

Nonverbal Communication and Cultural Influences

Developing video teaching materials to enhance intercultural understanding

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Abstract

This paper proposes an approach to fostering intercultural understanding in language and intercultural communication education through the interpretation of nonverbal cues. Grounded in perceptual constructivism, the study aims to enhance learners' awareness of their own interpretive processes and to promote reflective dialogue with others. Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in shaping context and meaning, and since its interpretation is influenced by cultural norms, its understanding is indispensable in intercultural communication. To this end, a set of video materials was developed by filming natural interactions of Japanese people and those of British people and editing them so that only nonverbal elements such as vocal intonation, facial expressions, gestures, and posture were observable. Learners used these materials to interpret interpersonal relationships, reflect on their thought processes and deepen their understanding through discussion with peers. The practice revealed that many learners became more aware of the importance of nonverbal cues and the impact of cultural backgrounds, suggesting that reflective dialogue can foster intercultural understanding. This paper concludes by considering the significance of the materials that have been developed and their potential future applications.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, perceptual processes, intercultural understanding, video teaching materials, reflective dialogues

【キーワード】 非言語コミュニケーション, 知覚プロセス, 異文化理解, 動画教材, 省察的対話

1 Introduction

A large number of materials have been developed to facilitate effective training of language and intercultural communication skills. However, despite the importance of nonverbal communication in everyday life, resources focusing on the perception and interpretation of nonverbal communication have been limited (Nixon, 2009). As observed in the concepts of

plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001/2020), the importance of ‘the dynamic use of multiple languages or varieties, along with cultural knowledge, awareness, and/or experience in social situations’ has been emphasised in intercultural communication. Therefore, the scope and expectations of language learning and teaching have expanded in recent years. Wei (2018), proposing translanguaging as a theory of language, explained that it ‘requires analytic methods that move the focus away from treating languages as discrete and complete systems to how language users orchestrate their diverse and multiple meaning- and sense-making resources in their everyday social life’ (p. 27). Wei also emphasised the need for a transdisciplinary approach by re-conceptualising language, language learning, and language use, citing Thibault (2017, p. 76), who stated that language learning is the process of adapting ‘their bodies and brains to the languaging activity that surrounds them’.

In studies of nonverbal communication, both universal and culture-specific aspects of expressing and decoding nonverbal cues have been reported (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1975). Ekman and Friesen introduced the term ‘display rules’ to describe cultural differences in nonverbal expression, while Buck (1984) used ‘decoding rules’ to refer to cultural patterns in interpretation. These rules in person perception reflect individuals’ social learning as shaped by cultural norms and values. Cultural expectations embodied in the perception of social episodes are particularly salient sources of information and are much more resistant to being discounted than other contextual cues (Forgas, 1976).

The importance of person perception and social skills has been widely noted, and efforts to train individuals’ perceptual skills have shown positive results (Rosenthal et al., 1979; Costanzo & Archer, 1991; Costanzo, 1992; Nixon & Bull, 2005). Costanzo & Archer (1989) developed the Interpersonal Perception Task (IPT) to assess processes of social perception. This video-based task features natural interaction scenes of spontaneous, unscripted communication, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal behaviours. The IPT has been used not only as an assessment tool but also as a teaching technique for both verbal and nonverbal communication. Building on the IPT format, Nixon and Bull (2006) developed the British and Japanese Social Perception Task (BJSPT), which includes interaction scenes featuring British and Japanese individuals. This tool has been used to assess cross-cultural perceptual processes, and results have revealed cultural differences in the interpretation of nonverbal behaviour, attributed to variations in sensitivity and cultural expectations across different contexts. These findings

suggest that examining perceptual processes and cultural expectations in diverse social scenarios can contribute to enhancing intercultural understanding and communication skills.

