

Your Gestures and Mannerisms: A Help or Hindrance?

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One of the areas which Teachers of English as a Second Language seem to neglect is personal gestures and mannerisms. Although sentence structure, intonation, and vocabulary are very carefully controlled, gestures are often used unconsciously or without any previous study or consideration. Many teachers feel that gestures are a universal language and that communication by sign language is primarily primi-

tive and natural, thus subject to only one interpretation. This language myth is quickly exploded as one examines various cultures. True, there are intercultural gesture cognates as well as word cognates, with similar and nearly similar interpretations, but every society has its own peculiar "sign language" which teachers should search out, then encompass or avoid, according to the meaning and/or connotation.

No Tours Today

Recently I took some visitors to see the industries of our island and called at the sugar factory near Honolulu. As we approached the building I stopped suddenly and informed my guests that the company wasn't taking tours that day. When questioned as to where I received this information I indicated a company official standing inside the building near a second story window and replied that the man in the office had told me. When I turned to leave, my guests, who were very anxious to see this factory, questioned my certain knowledge that no tours would be conducted that day. After all, they knew no one had spoken to me - there had not been any verbal exchange - so how could such definite communication have taken place? This was a perfect example of a meaningful body movement: The man's hand wave --a side to side rolling movement of the vertical open hand--has a peculiar significance in Hawaii*, and I had clearly "got the message" although to others in the group it was merely a friendly wave.

Cultural Meaning

ESL teachers must be particularly sensitive to peculiar cultural significances of common American and English gestures as unawareness can often alienate or unknowingly offend

students. Young children often laugh and snicker, or even show shock at these faux pas and the teacher can later find the reason and eliminate his error, but adults are not always so cooperative; mature students are often too polite to indicate these feelings.

Samoa Experience

During a workshop in Western Samoa this past summer I was surprised to learn that one of the very common signals for class response--a beckoning motion with the cupped hand in front of the instructor--indicates inferior status in the learners; thus it is disrespectful. Although this gesture had been used rather extensively in demonstrations and in films shown to a group of Samoan teachers, it was not until the third day of a five day workshop when gestures per se were discussed, and the teachers were asked which gestures were considered acceptable in Samoan culture, that someone volunteered the information that none of them would use this signal in their classrooms. (When the gesture was



Acceptable

discussed in American Samoa native teachers agreed that it was a derogatory gesture). When a beckoning motion of the finger was discussed, the response was that this gesture was even worse than the first--it would only be used to call a dog!

After discussing various gestures to indicate class response all of the Samoan teachers agreed on a gesture that was acceptable to their



Unacceptable

culture. This was cupping the hand but substituting a motion which started from the side to the front and then back toward the teacher, for the previous front toward teacher movement. Such a small difference, but it meant so much. Time spent in front of a mirror practicing this gesture until it became a "natural" one was worth the effort for all the previous, unconscious resentment disappeared and there was a feeling of unity or "togetherness" in the workshop class. All ESL teachers will agree that teaching becomes extremely difficult and learning considerably curtailed when this bond between teacher and students is lacking.

Ask an Informant

There are studies currently being conducted in this field which should soon be available as helps for teachers. However, every teacher can usually find a friendly native adult informant, or better still a small group of friendly informants, and discuss with them the impact of their normal, habitual gestures on the students and the advisability of adapting, changing, or substituting these for more effective classroom gestures.

* This gesture is variously interpreted as "it's all over," "nothing today or nothing now," "he's not here," "I don't have it," "not available at present," "it's cancelled," "I don't know," etc.