Nonverbal Communication Strategies in Dyadic Oral Interaction

Rushita Ismail, Budiman Sabri Ahmad, and Sarjit Kaur

Abstract—The co-occurrence of verbal and nonverbal behaviours has been found to be very frequent in face-to-face oral strategic communication. For successful communication, language learners tend to use hand gestures, kinesics and paralinguistic phenomena to compensate for the unavailable desired target language item. This study explored the use of nonverbal communication strategies, particularly gestures, displayed by 24 learners of English in 12 dyadic interactions in a given picture-story narration task. It investigated the types and the frequency of nonverbal communication strategies used by the learners and examined if nonverbal communication strategies might offer an opportunity in vocabulary learning. The audio and video recorded data were transcribed and analysed. The findings revealed that three types of nonverbal communication strategies (enacting nonverbal strategies, outlining nonverbal strategies and pointing nonverbal strategies) were commonly used. These nonverbal communication strategies were found to be used collaboratively with other verbal communication strategies. The implications of the study suggest the need to incorporate the teaching of nonverbal communication strategies in classrooms to facilitate successful oral communication among language learners.

Keywords— Communication strategies, dyadic, nonverbal, oral interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

LEXICAL deficiency in oral interaction among second language learners is common. To compensate for the unavailable lexical items, language learners tend to use verbal and nonverbal means to communicate the meaning of their intended message as effective and successful face-to-face oral communication encompasses verbal and nonverbal strategies [1] –[3].These verbal and nonverbal communication strategies constitute the communication strategies (CSs henceforth) that learners use when they find that the lexical items or structures they want to use are not accessible in their linguistic knowledge. They are the alternative means of expression to convey the content of their messages through the use of synonyms, descriptions, native language transfers, circumlocution, a word coinage, or even gestures to compensate the unavailable target form [4]-[6].

Studies have shown that nonverbal communications may play the most important role in interpersonal face-to-face oral communications [7], [8] as they have been found to be "exhibited in all human interactions and have a significant effect on social interactions" [9]. Second language learners, particularly, use quite a number of different types of nonverbal strategies such as hand gestures and paralinguistic phenomena such as sound imitation or onomatopoeias to compensate for the unavailable desired interlanguage item [2], [6].

Below is an example of the use of nonverbal communication strategies which were found among these learners whereby the learner's intention is to communicate the meaning 'road hump':

Example 1: HI-HI FN: Road /speed/ traffic hump
REFERENT: Road /speed/ traffic hump
1 A: maybe it's a zebra cross or it is something {you
2   like   where the ca: : r
3   {A's LH lifts and shows a motion
4   like going over a hump }
5 B: a bumper?
6 A: ya maybe a bumper
7 B: hmm

In example 1, the learner uses a number of verbal CSs, such as 'a zebra cross', 'it is something', 'you know' and a display of nonverbal CS when the learner lifts his left hand and moves it to show a motion of going over a hump. The verbal and nonverbal CSs co-occur simultaneously and the interlocutor is able to agree on the meaning when she responded to the presented CSs as 'a bumper?'

In this study, the segment of interaction between the learner and interlocutor as they establish a mutual agreement on the meaning 'bumper' is referred to as a CS segment. This segment is identified when a lexical problem arises and a CS needs to be used to resolve conflicts between the learner and interlocutor in the interaction.

II. THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of this study was to draw on the two research traditions (communication strategies and nonverbal communication) in order to analyse the use that Malaysian learners of English make of nonverbal communication strategies in their face-to-face oral interaction.

In this paper, the authors intend to analyse learner-learner interaction focusing on CS segments in order to answer the following research questions:

a) What types of nonverbal communication strategies do learners use to agree on the meaning when there is a segment of communication strategy use?

b) Do learners use the same types of nonverbal communication strategies with the same frequency?

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c) Can nonverbal communication strategies offer an opportunity for second language vocabulary learning?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The need for integrated approaches to the study of verbal and nonverbal behaviour has long been recognised by researchers from communication and allied fields. There have been criticisms against the isolation of verbal and nonverbal behavior studies. Among scholars that argue on this notion is reference [10] who claims that language theories and special language theories are on speech and different aspects of behaviors respectively; and these two are to be functioning together. Reference [11] believes that nonverbal research is actually neglecting linguistic phenomena, while reference [12] on the other hand, contends that it is senseless to speak of 'verbal' and 'nonverbal' communication as there is only 'communication'.

