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Body Language as a way of Knowing

Introduction and Brief History

Communication has been identified as both an art and a science.

Communicating or communication is basically the act of sharing, expressing, or conveying information to another person or a group of people. One generally accepted meaning of communication explains that it is “ an act by which one person gives to or receives from another person information about that person’s needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states which may be intentional, unintentional, may involve unconventional and conventional signals as in the form of different body languages being used across various cultures, linguistic and nonlinguistic forms, and may occur through spoken or other modes as in the case of the use of body language” .

There are various forms of communication which can be classified based on the exchanges of interaction between the “ communicators” and there are also forms of communication that are based on the mechanism of sharing information. This paper will focus on the latter, particularly the non-verbal communication, emphasizing its importance in the process of knowing or learning things.

Understanding communication and the different mechanisms that make it work is essential for readers to understand how non-verbal forms of communication, particularly body language, works as a way of learning. The most basic model of communication suggest that to be able to establish a line of communication, there has to be a message (anything that can be sent or conveyed), a recipient (the person or entity that will receive the message), and a sender (which is usually the one who would initiate the

communication process). In most cases, the recipient does not have to be aware of the contents or the context of the message that would be sent by the sender by the time the communication is initiated. This applies to both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. This principle is what actually enables individuals to remove communication limits. People can communicate across vast distances in space and time because of this principle. The process of communication, contrary to common belief, does not automatically end upon the receivers' receipt of the message from the sender. It actually ends after the receiver understands the message that was sent to him or her by the sender. Take note of the keyword understands because it is a typical requirement in majority, if not all, models of communication .

Communication as a way of learning and as a way of sharing information from one person to another can be traced back to as early as the prehistoric ages . This fact is actually believed to be the reason behind why the academic community describes humans as someone who has been born to communicate or simply, a social creature. There are a number of strong and convincing evidences that can attest to this idea. The presence of hunting and foraging groups during the prehistoric ages can, for example, serve as a strong indication that humans during that time already know some form of communicative mechanisms because they would not be able to establish such groups without any single sort of verbal or non-verbal communication. Surely, any particular hunting and foraging group would not be able to execute a coordinated attack against a large prey or a large foraging field without a mechanism to communicate.

The earliest forms of communication are actually non-verbal in nature. Some of the best examples of these communication forms that can still be actually seen today are in the form of symbols, cave paintings, petroglyphs, pictograms, ideograms, and etc. .

Body language definitely falls within the boundaries of non-verbal forms of communication. Every part of a generic definition of communication applies to body language except for the mechanism of conveying information. In a non-verbal form of communication for example, messages are conveyed via different body postures, facial expressions, gestures, and even eye movements. The history of the use of body language as a vehicle for conveying interests and information can actually date back to as early as the prehistoric ages. One evidence that can attest to that statement is the idea that even animals use body language as a mechanism to communicate . Research also suggest that while there are certain forms of body language that may be voluntarily controlled usually done to reinforce and strengthen the message being conveyed verbally, majority of the forms of body language happen subconsciously. This is actually body language's distinct feature that differentiates it from sign language or the act of using it in communicating. Sign language is a form of non-verbal communication that is consciously and intentionally done while body language is done subconsciously.

There are practically an unlimited number of ways how one person can convey his emotion, attitude, or even an entire message through the different forms of body language. Sielski (1979) once quoted Ralph Waldo

Emerson in one of his works about understanding body language saying “ the eyes of men converse as much as their tongues with the advantage that the ocular dialect needs no dictionary but is understood the world over” .

What Sielski basically wanted his readers to understand is that body language can be classified as one of the most effective and universally-accepted medium of communication because contrary to the universally-accepted language of today, which is English, the use of one’s own body to convey feelings, emotions, and intentions, is more easily understood even without the use of a dictionary or any supplemental material at that.

However, there are indeed certain barriers that limit the universality of body language and perhaps the greatest and most common of which are the body movement variations across cultures—more on this on a later chapter of this paper. There are different types of body language: gestures, postures, facial expressions, space, and appearance—all of which are typically used for the same purpose.

