

# Teaching Spanish nonverbal communication through soap opera

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## Reference Data:

Quintero García, D., & Vicente-Rasoamalala, L. (2007). Teaching Spanish nonverbal communication through soap opera. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Traditionally L2 teaching and learning processes mainly focus on verbal communication. The aim of this article is the presentation of a didactic unit which raises the students' awareness of the nonverbal components in L2 communication. In general, most teaching curricula do not cover this issue in depth. Specifically, we try to illustrate how those components can be taught through real input in the L2. Some relevant aspects such as proxemics, kinesics, and paralinguistics in the Hispanic culture are dealt with. Furthermore, cross-cultural differences are stressed as potentially significant for target language acquisition of communicative competence. In order to put into practice such issues, we present one activity exploiting a very popular Spanish soap opera.

従来のL2教育と学習プロセスは、主にことばのコミュニケーションに焦点をあてている。本稿の狙いは、L2のコミュニケーションのノンバーバルコンポーネントにおいて、学生の認識向上に関して、教育的な単位から説明することである。一般に、ほとんどの教育カリキュラムでは、この問題を深くカバーしていない。我々は、L2でのリアルインプットを通して、それらの内容がどのようなよう教えられているのかを、はっきりと説明しようとしている。ヒスパニック系の文化の近接学、動作学とパラ言語学のような、いくつかの関連した様相がある。さらにまた、異文化間の違いは、伝達能力の言語習得の目標において、潜在的に重要である。このような論点を実行するために、非常に人気のあるスペインのテレビドラマを活用して、1つのアクティビティを紹介していく。

## The multimodal nature of oral communication

**O**ral communication is multimodal. That is, it occurs at different channels or modalities involving discourse, gestures, and corporal and facial expressions. Several works on communication using interactionist and ethnographic frameworks prove that such components are timed to speech (Argyle, 1975; Jannedy & Mendoza-Denton, 2005). It seems that in more than 90% of utterances, speech and gesture synchronize. Therefore, gesture and speech behave as a single entity when conveying meanings.

Mehrabian (1971) presents one approximate statistic concerning the components of communication:

**Table 1. Components of communication (Mehrabian, 1971)**

1.	Verbal components	7%
2.	Paralinguistic components (i.e., the way words are produced)	38%
3.	Facial expressions	55%

Those numbers of intervening features might change according to the culture. Overall, however, in our daily life we often use gestures and facial expressions to communicate with each other. Different studies have identified a wide variety of types of nonverbal communication, and as Mehrabian (1971) shows above, perhaps less than ten percent of interpersonal communication involves words, the remainder being made up of non-linguistic devices. The following table is a relatively simple classification of those non-linguistic devices, compiled from different works (Hall, 1963):

**Table 2. Non-linguistic devices**

1.	Kinesics	body motions (blushes, shrugs, eye movement, foot-tapping, drumming fingers)
2.	Proxemics	spatial separation (in relation to both the social and physical environment)
3.	Haptics	touch
4.	Oculesics	eye contact
5.	Chronemics	use of time, waiting, pausing
6.	Olfactics	smell
7.	Vocalics	tone of voice, pitch, volume, speed
8.	Sound Symbols	grunting, mmm, er, ah, uh-huh, mumbling
9.	Silence	absence of sound (muteness, stillness, secrecy)
10.	Adornment	clothing, jewelry, hairstyle
11.	Posture	position of the body (characteristic or assumed)

12.	Locomotion	walking, running, staggering, limping
13.	Expression	frowns, grimaces, smirks, smiles, pouting

Despite the fact that nonverbal phenomena are important in human communication they have not fully been taken into account in foreign language classroom activities and research (Blanco Santos, 1997; Cestero, 1999a; Miller, 2000; Quintero, 2005a, 2006; Vicente-Rasoamalala, 2006). This paper attempts to provide a rationale for raising student awareness of nonverbal communication in L2, and presents specific activities for teaching Spanish nonverbal elements in L2 classes using soap operas as authentic material (see Appendix).