Later in the 1990s, verbal and nonverbal communication were viewed separately when books were published which dealt with discourse and conversation analysis by scholars like [13] and [14], while references [15] and [16] dealt with nonverbal behaviours.

Recently, there have been attempts made by the researchers to present the two; verbal and nonverbal communication side by side [6], [17], [18]. Reference [18] who favour this notion offered dialogues and interpretations on this matter. They laid out several issues on the integrations of verbal and nonverbal communication. Reference [19] furthermore, asserted that discourse and gestures are to be conceived as two modalities of expression of meaning as complementary especially in classroom teaching. Later, communication strategies and nonverbal communication strategies were incorporated in problem-solving situational tasks [6]. Following this trend, the authors intend to look into the usage of nonverbal communication strategy use among learners of English in Malaysian setting so as to bridge the gap on the study on nonverbal mode of communication strategies of Malaysian learners. It has been found that little attention has been given in language teaching to non-verbal communication as a complement to spoken language [20], [21].

A. Nonverbal Communication Strategies

Nonverbal CSs have been mentioned by CS scholars as they constitute the achievement CSs [5], [22]-[24]. Simultaneous use of nonverbal and verbal CSs have been seen to be made to the referential of a single concept. Table 1.0 below shows the use of nonverbal strategy from 1977 up to 1998 where it has been incorporated in the different CS taxonomies.

Reference [22] who initiated the use of CS in her taxonomy indicates that "conscious CSs are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual's thought." She includes miming as the nonverbal device and describes it to be the reference to objects and events i.e. 'everybody says ...to be followed by the gestures of clap hands'.

TABLE I
NONVERBAL STRATEGY INCORPORATED IN CS STUDIES

Scholars	Nonverbal Strategy	Description and Examples
Tarone (1977: 197-199)	Mime	The learner uses a nonverbal device to refer to an object or event (e.g. 'and everybody says [clap hands]'
Faerch and Kasper 1983: 52- 3)	Non-linguistic compensatory strategy as achievement strategy	The learner attempts to solve a communicative problem by expanding their communicative resources.
Poulisse (1993: 180-183)	Reconceptualizati-on strategies	The speaker may opt for gestures rather than speech or a combination of speech and gestures.
Dornyei and Kormos, (1998: 359-361)	Indirect appeal for help	Trying to elicit help from the interlocutor indirectly by expressing lack of a needed L2 item either verbally or nonverbally (e.g. 'I don't know the name …' [rising intonation, pause, eye contact])

Reference [23] grouped nonverbal CS to be the non-linguistic compensatory strategy which constitute an achievement strategy. The attempts made by the learner in solving a communicative problem are seen to be an expansion of communicative resources. Reference [24] later claimed that nonverbal strategy is part of reconceptualisation strategies as the speaker tends to either decide on using gestures more than speech or combine speech and gestures in their conversation. Reference [5] on the other hand, refer to nonverbal strategy as an indirect appeal for help. Being interactionists, they utilise verbal and nonverbal communication seeking for help from their interlocutors. They support the previous definition of nonverbal strategies as "describing whole concepts nonverbally, or accompanying a verbal strategy with a visual illustration" [25].

For the purposes of this study, the authors decided to include this category of strategic communication drawn on nonverbal communication studies [26]. Reference [26] ideas are seen to be more specific and in detail as compared to nonverbal communication descriptions offered by the others [22]- [24], [5]. Gestures have been found to be used interactively in a communication as they occur in the presence of others. There are four primary functions served by gestures and they are delivering information, citing a previous contribution by an interlocutor, seeking to solicit specific response from the interlocutor and referring to an issue associated with exchanging turns [27]. Reference [26] asserts that gestures exemplify the content of our speech as language

users occasionally displayed hand gestures when they need to "depict fairly concrete, vague or abstract referents".

The three types of common patterns of hand gestures nonverbal behaviour are: ***enacting strategies*** , whereby the speaker acts or mime an action related to the intended meaning; ***outlining strategies***, the pictorial representation of target referents and ***pointing strategies***, that is to point to or touch the referent, its location or a related object [26].

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample

The data for this study were drawn from 24 undergraduate students enrolled in an intermediate English communication class. They consisted of 17 males and 7 females and their age ranged from 21 to 23 years old. English is considered to be their foreign language as it is only learned in an instructional setting. The use of English by these students is only in certain required context.
At the time of the data collection of this study, the learners who took part in the study were students enrolled in the Applied Language Studies programme of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam. They were all taking similar language courses and had similar previous experiences and contact with the English language.