- Gestures and Postures

One can easily read a person’s intention or level of interest towards something by looking and observing that person’s gesture. It enables an observer, for example, to have a more complete and accurate picture of what is really on the person he is observing’s mind or detect whether there are discrepancies with what the person being observed is saying and what his gestures say. Gestures can be further subdivided into clusters that indicate a person’s sentiments and or dispositions. In most cases, gestures are accompanied by postures or vice versa and so in this paper, the author has decided to integrate them into just one.

- Openness

A man opening the first few buttons of his coat or shirt; a man who frequently takes his coat off before the start of a conversation; a woman who lays her hands down to the side of the chair or the sides of his legs are all generally readable indicators of openness .

- Closeness or Defensiveness

Young adolescents and adults would normally demonstrate a closed first gesture, a crossed, or a clasped arms gesture whenever they think about defying their parents or any person who has a higher level of authority's instructions. It is also common among adults to cross their arms in front of their chest to show that it is time to listen to them speak; some adults on the other hand do this to show defensiveness or closeness, or to protect and isolate themselves .

- Evaluation

A non-verbal sign that a person is evaluating the situation is when he or she strokes a part of his cheek or forehead usually on just a single side.

- Rejection

When a person folds his arms, moves away from another person, crosses legs, tilts the head forward as if wanting to see or hear more clearly what the other person has been saying, that is often a sign of rejection.

- Doubt

A person touching, rubbing, or stroking a part of his nose or face after being offered with something is a sign that he is in doubt or confused about something. This gesture may be accompanied by some of the examples of gestures when a person thinks about rejecting something or someone.

- Readiness

Gestures indicating readiness is practically similar to gestures indicating openness. Some examples of more specific gestures under this cluster include positioning both feet apart from each other, placing the hands on the hips, and running back and forth on the sidelines of a court for example—indicating his readiness to enter a game.

- Reassurance

A teenager who is worried about the results of the past exams is someone who needs reassurance and subconsciously expresses it through gestures like biting his or her fingernails, or stroking his hand; just like when a baby or toddler sucks his or her thumb or when an adult rubs their thumbs against each other.

- Cooperation

A person who leans forward, closer to the person he is talking to, with his feet in a tip toeing position, and with a slightly forwardly tilted head, is a sign that he is willing to listen or accept a proposition.

- Silence

Silence is a potent form of non-verbal communication as it creates great anxiety and may be interpreted as an expression of hostility . In some cases, silence may also be interpreted as a gesture of rejection or uncooperativeness.

- Facial Expressions

The face can be considered as a highly effective tool not just for verbal—because this is basically the part of the body where the mouth is, but also for non-verbal communication. The face is composed of approximately 43

muscles, 15 of which are considered as capable of producing unique facial expressions, which are widely used in non-verbal communications. Studies suggest that the use of facial expressions as a form of body language can be considered universal because all human beings have been neurologically programmed to control their facial muscles and associate them with common expressions and emotions. Frowning for example can be universally interpreted as a non-verbal sign of sadness, frustration, or disappointment, which of course depends on the context of a certain situation; just like how smiling can be universally interpreted as a sign of happiness, gratitude, and joy. What Sielski suggests is actually correct but only when applied to simple facial expressions such as frowning and smiling. More complicated facial expressions such as smirking and pointing at things using the lips or the eyes may be culture-specific. In fact, in some cultures, some facial expressions may be interpreted differently from their common universally accepted interpretation as what Sielski suggests. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied facial expressions are highly reliable forms of body language, but it has to be constantly remembered that cultural barriers also exist that limit the use of this non-verbal form of communication.

- Space

The use of space in non-verbal communication does not practically involve the direct or active use of a person's body or a part of it. It is important to know however, that there is a branch of science that deals with this—the use of space in communications, that is called proxemics. This branch focuses on the study of human beings' personal space, zones of territory, and how such spaces are commonly used and how they can be more easily interpreted.

One important thing to know about this science—that is of course, relevant to the topic that is non-verbal communication, is that there are four distinct zones of operation namely: the intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance. What activities human beings do and how they behave whenever they fall within any of these four distinct zones of operation varies. It would also be safe and logical to say that intimate distance is the closest distance that one human being can get from another human being, followed by personal distance, then by social distance, and lastly by public distance. To give the readers an idea of how far these distances are, the intimate distance can be as close as 0 inches (which is equal to actual contact) and be as far as 6 up to 18 inches of space. Anything beyond this zone of operation may fall under personal, social, and public distances, depending on the amount of space. Examples of activities that are usually done whenever two human beings enter the intimate distance are lovemaking, hugging for two very close friends, and for children clinging to a parent or to each other .

