

2 The Use of Gestures in the English Classroom

*Ashraf Said Bait Darwish
Dhofar Region*

1 INTRODUCTION

A gesture is a form of non-verbal communication in which meaning is conveyed using part of the body. Teachers' gestures can play an important role in the classroom; they can improve communication between the teacher and learners, and facilitate learners' understanding of what the teacher says. My aim in this study is to examine what teachers of English in Oman believe about the use of gestures; furthermore, this study also includes an intervention aimed at raising teachers' awareness of the importance of using appropriate gestures in the classroom.

2 GESTURE

2.1 Gestures in Teaching

Gestures are important in human life. Beattie (2004) even argues that speech and gestures are not separate, while it has also been claimed that "Gestural information is even more important than verbal ... without gestures, human life would become a cold and mechanical process" (Morris et al., 1979: preface). Gestures also play an important role in the classroom. According to Darn (2005), gestures reduce unnecessary teacher talking time and increase learner participation; this in turn develops learners' confidence. In addition, gestures reduce fear of silence, make teachers' instructions clear and help the teacher in classroom management. Furthermore, they improve performance in group work and pair work as well as self and peer correction. Gestures also help in avoiding misunderstandings. In the English classroom, teachers' gestures can scaffold learners' understanding of the language. Gestures can be used to support different aspects of language such as vocabulary and grammar.

2.2 Gestures and Communication Breakdowns

According to Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994), gesture is a non-linguistic means that can be used by learners to overcome communication breakdowns. In everyday life, people naturally use their gestures to deal with such breakdowns. For example, when we travel to a foreign country and we do not know the language used there, we often use our gestures as one way to communicate with others. When I went to France in 2006, I really appreciated the French man who guided me to the location of a metro station through his gestures when he realized that I did not speak French. Beattie (2004) wrote about gestures and the frustrations of everyday life and mentioned a story of some friends who met at a dinner party to discuss their schooldays. Each one talked about a situation that happened to him and one of them could not remember a word she wanted to tell to her friends. She tried to remember the word but she could not so she started to use her body language in order to explain their meaning. Of course, in order to avoid misunderstandings in the use of gesture, we need to be aware of cultural differences between societies. Haynes (n.d.) says that “what is perfectly acceptable in the United States may be rude or even obscene, in other cultures”.

2.3 Teacher Learning of Gestures

If we agree that gestures can enhance teaching and learning it follows that they are an appropriate focus for language teacher education. This is one issue this study is interested in – the extent to which teachers can learn to use gestures more effectively in the classroom. There is evidence that this is possible, as shown through a study carried out in USA with six mathematics teachers. The authors concluded that

The purpose of this experiment was to determine whether or not teachers could intentionally alter the gestures they produce during instruction. The results indicate an affirmative answer. Teachers produced more gestures following a tutorial about the effectiveness of gestures than they produced with no instruction. Teachers were also able to inhibit their gestures when asked to do so. (Hostteter et al., 2006 : 5).

In this study I will attempt to alter teachers’ use of gesture through a workshop.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question was: To what extent can I help teachers make more appropriate use of gestures in a Cycle 2 Basic Education school in Oman through conducting a workshop and organizing peer observations?

My sub-questions were:

1. How appropriately do teachers use gestures at the start of the study?
2. How useful do teachers find the workshop and the peer observation?
3. To what extent do teachers make more appropriate use of gestures after the workshop and the peer observations?

3.2 Participants

The participants were five teachers of English in a Cycle 2 Basic Education school in Oman. The school population was about 500 students. All the teachers had been teaching English for at least ten years and I was their senior teacher of English. Table 1 below summarizes the details of the participants.

Table 1: Participants in the study

Teacher	Nationality	Experience	Classes Taught
A	Indian	11 years	6 + 8
B	Indian	12 years	6
C	Jordanian	10 years	5 + 7
D	Sudanese	20 years	10
E	Omani	11 years	8 + 9

3.3 Data Collection

This study had elements of action research in that, with reference to the use of gestures by teachers, I was concerned with “trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge” (Kemmis & McTaggart, cited in McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996: 9). Three methods were used to collect data: observation, a workshop and peer observation.

3.3.1 Observation

With regard to the first method, observation, I prepared an observation sheet to record the gestures used by teachers while teaching their classes and the purpose for using such gestures. The sheet had two columns – one for describing the gesture (in words or through a diagram) and the other to make notes about its purpose. I observed each teacher once at the start of the research and observed two of them again at the end. I did not tell them I was focusing on gesture as this would have influenced their behaviour.