B. Data Collection

In pairs, these dyads were seated across a table and a low separator was placed in between them. They were given a picture-story narration task each. The first member of the pair was given a complete picture of the picture story narration while the other member was given the incomplete version with 32 missing items. The pair was not supposed to look at each other's picture but instead the first member was required to describe as accurately as possible the picture-story narration so that the other member was able to identify the missing items from his or her picture.

The 32 pre-selected missing objects and actions to be described by the first member to the second member in picture-story narrated task were – feather, hat, black neck tie, puddle, handle bar moustache, puddle, humming, bus-stop sign, barking, speed hump, speeding, manhole cover, approaching, fire hydrant, streetlight, knocks, sidewalk, post-box, zebra-crossing, traffic-lights, bent, dented, glasses, sling-bag, striped, suspenders, pimples, shocked, bonnet, siren light, flashing and shoe off. Each pair spent about twenty minutes to half an hour to complete each task.

The session was audio and video recorded and the nonverbal oral data were identified. The types of nonverbal CSs which accompanied the verbal CSs were analysed. In this study, the video was played repeatedly and the authors gathered the most common nonverbal communication strategies as the dyads communicate the same set of pre-selected referents. Once all these nonverbal CSs were gathered, the three nonverbal CSs i.e. enacting, pointing and outlining strategies were meticulously described and frequency counts were recorded.

V. FINDINGS OF STUDY

In analyzing the data, all nonverbal gestures that involved movements and directions of the arm, hand and fingers which accompanied the verbal data in the explanation of the 32 target referents obtained from the recorded video were transcribed. Below is the adapted key from reference [27] on the abbreviations used for non-verbal behavior transcription:

A	participant A
B	participant B
HH	hands
II	index fingers
LA	left arm
LH	left hand
L	left index finger
RA	right arm
RH	right hand
RI	right index finger
×2	gesture is repeated twice
×n	gesture is repeated an uncounted number of times

A. Enacting Nonverbal strategies

In enacting nonverbal strategies, speakers perform an action using both hands in to convey the intended meaning of the target lexical items. In example 2, learner A uses both of his hands with one hand forming a fist and the other a wide spread palm in the first turn. He makes a swift move meeting his fist and palm together at a certain force to mime the word 'like smashing' to convey the intended word 'dented'. Reference [26] highlights that the type of gesture which involves the use of palm and fist with a strong force also indicates an added emphasis and visually underlining a particular point being made. The word 'spark' is guessed by learner B from the actions and speech made by learner A. In the 6th turn, the learner spreads his right hand fingers open to describe the word 'spark'.

Example 2: LI-LI NH: dented
REFERENT: dented
1 A: heh! okay and the front of the car is {like smashing}
2   there's   like
3   {A's HH fist and
4   palm meet}
5 B: there's like what?
6 A: there's like a: : mmm
7 B: like there's a spark?
8 A: like a {spark} ..okay erm: : :
9   {A's RH fingers spread open}

B. Outlining nonverbal strategies

Language learners tend to outline the referent by drawing a picture in space [26]. Concrete referents are the common ones illustrated as to help the interlocutor visualise the objects. In Example 3, learner A indicates the meaning target referent "post box" by mentioning "a small box post office box" and illustrates this by using both index fingers outlining a rectangle shape repeatedly. This action made in turn 1 has helped learner B to elicit the word 'post box' and both learners are in agreement of the targeted word.

Example 3: LI-LI NH: post box
REFERENT: post box
1 A: ok. In front of the kid there's a {small post office box, box}
2   {A's II draw a rectangle
3   shape xn}
4 B: second *item post office*, (…) post box!
5 A: post box!
6 B: post office box?
7 A: post box!

C. Pointing nonverbal strategies

Pointing gestures is another interactive gesture which constitutes 10 to 20 percent of the gestures observed in a conversation [26]. Here the learner points to or touches the referent frequently to display the location of the related object. In the example below, in turn 3, learner A uses pointing nonverbal strategy when he uses his right hand to point at his head when he could not retrieve the target lexical item 'feather' from his linguistic knowledge. In turn 7, learner A points at his head using both his hands in circling motion. The repetitive pointing action made by learner A has made learner B produce the word 'feather' and is confirmed by learner A in turn 11.

