
Multimodality in TEFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT Multimodality is rarely focused on in classrooms, especially in Croatia. By definition, multimodality describes communication practices in terms of the textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources used to compose messages. Therefore, it is of great importance in everyday communication on all levels – from interpersonal to personal communication, to media and even intrinsic communication. Having this in mind, teachers should implement more multimodal tasks in their classrooms in order to elevate the level of awareness of their students. That kind of multimodal exposure would especially improve deeper understanding of the communication process in second language learners, such as Croatian students who are rarely exposed to native speakers. Basic groundwork for this kind of use of multimodality was laid down by the international project called *The Distributed Little Red Hen Lab*, established by Francis Steen and Mark Turner. The main goal of the project, besides the theoretical framework, is the development of new computational, statistical, and technical tools to assist research into multimodal communication. While learning about the project, we came up with some multimodal tasks and ways to present multimodality to high-school Croatian learners of English, which will be explored in this paper. Furthermore, one practical example of multimodal classroom task will be thoroughly explained.

KEYWORDS multimodality, TEFL, gestures, redhen lab, SLA

1. INTRODUCTION

Multimodality of language and communication is often taken as granted in Croatian English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Teachers tend to focus on only some parts of it due to various reasons, but mostly because the whole extent of multimodality is not thoroughly covered during their education. Furthermore, Croatian national curriculum for English language does not include some aspects of multimodality, namely gestures. Considering the importance of multimodality of a language, teachers should implement more multimodal tasks in their classrooms in order to elevate the level of awareness of their students and enhance their proficiency. By extending the level of multimodal exposure, second language learners could develop a deeper understanding of the communication process. Therefore, various multimodal exercises could be devised in order to achieve that, especially with the help of an international project called *The Distributed Little Red Hen Lab*, established by Francis Steen and Mark Turner. While contributing to the project, we came up with some multimodal tasks and ways to present multimodality to high-school Croatian learners of English. Therefore, one practical example of multimodal classroom task will be thoroughly explained in this paper.

2. MULTIMODALITY IN CLASSROOMS

In most Croatian classrooms, English teachers tend to focus on the *four essential skills* – reading, listening, writing, speaking – as a result of their education. Although this focus is somewhat justified in a sense that the primary goal of language learning is to achieve a high level of proficiency in those four skills, the language itself cannot be constrained to these four aspects – in order to fully capture and convey meaning, the multimodality of language has to be taken into account (Jakšić 2017). English language is multimodal, and according to Murray (2013, 51), communication consists of five different resources (modes): “textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual.” Therefore, people communicate by using

a combination of those five modes. The presence and absence of a single mode can alter the meaning of the message, which leads to a conclusion that these modes are interdependent, even though they can be used independently.

As mentioned before, the whole aspect of multimodality of communication is not explored in Croatian classrooms since teachers often overlook the spatial mode (Jakšić 2017; Korade 2017) and focus on other aspects, primarily on textual, aural and visual modes. This trifocal approach is criticised by Kress (2000, 184) who argues that “the so-called literate Western societies have for too long insisted on the priority of a particular form of engagement, through a combination of hearing and sight.” Kress (2000) further noted that hearing – the aural – is limited to the sounds of speech, while sight – the visual – is limited to the textual representation of speech, i.e. letters. However, by overlooking the spatial mode of communication, such as gestures and body posture, the meaning of a message, or a part of it, can change, therefore hindering the communication effort. Therefore, we believe that the scope of multimodality taught in TEFL classrooms should be expanded to all modes of communication.

3. GESTURES IN CLASSROOMS

Gestures are an integral part of the multimodality of communication, as visual cues that are spatial in nature, while in some instances they also have a linguistic mode. Even though they naturally occur during communication, they are rarely focused on in classes, especially in foreign language classes. Their presumed subconscious and automatic nature plays a part in this view as something that should not be specifically focused on in classes. However, Kendon (2004, 8) defines a gesture as “an action related to ongoing talk and that has the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness.” Therefore, a proper communication gesture is always deliberate as it requires a constructive mental effort behind and it is meant to either create and convey new meaning, or add another layer, another mode, to the already existing meaning (Korade 2017).

Furthermore, the aforementioned negligence of the (primarily) spatial mode of communication has led to a situation where students are expected to use and recognize gestures connected to their second language (L2) even if they have never received any education from their teachers. However, gestures and their frequency and meaning differ from language to language. Even though little is known about real differences between cultures and languages with respect to speech-associated or spontaneous gestures, differences do exist, and they can be assumed to pertain not only to culture, but also to various factors, such as region and socio-economic status (Gullberg 1998). Because of that, students should be taught about cultural differences and appropriateness in order to improve their L2 proficiency. This can be accomplished by educating L2 learners about gestures and their role in the language, and enticing them to perform and adapt their gesticulations while using L2 (Jakšić 2017).

