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WHY GESTURE!

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Co-speech Gestures

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by co-speech or spontaneous gestures because many times when people think of gestures, they think of culturally specific gestures, *emblems*, whose form and meaning differ from culture to culture, such as the *thumbs up* gesture. These are one type of gesture, and as we will see they are important for English language teaching, or for that matter any language teaching, but they are not the type of gesture that I mean when I refer to co-speech gestures. Co-speech gestures are also not speech-linked gestures, that is, gestures that occur with speech but are not synchronous with it and that fill a speech gap, a grammatical slot in the sentence (Stam, 2013).

Co-speech gestures occur only during speech, particularly with elements of high communicative dynamism (i.e., new, focused, or contrastive information) and are phonologically, pragmatically, and semantically synchronous with speech. Together, co-speech gestures and speech express two aspects of thought, the verbal (speech) and the imagistic (gesture), and complement each other. They arise from the same underlying mental process and form a single, integrated dynamic system in which thought, language, and gesture develop over time and influence each other (McNeill, 2005).

Co-speech gestures provide information about second language learners’ thinking and actual proficiency in the second language (L2) that speech alone does not. For example, one area that has been investigated is thinking for speaking, the thinking that occurs online at the moment of speaking. Slobin (1991) has proposed that in first language (L1) acquisition, children learn a particular pattern of thinking, and Stam (1998) has argued that in L2 acquisition learners often need to learn a different pattern of thinking for speaking. This is particularly true for Spanish learners of English because cross-linguistic research on motion events has demonstrated that Spanish speakers and English speakers have different patterns of thinking for speaking about motion linguistically and gesturally. Looking at Spanish-speaking English language learners’ speech and gesture in the expression of motion events, Stam (2008) found that learners could produce grammatically correct utterances in their L2 English, but their gestures indicated that they were not thinking for speaking in English. Rather, the gestures indicated that the learners' thinking for speaking was somewhere between their L1 Spanish and their L2 English. This would not have been discernible on the basis of speech alone.

Importance of Gesture in Understanding Second Language Acquisition and in Teaching Language

When we interact in a language, we not only speak but we gesture. This applies to interacting in our first language as well as our second language. To not take gesture into account in looking at second language acquisition and language teaching is to ignore an integral part of language and interaction. Over the past 30 to 40 years as this has become apparent, a growing number of scholars and language teachers have stressed the importance of both gesture and nonverbal communication in second language and foreign language teaching and research. These researchers and teachers have examined both learners' gestures and teachers' gestures in relation to a number of topics (e.g., communicative competence and use of emblems, assessment, thinking for speaking, type and function of gesture, classroom management, the facilitative function of gesture for comprehension and learning; see Stam, 2013, for a more detailed discussion). And the message is clear. Gestures are important in understanding second language acquisition, learners' proficiency, and teaching a language.

Let's look at communicative competence and emblems, the culturally specific gestures that differ from culture to culture. To function well in another language-culture, one needs to know what the emblems are and when it is appropriate to use them. Emblems can and should be taught in the English language classroom. In addition, as members of a language-culture, we often use emblems ourselves without thinking about them. Therefore, English language teachers also need to be aware of their own use of emblems so that they do not confuse students who may not yet understand them.

Research on gesture and assessment has shown that learners who gesture more like native speakers of the target language-culture are rated higher on oral proficiency than those who do not, regardless of the learners' grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Several studies have investigated whether second language learners' thinking for speaking patterns about motion change with increased L2 proficiency by using gesture to ascertain if the learners have acquired the L2 conceptualization. These studies provide an in-depth view of how the learners are thinking by demonstrating that the timing of the L2 learners' gestures indicates whether they are thinking in their L1, L2, or a combination of the two systems. In addition, some of these studies have demonstrated that the L1 speech and gesture of L2 learners is affected by the L2, indicating that cross-linguistic transfer is bidirectional.

The type and function of gestures used by second language learners have been examined in terms of lexical retrieval, reference, communication strategy, self-regulation, and naturalistic acquisition of L2 gestures. All of these studies shed light on the L2 acquisition process and how learners use gesture in their L2 interactions. This is information that would be missed by looking at only speech.

Gestures are important in terms of not just learners, but also teachers. Teachers' gestures have been explored in terms of their role in classroom management, learners' perceptions of them, how they can facilitate comprehension, and how they change when addressing learners with different levels of proficiency. In addition, studies investigating the teaching of vocabulary with gestures have shown that having learners repeat the teachers' gestures improves students' learning and retention of vocabulary more than just watching the teacher gesture (see Stam, 2013).

Conclusion

As the growing body of research on gesture in second language acquisition indicates, gesture is an important part of interaction and language teaching. It should not be ignored. It can provide us with information about learners' proficiency and their thinking. Its use by English language teachers can facilitate learning.

When we think of language as only speech and do not take gesture into account, we view only one aspect of language, the verbal aspect. We ignore the imagistic aspect. As David McNeill (2012) pointed out in *How Language Began: Gesture and Speech in Human Evolution*,

> language is more than . . . lexicosyntactic forms. . . . . It is also imagery. This imagery is in gesture, and is inseparable from language. . . . Taking seriously that language includes gesture as an integral component changes the look of everything. We see language in a new way, as a dynamic "language-as-action-and-being" phenomenon, not replacing but joining the traditional static (synchronic) "language-as-object" conception that has guided linguistics for more than a century. (p. xi)

Aren't interaction and teaching based on action, using language? Isn't it time to change our view about language and embrace both its dynamic nature as well as its synchronic one?

Chomsky revolutionized linguistics and challenged the then prevailing view of behaviorism by suggesting that humans had an innate ability to acquire language. Today, we take this perspective for granted. McNeill is challenging our beliefs about the nature of language: that it is more than just a synchronic object, that it also encompasses imagery and action, that it consists of both speech and gesture. An increasing number of second language researchers have adopted McNeill's perspective and have advocated that gesture be included in second language acquisition research and language teaching. What about you—are you ready for a new paradigm in linguistics?

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