From a perceptual constructivist perspective, Bennett (2017) argued that culture is not a collection of values and beliefs, but a process through which human groups coordinate meaning and action. Drawing on Hall (1959), he explained that people's experiences are not universal but shaped by the patterns of distinctions that constitute their worldviews. Events tend to conform to the expectations individuals hold in contexts, and experiences depend on whether and how people perceive those events. Bennett further identified perceptual flexibility as a key element of intercultural communication competence. This includes perceptual acuity; namely being conscious of one's perceptual processes, and perceptual agility; the ability to adjust one's perception to align more closely with the target culture. According to Bennett, cultural self-awareness is a prerequisite for perceptual agility. Similarly, Yamamoto (2020) described intercultural competence as the ability to relativise one's cognitive framework through interactions with others, emphasising the importance of clarifying one's own framework as a basis for recognising differences.

Landis et al. (2004) summarised intercultural training programmes as emphasising three domains: (1) cognitive: acquiring knowledge and understanding of other cultures; (2) affective: fostering positive attitudes and openness toward cultural differences; and (3) behavioural: developing skills for appropriate intercultural communication. Depending on the aims, the format they take and the tools they utilise, programmes cover these aspects to varying degrees and from different perspectives.

In this study, building on a perceptual constructivist approach and recognising the importance of nonverbal communication, video materials focusing on nonverbal cues were created for use in language classrooms and intercultural communication training. The sessions aimed to: (1) consider the role of nonverbal elements in communication, (2) reflect on one's perceptual and interpretive processes by discussing them with others, (3) examine the influence of culture on nonverbal expression and interpretation, and (4) provide a foundation for fostering cognitive flexibility and enhancing intercultural communication skills. While the sessions primarily focused on the cognitive aspect of communication, the behavioural and affective dimensions were also addressed through interaction among students and facilitators. The following section reports the procedures and findings from our video material production and nonverbal sessions.

2 Methods

2.1 Creation of nonverbal video materials

Since video clips constitute personal data, relevant ethical approval was obtained through the University of York; Jin-ai University did not require a detailed ethical review for social science studies at the time this study began.

Filming for the nonverbal materials was conducted by the authors in the UK and Japan between 2022 and 2024. Prior to participant recruitment, outlines of possible relationships (e.g., friends, couples, colleagues) and filming settings were developed to ensure that the interaction scenes would be as equivalent as possible between the British and Japanese videos. Participants were then recruited via email and through the authors' personal and professional networks. Those who agreed to the use of their video clips and signed the information form concerning ethical issues were invited to participate in the filming.

The recording and editing formats were based on the British and Japanese Social Perception Task (BJSPT; Nixon & Bull, 2005). Filming sessions were conducted at various locations, including university seminar rooms, offices, private premises, and a hotel lounge. Each session lasted about three minutes, during which participants engaged in natural conversation on everyday topics without using any scripts. From these recordings, short clips of 15 to 30 seconds were selected and edited for this study. The speech content in each clip was rendered unintelligible by filtering out high-frequency sounds. These clips were then compiled into tasks (each consisting of eight clips, or six in the short version), with a question about the relationship between the interactants appearing on the screen before each scene. A separate Google Form was also created as an answer sheet, including multiple-choice questions and a space for participants to write reasons for their answers regarding each scene during the viewing. Descriptions of the video clips used in the sessions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptions of videos used for the group sessions

Scene number	Nationality of interactants	Relationship of interactants
1	British	a couple who have been together for a few years
2	Japanese	friends who belong to the same society at the university
3	British	Scene 1: a person (with a course mate at the university)* Scene 2: the same person (with a lecturer at the university)*
4	British	a boss and a subordinate at the university
5	Japanese	close friends
6	British	an elder brother and a younger sister
7	Japanese	Scene 1: a person (with a course mate at the university)* Scene 2: the same person (with a lecturer at the university)*
8	Japanese	a boss and a subordinate at a university