3.1. GESTURES IN SLA THEORY

Gestures are rarely focused on in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. However, gestures can find a place in most widespread theories, either as facilitators of acquisition or as a helping tool for deeper understanding of the communication process.

In the innatist perspective, Chomsky argued that children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in just the same way that other biological functions develop. He argued that the environment makes only a basic contribution – in this case, the availability of people who speak to the child. He concluded that children's minds are not blank slates to be filled by imitating language they hear in the environment, but that they were born with a specific innate ability to discover to themselves the underlying rules of a language system on the basis of the samples of a natural language they are exposed to (Lightbown and Spada 2013). Gestures correspond with the innatist theory since they often appear before spoken language. A child can perform simple, usually deictic gestures

when asking for food or a toy, or even spread their arms in search of a hug or clenching their fists in order to make a person give them something. In this theory, gestures can be perceived as a precursor of spoken language.

On the other hand, connectionism is a theory of knowledge, including language, as a complex system of units that become interconnected in the mind as they are encountered together. The more often units are heard or seen together, the more likely it is that the presence of one will lead to the activation of the other. Connectionists attribute greater importance to the role of the environment than to any specific innate knowledge in the learner (Lightbown and Spada 2013). Gestures are, as mentioned before, heavily influenced and modified by culture and environment. Furthermore, through constant use of gestures, both recognizing and performing ones, with certain words, they become deeply connected and the presence of one part of the entrenched unit will often elicit the activation of the other.

Krashen's Monitor Model consists of five hypotheses, and the most important one for gestures is the comprehensible input hypothesis. Krashen argues that acquisition occurs when one is exposed to language that is comprehensible and contains "i + 1". The 'i' represents the level of the language already acquired, and the '+1' is a metaphor for language, i.e. words, grammatical forms, etc., that is just a step beyond that level (Lightbown and Spada 2013). In a classroom, this theory can often be used with young learners. For example, while teaching numbers to the children, the teacher can count his fingers (see Figure 1) and accordingly announce the names of numbers – one, two, three, four, five.

In this instance, the gesture of counting the fingers represents the already known content – names of numbers in L1 (represented by the number of fingers), i.e. 'i', while new words (in L2) represent the '+1'. Students can be encouraged to repeat both counting fingers and speaking the new vocabulary after the teacher in order to create even stronger mental images and link between gestures and new words, thus between pre-existent knowledge and new content.

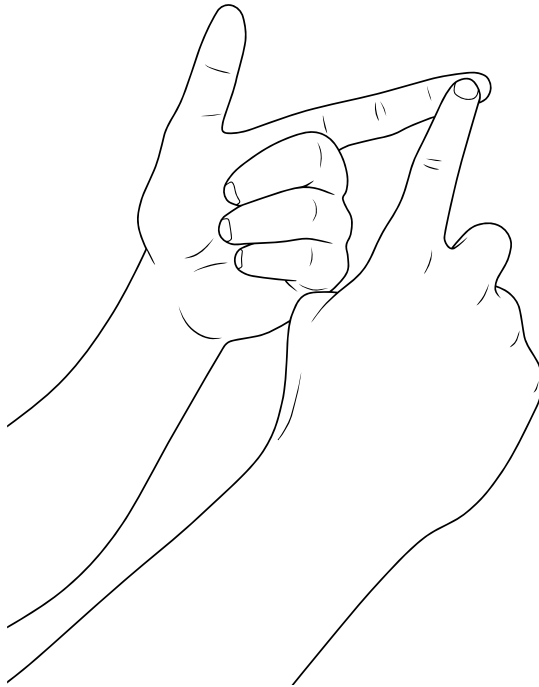


Figure 1. Counting fingers as an example of “ $i + 1$ ”

Long’s interaction hypothesis argues that conversational interaction is an essential, if not sufficient, condition for second language acquisition. The basis of this theory is that modified interaction – interactions with proficient interlocutors who modify the interaction – enhances acquisition. In this case, interlocutors need to work together to reach mutual comprehension through negotiation for meaning (Lightbown and Spada 2013). Since gestures are often heavily used during interaction, even to modify it, they can be relied upon to develop deeper understanding. Namely, while negotiating meaning, less proficient interlocutor will often pay closer attention to the proficient interlocutor’s body language in order to better grasp the meaning. The more competent he is in recognizing gestures, the more success he will have in decoding the message.

Connected to this is Swain's comprehensible output hypothesis, which argues that when learners must produce language that their interlocutor can understand, they are most likely to see the limits to their second language ability and need to find better ways to express their meaning, which then pushes learners ahead in their development (Lightbown and Spada 2013). However, during the current interaction, learners can use gestures in order to enhance their ability to convey the message even if they lack the vocabulary to do so. By doing so, they produce the comprehensible output, but also realize their weaknesses.