**The role of nonverbal communication**

Particularly, in the same way as verbal language items, nonverbal communication has functions which need to be taught along with their linguistic forms. Nonverbal communication in general performs three basic functions:

1. managing identity
2. defining relationships
3. conveying attitudes and emotions.

Specifically, a nonverbal element might have the following functions:

1. complementing or enhancing information (Chovil, 1992)
2. providing extra information (McNeill, 1992)
3. addressing attention to the listener (Goodwin, 1981)

4. supplying usual verbalized actions in communicative acts (Scherer, 1980).

There are several major problematic factors in teaching such aspects. First, like speech, nonverbal forms have both form and function. Second, such non-linguistic components are not always directly translatable. The first factor makes nonverbal communication difficult to teach. The latter leads to breakdowns and misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

The nonverbal components in communication might be generalized and ritualized in two ways: a) *socioculturally* as features related to cultural specificity, and b) *individually constituted*. The following table presents the most typical functions of gestural forms:

**Table 3. Functions of gestural forms**

	<b>Form</b>	<b>Main Function (in some cultures)</b>
1.	Nod (Yes)	Repeating
2.	Shrug (I don't know)	Substituting
3.	Scratch head, quizzical look	Complementing
4.	Tone of voice, pointing	Accenting
5.	Hand raised	Regulating, turn taking
6.	Head shake	Contradicting
7.	Eye movements	Deceiving
8.	Staring/Looking down or away	Dominating/Submitting
9.	Raised fist	Aggression
10.	Hand-shake	Socializing
11.	Touching, kissing	Arousal
12.	Over-adornment	Boasting

Notwithstanding, the functions of nonverbal forms might vary from culture to culture. Such components can be rooted as particular features in a given group of people. A particular nonverbal cultural concept might not have a corresponding

equivalent in another culture. As well, the same form might have a different meaning. Such areas of divergence among languages and cultures might be significant when learning a foreign language. Acquiring a language does not only mean learning the verbal structural components but all those that might serve to communicate involving the nonverbal communicative elements.

Although most nonverbal actions such as smiles, laughter and sour expressions are universal, there are also differences related to gender and age. As well, nonverbal communication tends to be relatively ambiguous and open to interpretation while its influence often depends on the nature of the “listener,” particularly when it is unclear whether the messages conveyed are deliberate or unconscious.

### Potential acquisitional benefits using audiovisual materials as L2 input

Regarding the internal processes using audiovisual material as a form of non-interactive input, some authors have suggested that this type of input might be processed in learner's minds. From a psychological point of view, they might promote SL comprehension. According to the Theory of Mental Representation (Allen, 1995; Garrett, 1991; Terrell, 1986), this type of input may involve at least two cognitive steps: i) binding and ii) mapping.

Terrell (1986) refers to *binding* as the connections learners form between the non-interactive input they hear, read, or see and what the expressions mean. Binding would lead to the formation of mental representations about how language works. After this step, students must develop a “mapping” or

processing ability. For Garrett (1991), *mapping* is the “ability to access meaning-form connections held in memory, to process them automatically, and to articulate them in real-life discourse” (p. 79). During mapping, students use the mental representations to express personal meaning independently from external stimuli.

Other psychologists have put forward the benefits of mental representations in learning a foreign language. Anderson (1980) suggests that the formation of mental representations of FL expressions is influenced by how the expressions are originally presented to the students.

Learners might also acquire enhanced cultural understanding of the target language and some specific aspects through visual input. This audiovisual presentation presents authentic language and contextual features about portions of verbal and nonverbal L2 features and their functioning, for example, to better understand the use of some gestures, or to show that speech rhythms of the Target Language differ from their L1. In particular, video can be used to present a specific task to make students work on specific items. Students may be more informed and gain a global perspective to communicate more accurately in the L2.