People described in ()* are not shown in video clips

2.2 Nonverbal sessions

These video materials were used in intercultural communication seminars, Japanese language classes, and an extracurricular intercultural session between 2023 and 2025. Depending on the context, time frame, and aim of the session, the format was adapted accordingly. In some Japanese language sessions, only a small number of videos were used as part of lesson content or as a warm-up activity. In this study, the results of four sessions which had similar formats were summarised and analysed. Details of the participants and session format are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Details of the groups and session formats

Group	Participants	Session format	Time (minutes)	Number of video clips used
1	12 Japanese students at a university in Japan	intercultural communication seminar conducted in Japanese	90	8
2	42 Japanese students at a university in Japan	intercultural communication lecture conducted in Japanese	90	8
3	7 Japanese exchange students and 6 Japanese learners at a university in the UK	extracurricular intercultural session conducted in Japanese and English	70	8
4	9 Japanese learners at a university in Italy	Japanese lesson conducted in Japanese	90	6

The first author was invited to a Japanese university and, in collaboration with the second author, conducted sessions for Groups 1 and 2 during a timetabled seminar and lecture. The Group 3 session was conducted with the first author's students who were studying in Japanese courses and Japanese exchange students recruited on campus at a university in the UK. The Group 4 session was carried out in collaboration with a Japanese lecturer teaching at a university in Italy. All the sessions were carried out face-to-face; however, the first author joined this Japanese class online to conduct the session.

These group sessions followed a similar format:

- (1) warm-up activities which aligned with the aim of each session;
- (2) a short lecture on nonverbal communication, person perception, and cultural influences (Group 3 session did not include this component due to time constraints and its focus on intercultural interactions);
- (3) video viewing: participants individually selected one of three possible answers after viewing each video and wrote reasons for their choices using a Google Form;

- (4) group discussion of their answers while viewing each video clip for a second time (discussions were carried out first in a group of about three and then in a whole group);
- (5) completion of reflective questionnaires about the session content and participants' performance/learning via a Google Form. The questions included: 'Please write down any thoughts or feelings you had while watching the nonverbal videos or discussing your interpretation of the clips,' and 'What did you learn or realise from this session? If applicable, please write your response'.

3 Results

3.1 Comparisons of groups

3.1.1 Accuracy of guessing actual relationships of interactants

As the video clips used for activities differ slightly between groups due to variations in the number of clips used and the arrangement of the sessions, comparisons of overall accuracy were not appropriate. However, comparisons of individual scene accuracy were conducted. The results suggested that there are some significant differences in accuracy between groups (Japanese students and learners of Japanese) for Japanese status scenes (interactions between a boss and a subordinate and those between a teacher and a student). In other scene types—British and Japanese intimacy (between a couple, friends, acquaintances), British and Japanese kinship (between siblings), and British status scenes—no significant differences were observed. Accuracy differences for Japanese status scenes are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Accuracy comparisons between Japanese students and Japanese learners

Viewers	Japanese boss-subordinate interaction scene	Japanese teacher-student interaction scene
Japanese students	78.7%	69.4%
Japanese learners	26.7%	26.7%
Pearson's Chi-square test & Fisher's exact test	$\chi^2(1, N = 76) = 15.08, p < .001$ (Fisher's $p < .001$)	$\chi^2(1, N = 64) = 8.69, p < .003$ (Fisher's $p < .006$)

While 78.7% of Japanese students accurately identified the relationship between a Japanese boss and a subordinate, and 69.4% did so for a Japanese teacher and a student, the corresponding figures for Japanese learners were significantly lower, at 26.7% for both scenes.

To examine the cause of these differences in accuracy, the reasons behind participants' answer choices were analysed to identify which nonverbal cues they focused on and how these

cues were interpreted. The findings revealed that the nonverbal cues focused on were quite similar in both accurate and inaccurate responses; however, differences were found in how the cues were interpreted, as shown in Table 4 and discussed in the following section.