Example 4: LI-LI IL: feather
REFERENT: feather
1 A: ya he is. and .on his hat there's a..
2 B: on his what?
3 A: on his hat I think there's {a: : : :}
4   {A's RH point from A's head}
5 B: on his what?
6 A: on his {hat}
7   {A's HH in circling motion point at A's head}
8 B: head?
9 A: hat
10 B: something like a feather
11 A: feather
12 B: haa.. feather.. okay

In Examples 2, 3 and 4, nonverbal CSs are seen to be an effective means of communication when the speaker lacks knowledge of necessary linguistic item. These examples show that nonverbal strategies are used in combination with other verbal CSs. The use of nonverbal strategies here could not be used in isolation as the gestures could not be understood without the utterance of a CS. Thus, the message of the communication has been successfully conveyed through the collaborative use of verbal and nonverbal strategies.

VI. DISCUSSION

The table below illustrates the frequency counts of the following nonverbal CSs: enacting, outlining and pointing strategies used by each dyad in the study.

A total of 83 nonverbal CSs, namely enacting, outlining and pointing strategies, were gathered. These nonverbal CSs have been seen to be utilised in oral communication of the dyads and this shows that gestures were frequently being incorporated with verbal CSs. Among the aforementioned nonverbal CSs, pointing strategies were found to be the most frequent CS used with 57 occurrences and all dyads seem to

have used more of pointing nonverbal CS as compared to enacting and outlining nonverbal CSs.

TABLE II
SHOWS THE FREQUENCY COUNTS OF NONVERBAL CSs

Dyad	Enacting strategies	Outlining strategies	Pointing strategies	Total
A	2	0	2	4
B	2	1	4	7
C	1	1	3	5
D	1	0	5	6
E	3	2	11	16
F	0	1	4	5
G	3	3	12	18
H	2	0	3	5
I	1	1	5	7
J	1	0	4	5
K	2	0	6	8
L	0	1	4	5
Total	16	10	57	83

Pointing strategies were used in conveying certain types of lexical items such as 'feather', 'suspenders', 'sling-bag' and these items are mainly objects. When learners could not retrieve the correct lexical item from their linguistic repertoire, they tend to incorporate pointing strategies in emphasizing the location, direction or indicated area of the objects where little effort is involved [28].

This is followed by enacting strategies (a total of 16). Enacting nonverbal CS would always require both hands and this shows that more effort is needed by the speaker in delivering the meaning of the lexical item. As most of the lexical items involved here are mainly action verbs, the speaker would frequently act out the action using both hands in presenting the meaning and it happened when the interlocutor failed to grasp the first trial of presentation of meaning conveyed by the speaker.

From the table, it could be gathered that the least frequent nonverbal CS used is outlining strategies (a total of 10). The use of outlining strategies here involved the object or shape of the target lexical item. It could be seen here that objects such as 'post-office box' and 'manhole cover' are among the items that learners would involve the use of outlining strategies to denote the different shapes of these items.

VII. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study show that the occurrence of nonverbal communication strategies does exist among Malaysian learners of English in oral interaction. In situations when a lexical difficulty is encountered by the learners, they resort to the use of a nonverbal CS for the successful communication of the message. Learners and interlocutors take an active role in displaying common nonverbal CSs such as *enacting strategies, outlining strategies* and *pointing strategies* to overcome communication breakdowns during their interactional exchange. Pointing strategies were used most frequently and outlining strategies were the least used. Language learners tend to use nonverbal CSs that require less effort as pointing strategies. Outlining strategies are used less frequently as the learners would normally use both hands in indicating the forms of the items.

From the findings, it can be concluded that nonverbal communication strategies may offer an opportunity for second language vocabulary learning as the gestures made by the learners have aided the interlocutors in retrieving the words; hence, it assisted learners in their vocabulary learning. Language games involving gestures and cue words should be used as enhancement activities in classrooms to assist learners in vocabulary building.

In sum, it is suggested that other verbal and nonverbal behaviours in strategic communication of learners from different ethnic and language background should be explored. Reference [29] asserts that nonverbal communication is related to culture and gender as different gestures may trigger different meaning from different people. Thus, further research to analyse other groups of learners and interlocutors' nonverbal communication may fill the gap in knowledge on the aspects of nonverbal communication and second language acquisition.

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