many other school disciplines, but not in a clear relationship with intercultural communication. As a consequence, NvC could be analysed using three new concepts: identity-alterity, integration and intercultural dialogue. All of them will be included in our paper.

On the other side, particular attention needs to be paid to students who chose to study and work abroad. For them, integration does not mean only linguistic and cultural knowledge, it means to have desire to do the best and, by expansion, to have positive feelings and attitudes. Therefore, it is imperative to teach students to accept and work with people from different cultural spaces.

2. Hypothesis, objectives, observations and discussions

This approach is one part of a larger preoccupation regarding to cultural and multicultural communication. In this paper, we are start from the premise that the NvC concept has to be explained in connection with individuality, but the expression of NvC has to be correlated with education and culture. Generally, expressing emotions using NvC encourages interpersonal and intercultural (non) dialogue. We consider that emotions and gestures accompany the communication and influence the attitudes and comportments.

In this respect, we propose to analyse NvC from the education perspective, emphasising the following aspects:

- the linkage between the expression of message using NvC and decoding/understanding of it;
- the role of education in expression of emotions (including all feelings and affects);
- some learning activities and strategies which can improve the quality of NvC.

The paper is a theoretical research that respects specific research strategies. Intending to develop the abovementioned proposals approach, we used both the researchers' opinions and our observations made during the seminary activities with foreign students who chose to learn abroad. This proposal may positively contribute to the configuration of some educational strategies centred on the improvement of NvC as a modality to improve the intercultural dialogue.

Our observations are focused on the following issues:

2.1. NvC – expressing and perceive

In general, the communication process is based on the message that has to be conveyed as closely as possible from the transmitter (T) to the receiver (R). NvC is a communication process, but it is more based on intention and interpretation than on message and therefore it is oriented towards the connection between T and R. In this case, the message depends on several factories, most of which are inconstant. Moreover, the impact of NvC is larger and longer in time because the communication actors are really more important than the verbal message. Certainly, NvC accompanies, completes or reinforces the verbal message but on the other side NvC could contradict it. For a better understanding, see Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, for successful communication a large common space is required. Capacity to use components of NvC shall be commensurate with capacity to encode and decode them; also, elements of the communication context shall have the similar effects upon T and R. Encoding messages using non-verbal elements means to generate information such as facial expressions, gestures, attitudes and postures. A part of them are understood by all people, worldwide, as they are universal. Decoding messages means to interpret information from received sensations, impressions given by the encoder (T). Accordingly, the analysing of NvC must grant a great deal of attention on the alterity, responsibility, interpretation and self-control. But the reflection and feedback should not be neglected.
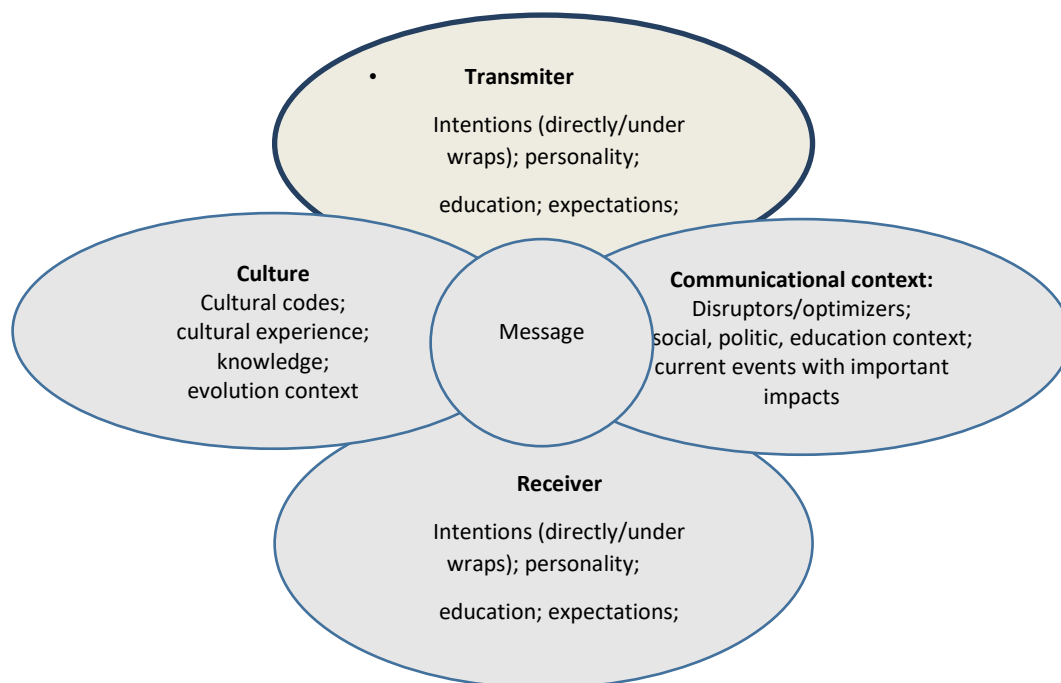
Figure 1. Non-verbal message – influences

2.2. Expressing NvC and the higher education

Analysing the tasks of academic studies programmes, we noticed that NvC is not represented at all. Obviously, the main mission of university is to train students for a specific professional field or job. But studying NvC in the higher education could be for the students an attractive discipline. Besides, NvC can be useful to optimise the interpersonal interaction, self-image, understanding others and yourself, to improve the cultural, professional and social dialogue. These convictions have resulted from a small educational experiment. Continually, we describe it, in brief.