Any activity should activate learner’s attention, effort, intelligence and conscious (metacognitive) learning strategies in order to enhance learning, that is, calling upon a range of cognitive competences such as observing, locating, recognizing, associating, classifying, guessing, anticipating, formulating assumptions, etc. The use of videoed material in foreign language classrooms may be one audio visual aid and rich source of input that enhances L2 acquisition

(Herron, Hanley, & Cole, 1995). Visual stimuli may act as a trigger for noticing L2 components, thus helping students to predict information about the target language taught. Dramatic audiovisual materials allow us to capture instances of nonverbal communication in ways that CDs, radio programs, and even face-to-face classroom interaction cannot.

### Cultureme model

Portions of culture need to be integrated in the curricula of language teaching as Poyatos (1994) and Cestero (1999a, 1999b) claim. The basic culturemes are those perceived by our senses: acoustic, visual, olfactive, haptic and kinesic. Furthermore, understanding the culture of the speakers of the language is an integral part of learning a language. Students through material presenting the culture of the target language may develop an understanding of the perspectives or viewpoints, practices or patterns of behavior, and products of the culture(s). This cultural knowledge about the L2 might improve the students’ ability to interact appropriately with native speakers of the language and to function successfully within that cultural setting.

### Key considerations for using soap operas in the FL classroom

#### Data selection

Data selection and video edition are needed to provide good and representative samples for activities in foreign language teaching.

### *The general goals using soap operas*

Using soap operas as foreign language teaching material will enhance visual components. Moreover, they further exploit key features taught in classroom tasks (Herron, 1994). Distinctively, soap operas can be attractive FL teaching material on many levels. They stimulate and motivate student interest making the language learning more authentic. For instance, there is a more natural and straightforward dramatization of FL nonverbal cultural cues than in comedies. Also, the cues have more salience in soap operas than in news and other kinds of movies. Furthermore, soap operas are alluring for students due to their popularity in the foreign country: The soap opera used in the activity we present in the Appendix has won the most prestigious Spanish television awards.

Moreover, such components should be included in the L2 teaching curricula to provide a comprehensive view of the communicative means of the foreign language. The following table illustrates how nonverbal communication components can be included as sociocultural and functional content.

**Table 4. FL teaching curriculum components**

1	Objectives	-Learning -Communication
2	Contents	-Functional (verbal/nonverbal) -Grammatical -Lexical -Sociocultural (verbal/nonverbal)
3	Activities	-Learning -Communication

### **Some considerations about Spanish nonverbal communication**

Spanish culture allows people to be very emotionally expressive. Most people kiss on both cheeks when greeting. People always look someone straight in the eye when being introduced and maintain eye contact as they speak. They are often very loud and animated in normal speech compared to other cultures which might favor silence or quietness. Some foreigners might think that Spanish are often angry or annoyed when speaking. Later, they realize that the high tone and volume are just the normal way of speaking with everyone.

Spanish people also often use hand motions and signals when they communicate (Martinell Gifré & Ueda, 2004, Quintero, 2005b). Personal space in Spain is much smaller than in Japan. Spanish people might come closer to you on the street. In Spanish culture it is very common to touch when greeting people.

Therefore, for learners of Spanish as an L2 there might be differences in cultural use and interpretations of body language, expression, personal space, and other nonverbal tools (Cestero, 1999a; Quintero, 2005a). Learning such features might help them to have more proficient communicative skills in Spanish.

Additionally, it is worth pointing out that not all Spanish-speaking cultures behave identically to Spanish culture. Each country has its own particularities. Nevertheless, there is a shared core of communicative nonverbal elements in these cultures due to the Spanish heritage.

### Teaching situationally with the help of video: The tasks

Nonverbal and verbal communication need to be taught and practiced situationally, in the right contexts, and with plenty of cultural input and awareness. Given the importance of nonverbal clues in communication, there is a singular lack of material for the teacher focusing on this aspect of communication, but a few techniques are outlined below.

Learners discuss the meaning of gestures and expressions (either demonstrated by the teacher, from pictures, or from existing published materials).