Body Language and Children as a way of Knowing

The type of communication that exists between a mother and her newborn child is undoubtedly non-verbal, in the form of body languages. The reason why that is so is because children cannot really engage actively in communicating with his or her mother because they simply are not capable of uttering words that a normal adult could; in short, the mother and the child basically have no choice but to engage in non-verbal or body-language-based communications because that is only what their current

means would allow them to do.

Non-verbal communication between the mother and the child starts from when the child is still in its embryonic stage of development. Because the infant is basically incapable of using majority of his special senses—sense of smell, sight, hearing, and taste, his choice would be limited to the sense of touch. Whenever the mother feels that the infant kicks or moves around her womb for example, that is actually a sign that the baby inside her belly is trying to communicate to her. after infancy or during the post-natal period, cuddling is considered as the most common form of non-verbal form of communication that exists between the child and his mother, or basically anyone who has access to him. During the period of infancy, between the first three up to the first six months, the baby gets to know a lot of things about the mother's behavior and infant care routine and after the period between the first sixth months up to one year, the infant is usually capable of using body language and other forms of non-verbal communication in conveying its needs to his parents. It is important to remember that at this point, no practical form of verbal communication exists between the baby and his mother.

There are three general stages that describe when a child may learn various things about communication: the baby synchronizes, the toddler synchronizes, and the older child synchronizes again . What can be easily noticed from the sequence of the three stages is that there are two reversals present. The first stage is marked by the child's ability and practice of mimicking things such as simple words and gestures. The second stage can be characterized as a stage wherein the child commits errors when it comes

to the proper use of the body languages, gestures, and words he had been mimicking and or imitating since the first stage. The third stage can be perfectly described as the integration stage wherein the child has already learned, through trial and error, the correct and appropriate use of the different verbal and non-verbal forms of communication he had encountered and misinterpreted since the first day of his life. The third stage also covers the part wherein the child discovers how to respond to various gestures and body languages and not just how to use them.

Nonverbal communication plays a prominent role in a child's various growth and development stages. It is important to remember that across different cultures, some may have different norms when it comes to grooming and or training a child regarding the use of different communication tools and or practices than the others. The importance of non-verbal communication, which well includes different forms of body language, in a child's growth and development was emphasized when Walburga (1981) explained that an infant may not develop into a normal social being if would not get exposed to and learn different non-verbal communications. The childhood stage is when every person learns a lot of things not only from the family but from his surroundings as well. The things that a child has learned during childhood stages, which includes body languages, can never be easily wiped out and replaced. This explains why most people commit to the use of body languages subconsciously—because it is actually a form of non-verbal communication that they first see and learn to use as a child.

Body Language and Education as a way of knowing

In the absence of the mother and or the father, the teachers and professors act as the parents. It is inevitable that a child would grow on and develop into someone who is ready to go to school and be educated. The quality and type of communication that exists between a child and his teacher is also an important aspect of his growth and development as a school-age individual—just like how the type and quality of communication between him and his parents during the embryonic and infant stages. Teachers play an important pivotal role in shaping the attitude and behavior of the children. They basically teach the children things that they cannot learn from home and ensuring that they were able to deliver such teachings to their students, is certainly a part of their job description.

