

# Non-Verbal Communication: The “Silent” Cross-Cultural Contact With Indonesians

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## A. Non-Verbal Communication

This paper reviews key issues in cross-cultural communication; verbal communication and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication is defined as spoken communication, including the use of words and intonation to convey meaning. On the other hand, non-verbal communication is “silent” communication, including the use of gestures, postures, position, eye contact, facial expressions, and conversational distance.

The issue of non-verbal communication is related to the teaching of Indonesian to speakers of other languages. The learners studying Indonesian should not only be equipped with the language itself but also the Indonesian culture because “.....to know another’s language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one’s self”(Brembeck, Winston:1977) and “Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants”(Hall, Edward T:1959).

The paper will limit itself to non-verbal communication or speaking without words, not verbal communication. It will put emphasis on the importance of non-verbal communication concepts, because without them, a real communication can not be conducted smoothly and successfully. Moreover, the paper is also going to explore the similarities and differences of non-verbal communication between Indonesians and non-Indonesian speakers. By doing comparisons, the learners learning Indonesian will avoid themselves from interpreting non-verbal communication that is culturally different from their own.

If we don’t understand the non-verbal communication from different culture, it is possible that we can make a mistake of reading the other person incorrectly. Some forms of non-verbal signals are the same and universal and they have the same meaning or interpretation. But, the other forms are different and they have different meaning too, or no meaning in the other culture. Craig Storti in “Figuring Out” as quoted by Wienchecki (1999) mentions three main categories of non-verbal communication in the cross-cultural context. These are:

- a. Non-verbal behaviours which exist in your own culture and in the target culture which have the same meaning in both cultures.
- b. Non-verbal behaviours which exist in both cultures, but which are assigned different meanings in the two cultures.
- c. Non-verbal behaviours which have meaning in one culture but no meaning at all in the target language.

In addition, just as verbal language differs from culture to culture, the non-verbal language may also differ. One gesture may be common in a certain country and have a clear interpretation, it may be meaningless in another culture or even have an opposite meaning. Take, for example, the cultural interpretations and implications of hand gestures, the ring gesture, the thumb-up and V sign (Pease, Allan:1990).

The question now is “Which communication is practiced more in our daily life?” Is it verbal communication or non-verbal communication? Albert Mehrabian as quoted also by Pease found that the total impact of a message is about 7 percent verbal (words only) and 38 percent vocal (including tone of voice, inflection, and other sounds) and 55 percent non-verbal. One study also done in the United States showed that 93 percent of a message was transmitted by the speaker’s tone of voice and facial expressions. Only 7 percent of the person’s attitude was conveyed by words. Apparently, we express our emotions and attitudes more non-verbally than verbally (Adelman and Levine:1993).

## B. Non-Verbal Gestures

The following are the examples of non-verbal gestures which have the same and different meaning in the United States and Indonesia (Pease:1990, and Adelman:1993)

- a. When we are happy, we usually smile. In other words, smiling is typically an expression of pleasure. It can also show affection, convey politeness or even disguise true feelings. But, it depends on the situations and relationships. A woman's smile at a police officer does not carry the same meaning when she smiles to a young child. In Asian cultures including Indonesia, smiling is also used to cover emotional pain or embarrassment. When the students are late to come to the class or they can't answer the questions from the teacher, they are possible to smile to cover their embarrassment.
- b. When we are sad or angry, we can frown, scowl, or even cry. In Arab and Iranian cultures, people express grief openly. They mourn out loud, while people from China, Japan, and Indonesia are more subdued.
- c. When we indicate "no" or negation, we usually shake our head from side to side. Shaking head from side to side is also used to show disagreement or have negative attitude. If we have a friend who is arrested by the police officer for the third time because of his crime, we may shake our head from side to side to show the disagreement or negative attitude towards his crime.
- d. When we do not know or understand what people are talking about, we usually shrug our shoulders.
- e. The "Ring" or "OK" gesture has different meaning in different countries. In the USA and in English speaking countries, the ring or OK gesture means "Everything is OK". In France it can also mean zero or nothing. In Japan it can mean 'money, in some Mediterranean countries, it is used to infer that a man is homosexual. In Indonesia, the ring gesture means zero.
- f. The thumb-up gesture has three meanings in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. It is commonly used by hitch-hikers who are thumbing a lift, it is an OK signal, it is probably an insult signal meaning "up yours" or "sit on this" when the thumb is jerked sharply upwards. In Greece, its main meaning is "get stuffed". In Italy, when people count from one to five, they use the thumb to mean "one" and the index finger becomes "two". In Australia, America, England and Indonesia, people count "one" on the index finger and two on the middle finger, hence, the thumb will be number five. In Indonesia, the thumb gesture means good job or response to someone who has completed an excellent job. It also means "delicious" when we taste delicious food. In Indonesia, if we want to stop the public transportation to take us to a certain place, we use the index finger to stop it, not the thumb.
- g. The V sign has an "up yours" interpretation in Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain. The palm faces towards the speaker for the insult version. In USA, the V sign means victory but the two fingers and the palm face out. In Indonesia, whether the palm faces towards the speaker or the palm faces out, the V sign means number two.
- h. Scratching the head can mean a number of things-dandruff, fleas, sweating, uncertainty, forgetfulness or lying. It depends on the other gestures or the situations that happen at the same time. If the student scratches his head when he answers the question given by the teacher, scratching the head can mean that he forgets or he is not sure about the answer.
- i. Someone is sitting at a bus terminal with arms and legs tightly crossed and chin down and it is raining, it may mean that he feels cold, not defensive. If the person uses the same gesture while we are sitting across a table from him trying to sell him an idea or product, it can mean that he is negative or defensive about the situation.
- j. If a boy is introduced to a pretty and charming girl and he winks one of his eyes, it can be interpreted that the boy likes her or the boy is interested in further relationship with her.
- k. If we feel disappointed, we usually put our fist under our chin.
- l. If we want to get the attention of a pretty or charming girl who passes in front of us (a group of boys), we can whistle.
- m. In USA, beckoning people to come with the palm up is common or acceptable, however, in the Philippines, Korea, and parts of Latin America as well as other countries the same gesture is considered rude. In some countries, only an animal which can be beckoned with the palm up. In

