



## The evaluation of instructors' views on the use of semiotics in English classrooms

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### Abstract

Semiotics is the scientific field dealing with the meaning making process via signs and symbols. This study primarily aims at investigating the opinions and preferences of English instructors about the usage of semiotic elements such as mimics, gestures, body movements, posture, eye contact, and clothing in language teaching classrooms. Instructors' awareness of the unspoken interaction in the class, to what extent they are using the semiotic elements in their teaching style, whether they find these elements useful or not are among the aims of this study. Further aims include determining whether or not language instructors need training about the effective use of non-verbal communication and which semiotic elements they may need special training in. In the data collection process, a questionnaire involving 20 items in a Likert scale format is completed by 40 English instructors, who are currently working in a university preparatory school. The results of the study reveal English instructors' positive beliefs about the effective use of semiotic elements in their teaching and the powerful effect of successful non-verbal communication to boost student achievement and motivation. Additionally, having previous training on non-verbal communication use is found to be influential on instructors' belief, which is interpreted as a need for training about the conscious use of semiotic elements in language teaching. Based on these findings, some pedagogical recommendations are proposed for further research.

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*Keywords:* Semiotics; non-verbal communication; English instructors

### 1. Introduction

Language teaching and learning is generally viewed as involving verbal exchanges of opinions but the sufficiency of this viewpoint is questionable. While speaking a language, whether it is our mother tongue or a second language, we use not only verbal communication tools like words, sentences but also non-verbal communication elements such as our eyes, hands, mimics etc. For this reason, speaking and understanding a language involve both the verbal and non-verbal ends in a continuum. This issue of using both verbal and non-verbal elements while speaking a language becomes more significant when it comes to communicating in a foreign or a second language. Speakers generally need more channels to send and receive messages while they are communicating in a language other than their mother

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tongue. The level of this necessity can change according to some aspects like the level of language proficiency, sociolinguistic environment etc.

Raising language learners' awareness about socio-pragmatically appropriate language use becomes more significant in foreign language teaching classrooms considering learners' limited language use opportunities in real life. In the same vein, understanding the place and significance of non-verbal communication in the classroom has attracted more attention over the last decades. To this end, language teachers' opinions regarding these points have great importance. Initially, what is meant by *non-verbal communication elements* in this article is clarified since non-verbal communication covers a broad area.

Semiotics is the scientific field that deals with the meaning making process via signs and symbols. It focuses on using signs and symbols to interchange messages both verbally and non-verbally (Şenel, 2007). Non-verbal communication elements are clarified as posture, eye contact (oculesics), gestures and mimics, hand movements, personal distance, clothing and being face to face by Ünal and Altay (2013). The area covers many sub-sections but in this article, posture, eye contact, gestures, mimics, hand movements and clothing have importance in terms of their usages by English instructors in the classroom. Therefore, evaluating the place of these non-verbal communication elements in foreign language teaching classrooms, specifically in English classrooms, is one of the main aims of this article.

Using non-verbal communication tools along with the verbal communication is not a matter of choice but a necessity to facilitate learners' understanding of a foreign language. Both teachers and learners rely on non-verbal communication to interpret and convey their intentions and feelings correctly and efficiently in the target language. One other reason to use non-verbal communication in the language teaching environments can be related to culture teaching and involvement in the foreign language teaching process because non-verbal communication comprises some cultural characteristics of the target language community. Being aware of the appropriate use of non-verbal communication in another language becomes a necessity to develop cultural understanding in the classroom and to have good intercultural communication skills (Altay, 2005).

In the light of all these issues, it can be stated that one of the main concerns of this article is to find out the preparatory school English instructors' preferences of non-verbal communication elements in their classrooms. For this purpose, a questionnaire involving statements to evaluate their beliefs and real usages of non-verbal communication tools in the classrooms was completed by the English instructors who are currently working in a university preparatory school.

### *1.1. Literature review*

For the last few decades, there have been some concerns about the place of non-verbal communication in English language teaching (ELT). When it comes to state the place of semiotics in ELT, many language teaching methods involve the usage of non-verbal communication elements as stated by Erton (2006). It may not be wrong to claim that using signs, symbols or body language in the classroom can ease students' understanding of the target language in both cognitive and meta-cognitive levels. By the same token, non-verbal tools are incorporated into almost all the language teaching methods in different ways and with different levels of importance.

