Nonverbal communication and its Role in Teaching a Second Language

¹Amir Mohammadian
Assistant Professor
Chabahar Maritime University, Iran

Abstract
Since language speakers’ competence is not merely limited to knowing lexical items and syntactic structures, considering all the different aspects of linguist knowledge is important in teaching and learning a second or foreign language. In the present paper, after a brief review on the different types of competence introduced so far, another probable aspect of competence that is nonverbal competence is considered using some examples indicating potential sources of miscommunication resulted from not being competent in this regard. It seems in teaching a foreign or second language the importance of this aspect of language knowledge cannot be ignored.

Keywords: competence, nonverbal communication, miscommunication.

¹English Department, Chabahar Maritime University, Iran
Email: Amir.Mohamadian@cmu.ac.ir
Introduction

Language learning process is one of the fields in linguistics receiving much more attention compared to others since in spite of its long history; it has not yet arrived in a definite and an agreed upon answer to Plato’s problem. When it comes to second language learning field, it will be more problematic as learners and teachers must consider all the different aspects of effective communication and language use in the target language.

Human languages have various interconnected levels among which some usually receive more concentration in teaching such as syntax, lexicon, phonology and phonetics. Although these aspects make a great part of language knowledge of speakers, it will not be the whole story. Evidence to this claim is the great number of fresh students of English language in Iran who in spite of their acceptable performance in entrance exam which is mainly based on syntactic points and vocabulary items’ meanings, are not still able to perform well in their classes at first. Such a disparity can be explained by two justifications. First, there is usually a difference between the terms competence and performance which have been introduced by Chomsky (1965) for the first time. Competence is what speakers know about their language or in other words the mental knowledge of a speaker about his language is called competence while performance is what they perform in actual use of language. Ideally, everybody likes to be able to match their performance and competence but practically there is not usually a one to one correspondence between them due to different factors such as stress, anger, hurry or tiredness. Secondly, language knowledge of speakers as mentioned above is not confined to some specific areas of linguistic knowledge and so there have been introduced different types of competence so far. Hence, in the present paper, after reviewing the history of emergence of the terms competence and performance and their different types introduced in the course of
time, another aspect of language knowledge which can be included among the types of competence and so teachers can consider in their teaching materials is studied using related examples which can potentially be sources of miscommunication if the learners are not aware of them.

**Literature Review**

Chomsky (1965) made distinction between the terms competence and performance and introduced them for the first time. He believes “Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who know its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors in applying his knowledge of this language in actual performance” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3). He further reaches a conclusion to the effect that we can thus make “a fundamental distinction between competence, that is the speaker or hearer’s knowledge of the language and performance, the actual use of language in concrete situations” (Chomsky, 1965, p.4). This seemed a revolutionary distinction in Linguistics and consequently Language Teaching since in spite of the previous schools such as structuralism which merely focused on outcome of language, that is performance, the really intended form or structure was also considered.

One year later, Dell Hymes (1966) added the term communicative competence as another type as well as the one introduced above, that he called linguistic competence, since he believed in addition to knowing different grammatical rules and structures, language users must also be able and aware of the rules governing an effective communication. In the 1970s, different researches (e.g. Hymes, 1967; Paulston, 1974) drew special attention to the
difference between what language users know about forms of their language with what makes them able to have an effective interaction. Later, Cummins (1981) made distinction between Chomsky’s linguistic competence from Hymes’ communicative competence through introducing the concepts context-reduced and context-embedded communication. From then on, the notion of competence and efforts to ideally equalize the performance of learners to their real competence have been among the center of attention in main pedagogical schools and different aspects of knowledge of language users have been the basis of introducing different types of competence to the effect that some scholars like Brown (2007) name up to four different types as follows. He states grammatical competence comprises knowledge of lexical items as well as phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic rules. This competence is in fact what was called linguistic competence before (Brown, 2007, p. 219). Discourse competence by which language users are able to make units larger than sentences is in fact knowledge of intersentential relationships while sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of language users relevant to social and cultural rules of language and discourse (ibid, p. 220). Savignon (1983, p. 37) believes in this type of competence the participants’ roles and their shared knowledge, the function of the interaction and an overall understanding of the social context in which the conversation is taking place exist. And finally strategic competence is the competence underlying our ability to make repairs and cope with imperfect knowledge such as paraphrasing, avoiding, guessing or shifting style (Brown, 2007, p. 220). Canale and Swain (1980, p. 30) believe “these strategies are used to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence”.

It seems these categorizations are mainly based on vocal and verbal aspects of language, although some non-verbal aspects of knowledge of language users in real communication
appear to play a crucial role in effective communication and ignoring them could potentially result in miscommunication or at least misunderstanding. Some of these possible sources of unintelligibility come in the next section.

**Non-verbal aspect of language knowledge**

Although language communication is primarily based on verbal media that is using words, phrases and sentences in order to transfer the intended meaning, there are plenty of situations in which non-verbal signs are used to fulfill it. Non-verbal aspect of communication may refer to “communication by means other than words” (Matthews, 2007, p. 266). Therefore, it is all those factors playing role in interaction and conveying the intended message of speaker but phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases and sentences. Of course, in the present paper, non-verbal communication means communicative signs, which are intentionally sent by language users, and other informative and unintentional signs such as coughing or sneezing due to a cold are not included.