Indonesia, when we want to beckon someone we extend one arm in front of us and, with the palm down, wave to the person to come.

n. Eye contact is important because it shows intimacy, attention, and influence. In general, Indonesian makes less eye contact with strangers in big cities than in small towns. In Indonesian small town, it usual for two strangers walking each other to make eye contact, smile and perhaps say “Hi !”, “Good Morning” or even “Where are you going”.

### C. CROSS-CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

The activities below are taken from Adelman and Levine(1993)

#### # Act out the following situations by using body language:

- 1.You can not hear your friend’s voice
- 2.You want a child to come to your side
- 3.Your friend has just walked into the class to take an important examination. Wish him or her good luck
- 4.Somebody has asked you a question, and you do not know the answer
- 5.You want to tell your friend that the lecture is boring
- 6.You signal to your friend that the person on the phone is talking too much
- 7.You are ready to enter the restaurant when you notice that a simple dinner costs almost Rp.50.000,00
- 8.You want to express “Oh, not again!”
- 9.You want to tell your friend that you have forgotten to bring something.
- 10.You want to tell your friend to wait a second or slow down.
- 11.You want to tell your friend that everything is OK.

#### # Multiple-Choice Questionnaire

1. Signaling a waiter is done by:

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a.Signaling the fingers
- b.Whistling
- c.Raising one hand briefly
- d.Saying, ”Waiter,” and gesturing to him

2.How do people end conversations nonverbally?

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a.They look at their watches
- b.They look away from the speaker
- c.They back up slowly
- d.They stop talking abruptly

3.The best way to get a teacher’s attention is to:

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a.Snap your fingers
- b.Raise your hand until the teacher calls on you
- c.Raise your hand and lower it when the teacher notices that you have a question.
- d.Call out the teacher’s name

4. When you are being introduced, what do you do in addition to speaking (e.g., what do you do with your hands)?

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a. Shake hands lightly
- b. Shake hands firmly for a few seconds
- c. Shake hands until the introduction is completely finished
- d. Shake hands and then bow

5. When you are introduced, what kind of eye contact do you use?

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a. Make direct eye contact
- b. Avoid eye contact
- c. Make eye contact and then quickly look away
- d. Make eye contact and then look at the floor

6. Nonverbally, how would you get the attention of a busy secretary in an office?

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a. Stand by the door and wait until the secretary looks at you
- b. Stand close to the secretary until you are noticed
- c. Sit down near the secretary and remain silent until you are noticed
- d. Tap the secretary on the shoulder

7. If a student does not understand a point a teacher makes in class, it is best to:

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a. Raise a hand and ask for clarification
- b. Look confused
- c. Remain silent and ask the teacher after the class
- d. Leave the class

8. How do you motion to a person to come to you?

*In Indonesia:* .....

*In the United States:*

- a. Extend both arms in front of you and, with your palms up, wave to the person to come
- b. Roll your eyes in the direction you want the person to come
- c. Extend one arm in front of you and, with your palm up, wave to the person to come
- d. Extend one arm in front of you and, with your palm down, wave to the person to come

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**TEACHING INDONESIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN  
THE INFORMATION AGE: QUALITY, IMAGE, AND PROFILE  
4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Teaching of Indonesian  
to Speakers of Other Languages  
Sanur-Bali, Indonesia  
October 1-3, 2001**

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Bandung, August 28, 2001

Dear KIPBIPA Secretariat  
IALF Bali  
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Dear Sir,

Please receive my complete paper and a disk. The title of my paper is "Non-Verbal Communication: The "Silent" Cross-Cultural Contact With Indonesians". I plan to deliver the paper for parallel sessions. I have also transferred the money for registration (dated: August 3, 2001) but I have no idea yet whether the money has been received. I am also interested in booking the hotels the committee offered but I do not know the detail procedure. I also want to know whether the committee provides the persons to take the participants from Ubung Bus terminal. The reply can be sent to:

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I look forward to your favourable reply. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Muhammad Handi Gunawan,S.Pd