Situational Language Teaching and Audio-lingual Method incorporate semiotics into language teaching classrooms in the form of using visual aids and creating analogy in the foreign language. In Direct Method, especially vocabulary teaching involves demonstration and using real objects, which are non-verbal tools to create meaning in the target language. The Communicative Approach makes use of role plays and discussions in which learners need to use non-verbal tools like hand movements or mimics to convey their messages in the target language. Silent Way is another method making use of non-verbal communication in the classroom. It is almost totally based on the use of non-verbal elements and verbal

usage of the target language is limited. In Suggestopedia, using posters and other visual cues constitutes the non-verbal part of the language teaching process. Total Physical Response is also based on using kinesthetic movements, which are strong non-verbal communication tools in the class. As it may seem in this short summary of the relationship between language teaching methods and the field of semiotics, nonverbal communication has a place in the classrooms but the level of importance given to it may show variety (Sarıçoban & Sarıçoban, 2012).

Considering multimodal communication in a broad sense, Roy (2005) proposed a view that combines a semiotic approach and schema theory to show the relation between speech and other modes of communication. The semiotic approach and its applications on foreign language teaching field has been investigated (Abushihab 2012; Şenel, 2007). In the same vein, some researchers were also interested in the application of semiotics in some specific aspects of language teaching. For instance, Hişmanoğlu (2006) showed the place of semiotic elements in vocabulary teaching process while teaching English. Çimenli (2015) stated the interrelation between the field of semiotics and pronunciation teaching. Being in line with the current study, Hong-li (2011) investigated the effects of non-verbal communication in teaching English in the university level and the results showed that even if non-verbal communication was found to be as important as verbal communication, most of the teachers participating in the study were found to ignore the usage of appropriate non-verbal communication cues in their classrooms. In that sense, it becomes more important to educate especially pre-service language teachers about the effective usage of non-verbal communication in the class (Özmen, 2011).

There is a growing body of research on the effects of correct usages of body language and nonverbal communication in language classrooms and how to incorporate body language into the language teaching process (Gregersen, 2007; Hişmanoğlu, 2008; Mohammadian, 2016; Negi, 2009; Tai 2014;). Akinola (2014) investigated teachers' use of various non-verbal cues in English language teaching classrooms and found out that English teachers needed to have training on effective usage of non-verbal cues. Najarzagdegan and Danaghi (2014) investigated techniques to help English teachers to incorporate non-verbal communication into their teaching styles. Behjat, Bayat and Kargar (2014) investigated learners' perspectives on teachers' non-verbal communication in the class and found out that teacher's use of eye contact, facial expressions and body movements like hand or head movements can play a significant role in learners' comprehension. Thompson (2014) also measured language teachers' awareness of other teachers' gesturing hand movements in a video they watch and spotted the importance of teachers' own self-reflection about the usage of non-verbal cues in their teaching.

Fan and Shi (2010) investigated the effect of nonverbal behavior to improve English learners' intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, Surkamp (2014) stated that knowledge of non-verbal communication could help language learners to achieve communicative competence and proposed to use drama activities in foreign language teaching classrooms to help learners to use non-verbal aspects of communication in various contexts. In their recent study, Karim and Sotoudehnama (2017) have investigated language teachers' use of non-verbal communicative elements in foreign language teaching classrooms by considering language learners' views. Furthermore, Bambaerloo and Shokrpour (2017) have summarized the positive effects of nonverbal communication on the success of language teaching.

## *1.2. Research questions*

To reach the aims of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are English instructors' preferences of non-verbal communication elements in language classrooms?

2. What are English instructors' views of the effectiveness of their non-verbal communication in the classroom?
3. What are English instructors' views about the effects of non-verbal communication on student achievement and motivation?
4. Is there a significant difference among English instructors' views on the use of non-verbal elements depending on their background and individual differences?

## **2. Method**

In this section, the aims of conducting this study, the information related to setting, participants and instrumentation was provided. Additionally, the quantitative research design of the study, the procedures for data collection and analysis were explained.

### *2.1. Aims of the study*

The research into English instructors' opinions regarding the use of nonverbal communication elements in EFL classrooms is scarce. Seeing this gap in the current literature, the present study was primarily aimed at investigating English instructors' views on the usage of semiotic elements including mimics, gestures, body movements, eye contact in language teaching classrooms. Their awareness of the importance of unspoken interaction process between teachers and learners, to what extent English instructors use the semiotic elements in their teaching style, whether they find them useful or not are among the main concerns of this study. Further aims include determining whether or not language teachers need training about the effective use of non-verbal communication in the classroom and on which semiotic elements they may need special training.