3.3.2 Workshop

Following the first set of observations I arranged a workshop for the teachers. I was able to arrange the teachers’ timetables so that they were all free for two periods

at the same time during the school day and the workshop was held then. I prepared the workshop in such a way that the teachers would be able to engage in deep learning (Moon, 2001) through sharing experience and reflecting on teaching.

I started with an introductory demonstration. I arranged for a group of five students from grade 7 to come to the workshop and I taught them some classroom instructions using prepositions, such as 'put your pencil under the table' and 'point to the door'. I did the activity twice, once without any gestures and once with gestures. After this activity I allowed for group discussion in order to "offer opportunities for participants to share knowledge and ideas" (Hayes, 1995: 260). I asked teachers to discuss what helped the students to understand my instructions in the warm-up activity. Furthermore, teachers were given the opportunity to discuss their opinions about two questions which were "What is your belief on gestures?", "What will happen if a teacher uses confusing gestures?". Following this phase I provided the teachers with 'input from outside' as one source of knowledge, according to Ur (1996: 7). I showed them the results of a study carried out in USA about teachers' gestures in teaching mathematics (I referred to this earlier). In the last part of the workshop we discussed the meaning of gestures in different cultures (the five teachers came from four different countries); at the end of the workshop I asked the teachers for some written feedback on what they had learned.

3.3.3 Peer Observation

In the final phase of the study I organized peer observation sessions among the teachers. I gave the teachers an observation sheet like that I had used in my observations and paired the teachers up so that those who I felt needed more support in using gestures observed those who I believed used gestures more effectively. At the end of the study I observed two of the teachers once again in order to determine if there had been any change in their use of gesture compared to my initial observation.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 First Observation

Based on the qualitative data collected and according to my first visits to the five teachers I noticed that teachers B, D and E seemed to use appropriate gestures. Table 2 shows examples of gestures used by these three teachers.

The examples of teachers' gestures in this table reinforced what they said orally and did not cause problems for students to understand them.

In contrast, teachers A and C seemed to use gestures less effectively; their gestures confused the students and did not match what they said in the classroom. Table 3 shows examples of less effective gesture use.

Table 2: Examples of effective gesture use from first observations

Teacher	Description of Gestures	The Purpose
B	fingers are pressed together, hand curved jabbing at his mouth.	“what did you eat for breakfast today?”
B	upward sweep of finger	“stand up” for a student who did not bring his book.
B	pointing to the ear, then, outward rotation of finger in front of the mouth	“listen and sing”
D	arm at right angle with straight hand	“put up your hand”
D	raised the index finger with the fist closed	“it is singular, not plural”
D	traffic policeman stop sign	“leave the book and give me your attention”
E	pressing hands down and then spreading them out at the side and up a little	to support the meaning of the superlative “the biggest”
E	showing the number clearly (fingers up with space between them)	to support the sentence “you have four rials”
E	waving his finger across the ‘rubric’ of an activity in the book	“who can read the rubric?”

Table 3: Examples of less effective gesture use from first observations

Teacher	Description of Gestures	The Purpose
A	full arm signal with the palm of the hand open, fingers, pointing to the tape	“listen”
A	backward flip of the hand in front and below his face	to explain the meaning of the past tense
A	spinning his hands in front of his chest	“what did he say?” (asking other students)
C	pointing to the board (irrelevant, confusing gestures)	“write 6 in the exercise book”
C	hand repeatedly contracting like an octopus	“work together”

The examples mentioned above caused misunderstanding for students. For example, Teacher A pointed to the tape where he could have pointed to his ear to support the verb ‘listen’.

4.2 The Workshop

Analyzing the data from the workshop will provide a partial answer to sub-question 2. Following my introductory demonstration (see above) the teachers discussed what they had observed and agreed that my gestures did help students to understand the instructions. At that point I informed the teachers that the topic of our workshop was teachers' gestures in the classroom. In response to the next activity, three points emerged. First, they all believed in the importance of gestures. Second, they also agreed that if a teacher used confusing gestures then that would impact negatively on students' learning. They also agreed on the importance of teachers being aware of the cultural differences between communities in order to avoid any misunderstandings when they use gestures. The next part of the workshop was where I presented the results of the study by Hostteter et al., (2006) and this was followed by a practical activity where the teachers discussed which gestures would be appropriate for particular meanings, such as 'sit down' and 'listen'. The written feedback at the end of the workshop generated more data; the teachers agreed that the workshop was useful. Teachers A, D and E agreed that they realized the importance of gestures in teaching as well as the effect of culture on understanding gestures. Teachers A and C agreed that they had learnt to use gestures under conscious control to avoid confusing the students. All five teachers also said that their views about gestures had changed as a result of the workshop. Teacher A stated that a gesture "builds the bridge very easily between the students and teachers and it makes the students understand very easily". See the Appendix for an example of teacher feedback on the workshop.