Schmidt's noticing hypothesis suggests that nothing is learned unless it has been noticed. Noticing does not itself result in acquisition, but it is the essential learning point (Lightbown and Spada 2013). By noticing the patterns, reasons of use and meaning of gestures, learners can deduce meaning of unknown words and learn when and why are certain gestures used. This is of great importance since L1 and L2 cultures are often very different, and by noticing and learning how to properly use certain gestures, L2 learners can reach near native-like competence.

One of the rare SLA theories that explicitly mentions gestures is Selinker's theory of interlanguage. According to Selinker (1972, 211), "[t]he process of learning a second language (L2) is characteristically non-linear and fragmentary, marked by a mixed landscape of rapid progression in certain areas but slow movement, incubation or even permanent stagnation in others. Such a process results in a linguistic system known as 'interlanguage.'" Essentially, the term *interlanguage* denotes learners' developing second language knowledge which consists of some characteristics influenced by previously learned languages, or his L1, some characteristics of the second language, and some general characteristics that often occur in various interlanguage systems, such as excessive gesturing. Therefore, learners who have not yet fully developed their L2 will tend to use gestures to convey meaning and enhance their production.

4. THE DISTRIBUTED LITTLE RED HEN LAB

The Distributed Little Red Hen Lab (Red Hen Lab) is a global laboratory and consortium for research into multimodal communication, founded by Francis Steen and Mark Turner. Its primary goal is to create a massive systematic corpus of ecologically valid multimodal data, along with new tools and practices to analyse given data (Steen and Turner 2013). Red Hen Lab's researchers record audio-visual news broadcasts systematically, and supplement the resulting dataset with other audio-visual records (Steen and Turner 2013).

Red Hen is organized as a cooperative of engaged researchers from all over the world who collaborate closely and contribute power and content to Red Hen Lab, and hence to each other and to future researchers. By developing various tools – theoretical, computational, technical and statistical – Red Hen Lab aims to advance research in any study of multimodal communication, including any area in which there are records of human communication. Therefore, the possible usefulness of Red Hen Lab is immense, since it can be applied to any language and almost any form of communication.

5. CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Gestures have a wide range of possible applications in classrooms. Besides teaching students about cultural differences among gestures, they can be used as a facilitator of second language acquisition, as shown in previous sections, or used as a specific learning topic.

However, in order to fully utilize them in classrooms, students must become aware of their importance. Therefore, we came up with a simple task that involves gestures – a variation was used in Jakšić 2017 and Korade 2017. This exercise is suitable for all age groups with minor tweaks, and requires no additional training.

The topic of the exercise is *Gestures in communication*, while its aims are:

- a) linguistic – introduction to multimodality
- b) communicative – developing deeper understanding by recognizing gestures
- c) educational – learning how to use body language; culture specific gestures.

Materials needed for this exercise are a PC or a laptop, and, depending on the availability, a projector or a smart board, while a blackboard serves as a backup for possible further explanations.

Students should be eased into the exercise by introducing the topic (gestures) and a brief discussion about it. Teachers are required to explain the importance of gestures and to demonstrate a small number of gestures and ask the students to do the same. During the discussion, a few students are chosen to use a specific gesture in a situation of their own.

After the introduction, the teacher plays a video clip without sound or subtitles while the students watch the clip and take down notes. The students are told to recognize as many gestures as possible during the first viewing. After the viewing, the teacher discusses the memorized gestures with the students.

Following the discussion, the teacher plays the video for the second time. This time, during the second viewing, the students are instructed to analyse the speakers by ascribing certain attributes to the speaker, for example commanding, compassionate, apologetic, aggressive, etc. Students should try to describe the general tone of the discussion in the video and recognize the hierarchy of speakers.

This kind of an exercise can be used to explain cultural differences and acquiring new gestures, as well as learning about the proper usage of gestures in everyday communication. Although almost any video clip can be used, we believe that movies are not as useful as talk shows,

since actors produce specific script-related gestures, while talk shows and similar TV shows present a more realistic and natural circumstances. Therefore, this exercise is best paired with Red Hen Lab's resources and videos, since they record TV shows and provide us with annotated gestures.

6. CONCLUSION

Currently, the whole extent of multimodality of language is not covered in Croatian TEFL classrooms. However, this could be changed by educating teachers on the importance of visual and spatial mode of communication, i.e. about gestures. This could be done by emphasising those aspects during their education, or by directing them in the *National curriculum*. We believe that teachers would improve their teaching success by using *The Distributed Little Red Hen Lab's* resources in creating various types of multimodal tasks. By doing that, they would open new horizons for their students, providing them with a lot of new and useful information, thus enabling them to reach higher levels of L2 proficiency. Furthermore, this would make the classes more interesting to students by shifting the focus from the "four essential skills" since the insistence on those can become fairly tedious to students. Therefore, the importance of gestures and other non-mainstream modes should not be underestimated, and they must be incorporated in TEFL classrooms.

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