### *2.2. Participants and setting*

Total number of the participants is 40 English instructors (female: 31, male: 9). They are currently working at a preparatory school of a foundation university in Ankara. The descriptive information about the participants' teaching experience, age, and the department they graduated from was collected via a questionnaire. Whether they previously took any special training or a course on the usage of non-verbal communication in the class was also asked. A survey including 20 items about the use of non-verbal communication in language teaching process was delivered to the instructors personally. They were informed about the voluntary basis of the study.

### *2.3. Instrument*

A survey including 20 items about the language teachers' use of non-verbal communication in the class was used as the data collection instrument. The survey is a five point Likert scale from 5 "strongly agree" to 1 "strongly disagree." To check the reliability of the scale, reliability analysis was conducted by SPSS 21 version and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found to be .77, which is regarded as acceptable (DeVellis, 2003).

### *2.4. Data collection and analysis*

Data were collected through distributing a survey to the participants. After they completed the surveys in their appropriate time, the researcher took the surveys back. Since the participants were all working in the same preparatory school, the survey collection process was not problematic.

The data collected from the participants was analyzed using SPSS 21 version. Initially, general descriptive analysis was conducted and the mean values of each item in the scale were calculated. Since two items were negatively worded in the survey, these items were reverse-coded by SPSS to be used in the further statistical analysis correctly. The items of the survey were separated into three groups according to the previously identified sub-headings, which are “preferences” including survey items about instructors’ preferences of semiotic elements, “effectiveness” including the items about the effectiveness of instructors’ non-verbal communication use in the class, and lastly “achievement” including the items about the effect of non-verbal cues on students’ achievement and motivation in language learning.

Normality analysis conducted by SPSS showed that the data was not normally distributed. Due to the violation of normal distribution, nonparametric tests were implemented for further analysis. To see if there is any difference in the participants’ answers concerning the departments they graduated from, their age and teaching experience, Kruskal Wallis H test was used, the non-parametric version of one way between groups ANOVA. To determine the instructors’ opinion difference based on having special training on non-verbal communication use, Mann Whitney U test, the non-parametric version of independent samples T-test was conducted. Additionally, the mean values of the survey items were reported to determine the degree of instructors’ involvement with the statements.

### 3. Results

This section presents the results and the interpretation of all the statistical analyses conducted in accordance with the research questions.

#### 3.1. Results related to research question 1

The mean values of the items aimed to determine the participants’ preferences of non-verbal communication elements including hand gestures, tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions and clothing in the language classes, were presented in table 1 below. All the items in this section have mean values above 4, meaning that most of the participants agreed with the items.

**Table 1.** English Instructors’ Preferences of Non-Verbal Communication Elements

	N	Mean	SD
2. I use hand gestures in the class.	40	4.6	.59
3. I change my tone of voice while teaching a language.	40	4.6	.49
4. I have eye contact with the students in the class.	40	4.8	.38
5. I use my facial expressions or mimics to explain something during the lesson.	40	4.7	.43
6. I am careful about my clothing in the class.	40	4.5	.67
7. I think teacher posture is an important element to take students’ attention to the lesson.	40	4.7	.49

Table 1 shows that English instructors stated using the non-verbal communication elements in their classrooms and all the separate elements were found to have similar mean values meaning that there is not much difference among the participants on the usage of these semiotic elements.

### 3.2. Results related to research question 2

Instructors' opinions about the effectiveness of their non-verbal communication and interpretation of their students' non-verbal signals in the class were investigated to answer the second research question. In addition, whether they use semiotic elements consciously and their beliefs about the need to be trained on non-verbal communication use in the class were investigated. The mean values of the items answering these constructs were presented in table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Instructors' Effectiveness and Consciousness of Using Semiotic Elements