Word, sound, and body languages are three mechanisms by which the teachers and their respective students can establish lines of communication within the classroom . Body language plays a key role in the educational discipline whenever a teacher reviews the non-verbal feedbacks he receives every after a lecture has just been finished. The purpose of this phase of discussion is to check whether all pupils were able to understand what their teacher has taught them. It is typical for a fresh primary school student child to be shy and so his common response whenever the teacher asks him whether he was able to understand the lectures or not would be positive, even if he did not understand a thing about it. This is one of the few moments when a teacher, whose job is to ensure all pupils have understood every topic, cannot trust the truthfulness of the children's response. One possible way how the teacher can accurately determine whether the

students have indeed understood the topic is by reading their body language. Pupils behave differently whenever they understand or do not understand a topic and a teacher who knows techniques how to read body language should not have a hard time figuring things out. Body language in the education as a way of knowing works pretty much the same way in other situations. Open gestures such as laying arms down to the side of the legs and making warm facial expressions which can be simply done by always wearing a smile are also forms of body language that the teacher can use to gain the confidence and the trust of the pupils, which should benefit both the teacher the pupils in the long run, because trust and confidence in the classroom is a good capital for a teacher-student relationship . It is important not to take the importance of non-verbal communications for granted because whenever one becomes a part of a conversations, the receiver does not usually sort the communication channels into verbal and non-verbal messages. Both messages usually come integrated with one concrete message that the receiver has to interpret.

Ahmet stressed the importance of the use of body language in the education setting when he conducted a survey study asking the subjects about their opinions about the matter. The results of his study suggested that an education professional who does not know how to adequately use body language in his profession should undergo training because it is somewhat a prerequisite in the field of education .

An ideal education or classroom setting should demonstrate how both the teachers and students use body language as a supplement to the verbal communication mediums at all levels and grades —and more so at pre and

post primary levels of education. Spoken language may suffer from barriers during teaching sessions, particularly in a cross-cultural environment; but unspoken or non-verbal languages which well include the use of body language would usually be able to overcome those barriers.

According to Foerster (2013), one advised way to improve the communication between the teacher and students in the classroom setting is to teach the children how to read and use body language. This way, they would be able to cope with what the teacher knows and explains and show whether they have any problems with whatever is going on in the school or classroom. Plus, they can use what they have learned about body language not just inside the classroom but in other individual facets of their life as well .

Body Language across Cultures

As mentioned before, depending mainly on verbal means in communicating within a cross-cultural space may be met with a variety of hurdles. These hurdles can even exist in a situation wherein two or more people speaking the same language—but from different cultural backgrounds (e. g. pronunciation styles, accents, etc.), converse. One direct cause of such barriers is misunderstanding or in worse cases, misconceptions. If we are going to use the operational definition of a communication process, we cannot call a misinterpreted communication as a complete cycle of communication because the receiver was not really able to get what the sender had been pointing out. The situation can spiral down and become more complex when people speaking only dialects and no major national

languages become a part of the equation. These people cannot really be blamed because a person communicates based on the way he learned how to communicate while doing work, playing, making love, and doing all sorts of things; plus, integrating communication to one's daily activities should take some time.

Just like verbal communication, body languages—which is also a form of non-verbal communication, can also be misunderstood and be met with various cultural hurdles in a cross-cultural setting. Different cultures have distinct and or unique body languages and so the use of a specific body language in one culture may be misinterpreted in another .

One thing that the participants of the cross-cultural communication can do here is to learn how to understand how different cultures interpret various verbal and body languages or to be more aware culturally. This way, participants are directly decreasing their chances of misunderstanding a person—who came from a different culture.

Discussions

Studying non-verbal communications, particularly the use and understanding of different body languages, has been a new way of knowing or learning for me because firstly, like most people do, I also used to believe that communications and or conversations with another person or group of people are mainly done verbally. I did not know until recently that verbal means of communication only constitute approximately seven percent of a normal communication, while the remaining percentage is dedicated entirely for non-verbal means of communication. Verbal communication can create

more impact and be more easily understood when supplemented with an appropriately executed set of body languages and other non-verbal communication. Body language plays a significant role in a person's life from the time he is still in his mother's womb until the last days of life. During the post-natal stages, it still does. In fact, the ability of the child to use and understand body languages takes place before he learns how to use and understand verbal language—this takes place during the childhood stage of growth and development. It is important to expose children to the various body languages and non-verbal means of communication or they would literally miss a lot of things.

The use of both verbal and non-verbal communications in a cross-cultural setting should be expected to be met with difficult challenges, mainly because of the cultural barriers and variations in meanings that may exist between one culture and another. There is no other more practical way of addressing this but by making the effort of studying how other cultures interpret certain words, actions, and body languages so that no misunderstandings and misconceptions will occur in the future.

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