The students/participants are registered at Cross-border Faculty and they study International Relationships and European Studies. They are aged 18–25 years and agreed to participate in this study, by protecting anonymity and collecting, analysing and interpreting data. During one seminar, students have to analyse a picture which metaphoric illustrates concept of European Integration.

The picture was interpreted by students from different points of view, but the majority of them strove to have closer links with the tasks of subject. That is a wrong way of analysis. It was obviously difficult for students to notice those details which conduct to the correct interpretation of the picture. Speaking about this difficulty, the students explained that:

- there is not enough time to learn, analyse and reflect in an organised way at NvC, as well as the emotional changes;
- generally, people are interested in the verbal communication; they pay more attention to constructing the verbal messages not to non-verbal message, feelings and sign language;
- the social and professional rank is dictated by the professional results.

From the above-mentioned aspects, a contradiction can be emphasised: NvC must be educated in the school or it is not a school task. The answer is given by both the communication intention and the finalities of educational process.

Therefore, the experiment carried out has shown that there is a lack of teaching subjects regarding on the non-verbal expression. As an extension, the students could have some difficulties if they are

compelled to use and understand gestures and facial and corporal expressions in communicating with others. This is reason of our intention: to identify, adapt and apply several teaching and learning strategies which improve NvC.

2.3. Developing of NvC in the academic education system

Actually, using proper NvC seems to be the first condition for an improved human communication, even if it is not considered that by all scientific researches. As it is well known, quite frequently we communicate, consciously or subconsciously, with others in 'gestures and feelings language'. Very often, the successful interpersonal and cultural dialogue depends on the clarity of NvC and correctly decoding of it. But NvC changes with time and therefore we regularly should update NvC. That is why we emphasise the importance of academic education system for improving NvC by learning strategies and activities.

There are at least two teaching sequences which can encourage the application of NvC methods and techniques. One of them is the 'ice-breaking section', an introductory sequence of the lesson. In this section, we use some short interactive activities which are focused on expressing of emotions, non-verbal message and thoughts. All of them make a transition from 'personal mood' to 'learning state' but in a constructive modality. The second sequence is the 'feedback section', the final of lesson. This section is recommended for reflection and self-reflection strategies centred on the using gestures, attitudes and facial expression. All of them have both finalities, the level of knowledge and the personal impression. In this respect, Table 1 propose several didactical examples.

Table 1. NvC strategies

Didactical method/technique. Learning activities	Description	Finality recommendations
The mime Pantomime activity	This is a communication exercise by gestures, signs, corporal posture and facial expressions (pantomime). The students are divided into two or three aleatory groups, behind each other. Each student at the top of groups reads from a note about a situation/action which has to be mimed to the next student (who is behind him) and so on. At the final exercise will be compared the task read with the mimic.	− To correlate the verbal message with expressing of it by non-verbal modalities; − To pay more attention decoding of NvC;
Fishbowl educational game	The students are divided into two aleatory groups ('actors' and 'observers'. The first group has to play a real-life situation. The second one has to notice the play. At the final exercise, both groups speak about the feelings and reflections.	− It is important for both the mimed action and understanding of it;
Expressive face	The students are divided into four or five aleatory groups. One by one, they need to express emotions and thoughts using only the mimic. The others have to verbalise their notices.	− It is better to not impose any rules of discipline in the classroom;

| Why is that? Pantomime exercise | One student expresses an emotion/feeling (using NvC) and the others have to recognise and explain it. Who recognised it will be the next mime and so on. |
| Role-playing activity | It is a usual learning activity. But for this time, the exercise has centred only on the feelings and gestures. |

As can be seen in Table 1, all activities bring out the differences between people and conducts to the conclusion that it is really important to accept them and to be more responsible using NvC. In addition, people of all ages need to practice using NvC in various real-life contexts. Our didactical proposals are more necessary for students who come from different countries. And this situation is more and more possible for all of us.

3. Conclusion

Generally, feelings and gestures are implied in every person's activity (Buck, 1991; Lehmann, 2007). NvC is an essential component of people interaction and, also, a basic element of communication between people from different geographic and cultural spaces. Besides, improving NvC during the classes, it is a great solution to make learning activities more attractive and effective.

For building up and exercising NvC competences, the didactic strategies are not so many. Instead, there are a lot of learning activities and lessons sequences which can be an excellent context for that educative intention. As a result of the observations and discussions at the seminars on pedagogical subjects, learning and practice NvC is a successful strategy for improving the students' communication and integration competences.

Speaking about NvC means to give serious consideration to the following aspects:

– knowing, in general, the impacts of NvC on the interethnic dialogue and interpersonal interactions;
– realising one's own responsibility for communicating with others;
– proper understanding, decoding and interpreting of gestures, mimics and body postures.

For this reason, the learning activities have to encourage the expressing and understanding of NvC regarding interactions with others who belong to different cultural spaces. Reflection on one's own non-verbal reactions related with dialogue with others is a great solution for the increase in efficiency and quality of students' communication and interaction. This does not eliminate the importance of linguistic competences, but for an effective communication it is recommended to learn about what, how, why and when can be used NvC related with the cultural differences, especially related to cultural etiquettes, stereotypes, clichés and prejudices.

Reflecting on one's own emotions and gestures (Alexandrache, 2014), the students from abroad can be more responsible and interested in improving the linguistic competences needed for a better communication and integration in a foreign cultural space. Implicitly, they can deconstruct the cultural and ethnic stereotypes and clichés.

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