For example, Hall (1990) considers cultural space among the most important items in nonverbal communication. Cultural space refers to physical distance between speakers while conversing. It differs from 15 to 45 cm in intimate, private or close talks, 45 to 120 cm in normal friendly conversations, 120 to 350 cm in social relations among people who know each other and 350 to 750 cm in public conversations in different societies. Disobeying the above mentioned distances can result in an uncomfortable feeling from the addressee’s side since getting too close to or too far from the other side of conversation may be a sign of trying to change the type of relationship between the people involved. Therefore, it is important to be aware of these allowed spaces in the target language while learning a second
language especially when they differ from the source language of learners. In addition, it seems in some societies like Iran gender plays a role in these spaces such that the distance increases when the genders of the participants differ.

Some of the signs in nonverbal communication are gestures or activities done in order to convey a special message to the addressee. Ekman and Friesen (1972) described emblems to be used instead of their verbal equivalents. These gestures must have verbal counterparts in the same language, they must be shared by language users within a society and they must arouse an effect or a motivation in the addressee. For instance, the thumb up gesture in societies like the U.S. or Canada is a sign of approval while it is an offensive sign in Iran, Iraq or Thailand (siljerud, 2008). Another example is the gesture of moving head from side to side to express uninformedness in Iran but it is used to denote confirmation in India (Pazokizadeh, 1389, p. 15) or in Bulgaria a single nod of the head down means disconfirmation while in Iran it means confirmation. Pointing the middle finger in the U.S. or Canada is similar to the thumb up gesture in Iran and is offensive while it has no special meaning in Iran especially for the old. These are some examples of emblems as symbolic gestures differences in different cultures to mention a few.

Illustrators include another type of nonverbal signs in communication which facilitate it. The main difference between illustrators and emblems is that the former usually comes with their verbal counterparts while the latter often comes instead of them. For instance, in Persian speakers usually bent their thumbs touching the palm while the other fingers are spread (thumb finger closed) to show number four whereas in Japan it means number one (Viet, 2014). These types of differences are more problematic especially when the people involved in a conversation have different illustrators and do not use verbal signs for any reason.
Regulators refer to those signs regulating interactions like turn taking in a conversation, interrupting the speaker or showing interest in what is being said and encouraging the speaker to continue. Different languages use different non-verbal symbols to show them. For example, in Japan folding arms while eyes closed denotes thinking deeply (Viet, 2014) although this can be interpreted as a sign of uninterestedness of the hearer in Iran.

Affect displays reveal affective and emotional state of language users such as frowning or smiling. Although Ekman and Friesen (1972) consider motivating feelings and affect displays shared in all languages and cultures and are universals, it seems not only affective displays, but also affective reactions to different motivations depend on context and culture of speakers (Russel, 1994; Shweder, 2000; Tsai, in press). Hence, it seems necessary to consider these differences when learning a new language. For instance, laughing which is mainly a sign of happiness or content, is more observed in east and Asian cultures when people are embarrassed or talking about a painful matter compared to European cultures (Ostermeier, 1995: 30-31) or smiling in cases other than happiness in Germany or China is a sign of intelligence while in Iran smiling individuals were perceived as less intelligent (Krys and others, 2014). Alternatively, smile of women to strangers of the opposite sex when having a short accidental eye contact unintentionally is interpreted differently from societies in which it is a sign of politeness. Considering these differences when communicating with target language users seems necessary in order to have a successful communication.

Adaptors refer to those activities done by participants in a conversation in order to adapt to the context and setting like moving or changing position. Although adaptors are unconsciously done and so are not included among nonverbal signs in this paper, they are of great importance since a specific movement may be unintentionally made and considered an
adaptor in one language society while in another it is among nonverbal signs as emblems and intentionally done. Examples include showing the sole of the shoe while sitting crossed legs which is an adaptor in the U.S. but is an insult and offense in parts of the Middle East and Asia (Westside toastmasters, online).

Considering the above mentioned items, it seems as well as being competent in the different aspects of language knowledge presented so far as types of competence, an effective communication is also dependent on being familiar with nonverbal system of the language in use.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In the present paper, after introducing the importance of paying attention to competence and different aspects of knowledge of language users especially in language teaching, different types of competence introduced and focused so far were briefly reviewed. It appears that they are mainly related to the verbal aspect of language and the nonverbal dimension has not been considered so much in linguistics nor in teaching a language as a separate part of competence. Hence, some of the potentially problematic cases causing misunderstanding in communication due to misusing nonverbal signs in the target language were discussed. As it is seen, there may be some differences between the first and target language of language learners regarding different nonverbal signs and postures. It seems these differences must be taken into consideration while teaching or learning a second language since they seem to be a part of language knowledge of native speakers which must be learned by learners and such that neglecting or disobeying them causes great misunderstandings or opposite meaning to what is intended as in the case of nodding the head in different cultures. Based on these facts,
it seems nonverbal aspect of language is of such a great importance that it should be considered as another kind of competence beside the ones introduce so far.
References