3.1.2. Nonverbal cues focused on and their interpretations

The nonverbal cues mentioned by participants and their interpretations are summarised below, distinguishing between interpretations that led to accurate and those that led to inaccurate guessing of a Japanese boss-subordinate interaction scene. In the scene two women are sitting in a meeting room, facing each other in chairs. Both sit relatively upright and are dressed in somewhat formal clothes. In their conversation, they nod in response to each other and smile. Except when making small gestures, they keep their hands on their laps. The woman on the left (subordinate) speaks more, while the woman on the right (boss) listens attentively.

The cues are listed in the order of how frequently they were mentioned (figures in parentheses indicate the number of mentions). Some participants gave overall impressions without specifying which cues they focused on; these responses are not included in the table.

Table 4. Cues focused by participants for interpretation of Japanese boss-subordinate interaction

Nonverbal (NV) cues focused on	Interpretation of NV cues which led to accurate guessing	Interpretation of NV cues which led to inaccurate guessing
nodding [14]	left person: agreeing to the right person; showing attention	The way they respond or tilt their heads doesn't show any hierarchical relationship.
appearance features [13]	right person: older? dignified, calm, dominating	no comments no difference between the two
amount of speech [left person > right person] [10]	left person: subordinates are speaking with consideration; reporting; receiving advice	left person: explaining to her subordinate right person: being in the position to listen (subordinate)
posture [8]	left person: in a good (upright) posture and listening intensely	left person: back is not straight right person: placing both hands on the lap and showing respect
facial expressions [7]	left: smiling politely, being considerate, nervous	left: confident, composed smiles

In this scene, the relative frequency of nodding, the amount of speech, and appearance, such as perceived age differences, appeared to serve as important cues for participants. Frequent nodding was often interpreted as a sign of attention and agreement, while a higher amount of speech, when combined with nodding, conveyed the impression that a subordinate was

explaining or reporting something to a superior, possibly seeking advice. Additionally, perceived age differences influenced some Japanese participants' interpretations, leading them to speculate that the older individual held higher social status.

In contrast, some participants interpreted a higher amount of speech combined with smiling as a sign of confidence, concluding the opposite—that the person on the left was explaining something to their subordinate. Similarly, others did not perceive clear differences in age or nonverbal cues such as nodding and posture and thus concluded that the two individuals held equal positions at work.

3.2 Reflective questionnaire comments

Participants' comments in the reflective questionnaire were examined and summarised into five categories based on the content: (1) awareness of the importance of nonverbal communication; (2) awareness of cultural differences; (3) observation of thought processes and person perception accuracy; (4) appreciation of opinion exchange; and (5) perceived usefulness of the activity. A few example comments are shown below for each category, with the participant group number in parentheses (Japanese comments were translated by the first author).

(1) Awareness of the importance of nonverbal communication

- Since I had never consciously paid attention to nonverbal communication when speaking, I felt that it was surprising how much one can interpret and infer from nonverbal cues alone. (Group 1)
- Because I got several questions wrong, I think I should pay more attention to subtle nonverbal communication cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. (Group 4)

(2) Awareness of cultural differences

- In relationships between supervisors and subordinates overseas, I thought that crossing one's legs while speaking to a superior would be considered rude in Japan, but it didn't seem to be so overseas, which I found very interesting. (Group 1)
- I came to understand that even across different countries, the way people perceive the atmosphere of a relationship is not so different. (Group 3)

(3) Observation of thought processes and person perception accuracy

- I enjoyed considering how I would judge people's relationships as it is usually not something you think of consciously. It was a little tricky to explain my thought process (Group 3)

- I learned the importance of letting go of preconceived notions. (Group 2)

(4) Appreciation of opinion exchange

- By listening to everyone's opinions, I realised that while we might share a general understanding, each person has their own way of perceiving the finer details. (Group 1)
- I noticed that some people perceive things differently from me, and that when I listened to their reasons, there were often many points I could agree with. (Group 3)

(5) Perceived usefulness of the activity

- The lesson was based on group work and comparisons with other countries, and I was able to deepen my understanding while enjoying it. (Group 2)
- This class was easy to understand since we watched videos and could actually see scenes of people communicating. (Group 2)

Although the number of comments presented are limited due to space constraints, similar reactions were observed in each section by different groups, indicating that these activities were considered equally useful in both language and intercultural understanding seminars. While analyses with a larger number of participants would allow further clarification, the present responses demonstrate effectiveness in raising awareness of the importance of nonverbal communication and cultural influences on perceptual processes. They also highlight the value of reflection and dialogue with others for promoting intercultural understanding and learning.