	N	Mean	SD
1. I rely on non-verbal cues to communicate with my students.	40	4.47	.60
8. I am effective in using non-verbal communication in my lessons.	40	4.05	.68
9. I am effective in interpreting my students' non-verbal communication in the lesson.	40	4.10	.63
10. I am conscious of my non-verbal communication in the class.	40	3.95	.78
11. I match my body language to the words I use.	40	4.45	.60
12. Teachers need to be aware of their own body language and tone of voice while teaching a language.	40	4.70	.52
13. Body language is closely linked to good communication.	40	4.80	.40
19. Teachers should recognize their body language and tone of voice in order to express their positive/negative emotions.	40	4.65	.48
20. Teachers should be given training on non-verbal communication.	40	4.30	.72

Concerning the effectiveness subcomponent of the scale, the mean values of the items were found to be above 4, which shows the instructors belief about effectively using nonverbal communication in their classrooms (item8,  $M=4.04$ ,  $SD=.68$ ) and also being good at interpreting their students' non-verbal cues (item9,  $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=.63$ ). Only the mean value of the item10 ( $M=3.95$ ,  $SD=.78$ ) which is about the instructors' consciousness about the usage of non-verbal communication elements was found to be less than the other items. This might show that teachers may not always be aware of their use of the non-verbal communication elements in the class. It can result from automatically using semiotic elements in their teaching style or it can also show that they need some training on the conscious usage of non-verbal communication. Related to the issue of training need, most of the participants agreed that teachers need additional training on non-verbal communication use in the class (item20,  $M=4.30$ ,  $SD=.72$ ).

### 3.3. Results related to research question 3

Instructors' opinions related to the influence of non-verbal communication elements on student achievement and motivation were investigated to answer the third research question and the results were presented below in table 3.

**Table 3.** The Effect of Non-Verbal Communication on Students' Achievement and Motivation

	N	Mean	SD
14. Using body language can ease students' understanding in a foreign language.	40	4.72	.45
15. Using non-verbal cues in the class confuses students in the class.	40	4.12	1.26
16. I believe non-verbal communication elements affect students' achievement in language learning.	40	4.20	.79
17. I believe non-verbal communication elements affect students' motivation in language learning.	40	4.32	.76
18. Body language and other non-verbal cues are not necessary while teaching a language.	40	4.30	1.13

Items 15 and 18 were reverse coded by SPSS program and the mean values of the reversed versions were presented. The analyses of the item 15 ( $M=4.12$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ) and item 18 ( $M=4.30$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) show that the instructors actually see the use of nonverbal communication as the necessary part of language teaching process. Instructors' opinions concerning the effect of non-verbal communication on students' achievement (item16,  $M=4.20$ ,  $SD=.79$ ) and motivation (item17,  $M=4.32$ ,  $SD=.76$ ) showed their belief about the powerful effect of successful non-verbal communication to boost student achievement in language learning.

### 3.4. Results related to research question 4

A Mann Whitney U test was conducted to pinpoint if the participants' opinions differentiated related to having additional training on the use of non-verbal communication in the class. Concerning each of the three sub-constructs defined previously as preferences, effectiveness and achievement, a statistically significant difference was found and the results were presented in table 4.

**Table 4.** Training Related Difference on Instructors' Opinions

	Training	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Mann Whitney U	p
preferences	without training	28	17.73	496.50	90.500	.019
	with training	12	26.96	323.50		
	Total	40				
effectiveness	without training	28	17.70	495.50	89.500	.020
	with training	12	27.04	324.50		
	Total	40				
achievement	without training	28	17.34	485.50	79.500	.008
	with training	12	27.88	334.50		
	Total	40				

A Mann Whitney U test showed a significant difference in the instructors' opinions about the preferences and effectiveness of non-verbal communication use in the class and the influence of non-verbal communication on students' achievement as shown in table 4. The analyses showed that there was a statistically significant difference on the effectiveness component ( $U=89.500$ ,  $p=.020$ ); on the achievement component ( $U=79.500$ ,  $p=.008$ ) and on the preferences component ( $U=90.500$ ,  $p=.019$ ) between the participants having previous training about non-verbal communication use ( $N=12$ ) and the participants having no training ( $N=28$ ).