4.3 Peer Observations

As a result of the analysis of my first observations, I decided to give teachers A & C the opportunity to observe their colleagues who seemed to use gestures appropriately. Furthermore, in order not to make these two teachers wonder why I asked them only to observe others, I also asked teacher D to observe one of his colleagues. As far as teachers A & C are concerned, teacher A observed teacher E and he managed to record some types of gestures made by teacher E and said he found the experience useful. Teacher C observed B, and he also agreed that the visit was beneficial. He too managed to record some types of gestures used by teacher B while teaching his students.

4.4 Final Observation

I conducted a final observation with teachers A and C to see how they would use gestures after the workshop and the peer observations. I visited teacher A along with a group of teachers from other schools who were attending an intensive course in methodology and they were asked to visit an experienced teacher. I found that day suitable for me to observe him and focus on his use of gesture. Furthermore, I visited teacher C just before the semester exam. I visited him when he was conducting a revision lesson and I told him that I wanted to see how ready his students were for the exam. I managed to record different types of gestures without

his awareness. My observations suggested that in both cases the teachers' use of gestures had improved. Table 4 gives examples of effective gesture use from their lessons.

5 DISCUSSION

In this section, I will discuss the findings of my study in order to answer the *Table 4: Examples of effective gesture use from final observations*

Teacher	Description of Gestures	The Purpose
A	open hand, arm out stretched pointing through the window	"how is the weather today?" to guide the students to
A	a mouth in 'O' shape, the hand fanning the mouth	recognize the meaning of the word 'spicy'.
C	a beckoning hand curved towards the speaker	"come Ahmed"
C	pointing down to a specific spot	"come and stand here"

research questions which were defined earlier.

Based on the analysis of my first visits to the five teachers, I found that all teachers used gestures while teaching their students. They used gestures naturally without being aware of my focus. However, some gestures were effective and others less so.

In response to the initial observations, I found the workshop a very useful method to raise teachers' awareness of certain concepts in teaching which can lead to improve language learning. All the teachers gave positive feedback on the session and this suggests that providing them with opportunities for reflection and discussion is a useful strategy for supporting teacher learning. As already noted, there is evidence here that the workshop supported at least two of the teachers in using gestures more effectively in their teaching.

It is important to say that teachers can learn from each other if they are working in a collaborative environment. Peer observation seems a sensitive issue to some teachers, however, "it gives teachers an opportunity to learn from each other in a non-threatening environment" (White, 2003). In this study, the two teachers who needed support in using gestures obtained this at least in part from observing their colleagues and reflecting on this experience. To some extent, then, peer observation helped teachers to make more appropriate use of gestures.

5.1 Limitations

Although I find the results of this study encouraging, I must acknowledge a number of limitations. This was a small-scale study of male teachers in one school; I was also their senior teacher and this may have influenced their reaction to the study. I am also aware that this study raises some ethical issues, especially as I did not tell the teachers what the focus of my observations was; also, I only observed the teachers I felt needed support a second time and it may have been more useful to

observe all five teachers again. Finally, although I believe that the workshop did raise teachers' awareness of the use of gesture, I am also aware that one 70-minute workshop is unlikely to lead to lasting changes in teachers' beliefs and practices.

6 CONCLUSION

The effective use of gestures by teachers of English can undoubtedly enhance both teaching and learning. The use of gesture is thus an important topic for teachers to reflect on, become aware of and learn about. This study explored ways of engaging teachers in these processes and despite the limitations noted above I am confident that the teachers who participated in this work did benefit; the study also confirmed my belief that teachers can consciously learn to use gestures more effectively in the classroom.

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APPENDIX: POST-WORKSHOP TEACHER FEEDBACK

23rd July Boys School (cycle 2)

TEACHER (A)

Date: 23/4/2007

Feedback and Reflection on Workshop on Gestures

Was the workshop useful?

Yes, it was.

What have you learnt from the workshop?

Using gesture not spontaneously but
using under conscious control.

Have your ideas about using gestures for teaching purposes changed at all?
(if so, in what way?)

Yes. → 1) It builds the bridge very early
between the students and teachers.
2) It makes the students understand
very early.
3) It makes class easy.
4) Even the weak listeners can follow
your instructions.

Will you do anything different in your teaching regarding your use of gestures?

if so, what?

Along with the gestures some times it is
very important to mime and act.

Try to create some new gestures which
are not common and make students to
follow.