4. Conclusions

Nonverbal communication training in language teaching and intercultural communication seminars has been found to be effective in raising awareness of cultural differences and similarities in the expression and interpretation of nonverbal cues. For participants, these sessions confirmed the commonalities shared across cultures, while also highlighting context-dependent differences shaped by cultural and social rules and norms of appropriateness.

Accuracy differences between Japanese participants and Japanese learners of other nationalities revealed that certain communication contexts, such as interactions between a boss and a subordinate in the workplace, or between a teacher and a student, require an understanding of cultural rules and social appropriateness. Such understanding is essential for grasping interpersonal relationships and the nonverbal communication that is associated with them. For

example, nodding is frequently used in Japanese interaction to signal attention and acknowledgement of the speaker. Awareness of how such cues are used can therefore help learners to develop appropriate understanding and thus facilitate effective communication. Certain nonverbal behaviours, such as crossing one's legs, were often mentioned by Japanese participants as being somewhat inappropriate in formal settings. These aspects can serve as focal points in culturally-specific awareness training or discussion. Exchanging interpretations of communication cues can also promote valuable cultural learning, especially when sessions are conducted cross-culturally with students from diverse backgrounds.

The use of video materials developed within this study has been described as valuable in training, as they allow participants to observe natural interactions that supplement texts, audio materials, and other teaching resources. Quiz-style tasks can further encourage active participation by stimulating interest and concentration. At the same time, it is important to remind participants that the individuals in the videos display both personal and cultural characteristics in their nonverbal behaviour, which are shaped by the specific social contexts and physical settings in which they occur. Consequently, such limited video samples should be used as prompts for discussion and reflection on participants' interpretive processes and cultural expectations, rather than as tools for assessing nonverbal accuracy.

Although verbal content can be added depending on the aim of the sessions, focusing on nonverbal cues helped participants become aware of their importance in everyday communication. This awareness will enable learners to be mindful not only of linguistic aspects but also of more holistic communication, encouraging them to make use of their varied communication skills, including both nonverbal expression and perceptive abilities. Participants in this study appreciated that these activities provided a new perspective that stimulated their interest in further intercultural learning.

Culture, as explained by the perceptual constructivist approach, is constructed through people's perceptions. An important aspect of this nonverbal awareness training is reflecting on one's own perceptual processes and sharing them with others. As some participants commented, this is not something people are accustomed to and can be difficult to describe verbally. However, it emerged as one of the aspects most appreciated by participants, who were curious about how others interpret nonverbal cues and intrigued by both individual and cultural similarities and differences. Participants were very open to these differences and enjoyed exchanging their views, which created a warm and stimulating atmosphere in the session rooms.

Cultural understanding can be achieved to some extent through receptive learning, such as reading information and watching various materials. However, learning through interaction with others allows participants to reflect on their own communication styles while observing those of others. These interactive activities therefore provide a foundation for open, understanding, and inclusive attitudes, which in turn facilitate intercultural understanding and the development of communication skills. Video materials developed and evaluated by the authors, as confirmed in this study, can also serve as stimuli for activities such as role-plays or drama-based exercises, which engender more behavioral aspects of communication.

The findings of this study confirm that, in the classroom, teachers should be encouraged to act as facilitators of self-reflection and peer interactions, and to actively promote autonomous learning attitudes among their students.

Notes

This project was funded by the Great Britan Sasakawa Foundation.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the warm invitation from Miho Tokimoto, PhD, Sapienza Università di Roma, to collaborate in the intercultural understanding session of her master's Japanese course.

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