Kruskal Wallis H test showed no statistically significant difference in the instructors' beliefs regarding the length of teaching experience and the department they graduated from. For this reason, the results were not presented in this section.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

The main aim of this study was to find out English instructors' views of non-verbal communication usage in language teaching classrooms. For this purpose, a survey method of data collection was used and 40 instructors currently working as English instructors in a preparatory school of a foundation university in Ankara participated to the study. The results of the study came up with several important implications for language teaching in EFL classrooms. Overall evaluation of the results of the survey showed English instructors' belief that non-verbal communication is an inevitable part of language teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Concerning instructors' preferences of non-verbal communication elements including hand gestures, tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions and clothing, all of these nonverbal communication cues were found to be used by English teachers in the classroom and no specific preference was detected. About the effectiveness of their non-verbal usage in the class, English instructors generally believe that they are using semiotic elements and also interpreting the non-verbal cues of their students effectively in the class. It was also found out that English teachers did not pay specific attention to use nonverbal language effectively in classrooms. For the experienced teachers this issue of using nonverbal cues somewhat unconsciously may not create any problem but especially new and inexperienced teachers may need to be aware of their use of non-verbal cues while teaching a language. These findings were in line with those of Akinola (2014) and Özmen (2011).

The findings of the study also yielded important insights into the advantages of incorporating nonverbal communication into university level English teaching and learning process, which supported the findings of Hong-li (2011). Being aware of the fact that language teaching involves not only spoken language interaction but also unspoken forms of communication can ease both language teachers' and learners' responsibilities in the class. Learning and correctly using non-verbal cues in the language classrooms can lead to culture learning, as well. Another benefit could be related to reaching the learners from different communication channels as being both spoken and unspoken to create a multi-modal learning environment. The need to train language teachers on effective nonverbal communication use in the class is another important issue that should be taken into consideration while evaluating the effects of non-verbal communication in language classrooms.

#### **5. Recommendations and Limitations**

The present study is not without its drawbacks. Initially, including English learners' views on the effects of non-verbal communication in English lessons could make it possible to evaluate both teachers' and learners' viewpoints. For further research, it might be better to include a survey on students' views regarding semiotic elements use in language classrooms. The number of the participants and involving only one preparatory school could be another limitation of this study. More participants from different English preparatory schools could make it possible to reach more generalizable results. Thus, further research should focus on larger sample sizes including a wide range of university students as well as instructors.



Drawing upon the findings of the current study, it is recommended that a mixed data collection method can be used for further research studies. Observation sessions can be included to the data collection process. Teachers' use of non-verbal communication can be observed and the researcher's observation notes and the observed teacher's views on his/her non-verbal communication use in the class can be compared to determine whether teachers are aware of their non-verbal communication in the class. As the last remark, the current study has significant practical implications for both English instructors and learners.

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## İngilizce derslerinde göstergebilim kullanımı hakkında öğretim elemanlarının görüşlerinin değerlendirilmesi

### Öz

Göstergebilim, işaret ve sembollerle anlam üretme süreciyle ilgilenen bilimsel bir alandır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin mimik, jest, vücut hareketleri, duruş, göz teması ve kıyafet gibi göstergebilim unsurlarının dil öğretim sınıflarındaki kullanımı hakkında görüş ve tercihlerini araştırmaktır. Öğretim elemanlarının sınıftaki sözsüz iletişim farkındalığı, göstergebilim unsurlarını kendi öğretim biçimlerinde ne ölçüde kullandıkları, bu unsurları faydalı bulup bulmadıkları, bu çalışmanın amaçları arasındadır. Çalışmanın diğer amaçları yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin sözsüz iletişimin etkili kullanımı konusunda eğitime ihtiyaç duyup duymadıklarını ve hangi göstergebilim unsurlarında eğitime ihtiyaç duyabileceklerinin belirlenmesini de içerir. Veri toplama sürecinde, Likert ölçeğinde 20 maddelik bir anket formu şu anda bir üniversite hazırlık okulunda çalışan 40 İngilizce öğretmeni tarafından doldurulmuştur. Çalışmanın sonuçları, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin göstergebilim öğelerinin etkin kullanımına ilişkin olumlu inançlarını ve öğrenci başarısı ile güdülenmesini

arttırmak için sözsüz iletişimin güçlü etkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, sözsüz iletişim kullanımıyla ilgili geçmiş eğitime sahip olmanın, öğretim elemanlarının inançlarında etkili olduğu görülmüştür; bu durum, dil öğretiminde göstergebilim öğelerinin bilinçli kullanımı konusunda eğitime ihtiyaç olduğu şeklinde yorumlanmaktadır. Bu bulgulara dayanarak, bazı pedagojik öneriler sunulmuştur.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Göstergebilim; sözsüz iletişim, İngilizce öğretmenleri

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