### Drawbacks

Videos do not provide a means for learners to interact with others. Interaction has been said to greatly increase the

Table 5. Task design framework

1	Goal	Awareness of the importance of nonverbal information provided by proxemics, kinesics, and paralinguistics in Spanish interaction.
2	Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selected video extracts from popular Spanish soap operas</li> <li>• Photocopies with graphic information about characters to appear, tables, and some written criteria to help understanding of the target nonverbal communication in L2.</li> <li>• A DVD or video player or computer and a screen.</li> </ul>
3	Procedures	<p><b>1a)</b> Warm Up: Short introduction of the pragmatic context to be analyzed and the linguistic exponents to be used in the activity.</p> <p><b>1b)</b> Students watch the different videos and write down the possible relationship between the characters that take part in the different scenes. Students and teacher then try to reach a common conclusion.</p> <p><b>1c)</b> Warm up: Some explanation of linguistic exponents to be used in the activity. Scenes are reviewed again regarding proxemics. Students and teacher try to reach a common conclusion.</p> <p><b>2)</b> In groups, students try to induce some rule from the information elicited. Each group then presents its conclusion regarding proxemics in Spanish and their own culture.</p> <p><b>3)</b> Students watch the different clips and hypothesize about nonverbal signs related to greetings and farewells in Spanish. Students and teacher then try to reach a common conclusion.</p> <p><b>4)</b> Students identify different emotions after watching video excerpts and complete a table. Students and teacher then try to reach a common conclusion.</p> <p><b>5)</b> Students identify verbal expressions that characters do not verbalize. Students and teacher then try to reach a common conclusion.</p> <p><b>6)</b> Students reflect about L2 nonverbal actions. Each group then presents its conclusions regarding nonverbal communication in Spanish and their own culture.</p>
4	Predicted Outcomes	<p>Product (open): completion of character information regarding relationship and proxemic behaviour, paralinguistics and social gestures.</p> <p>Process: Some cognitive processes are involved such as: induction, binding, mapping, and reflection. Linguistic exponents are expected to occur such as questions regarding other possible relationships rather than the ones proposed or personal opinions regarding the target language nonverbal components.</p>

ability for a student to learn a language. Video alone does not provide enough comprehensible input or what the learner actually feels necessary for learning a language.

Interaction also forces the language learner to negotiate meaning and try to understand the person they are interacting with. This act of negotiation is in fact helping the student to acquire a language and gain comprehensible input. Videos cannot assist in that negotiation, although students watching the video can negotiate meaning among themselves.

### Conclusion

Oral communication is multimodal in essence, i.e., in conveying messages, humans make use of verbal and nonverbal components. Therefore, it is important to help L2 learners to decode, understand, and grasp the meaning of the events portrayed in soap operas since those resources show cultural aspects of the target language. In this article, we have tried to present soap opera as one valuable source of real nonverbal L2 input to foreign language learners.

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**Appendix**

**Spanish Nonverbal Communication**

The original tasks are all written in Spanish, so some parts have been translated into English. Please note that supporting graphics can be found on the Internet at <www.yosoybea.telecinco.es/>.

1) Watch these three scenes from the popular Spanish soap opera “*Yo soy Bea*”.

1.a) Classify each of them in one of the next categories:

Social Context	Personal Context	Intimate Context
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1.b) Relate each character with the rest.

1.c) Reflect upon the distance followed by each character

Very, quite, too	Near, far
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2) Try to form a rule related to the distance followed by the characters. Can you find any differences or similarities in your culture?

**VIDEO 1:**

1.a) CONTEXT .....

1.b) You can use the following vocabulary:

Amigo/a, conocido/a, desconocido/a, enemigo/a, jefe/a, subordinado/a, compañero/a, novio/a.
---

ALVARO	BARBARA	BEATRIZ	CAYETANA	GONZALO
Relación:	Relación:	Relación:	Relación:	Relación:
Distancia:	Distancia:	Distancia:	Distancia:	Distancia:

**VIDEO 2:**

1.a) CONTEXT .....

1.b) You can use the following vocabulary:

Amigo/a, conocido/a, desconocido/a, enemigo/a, vecino/a, familiar, compañero/a, novio/a.
--

SANTIAGO	BEATRIZ	CARMELO
Relación:	Relación:	Relación:
Distancia:	Distancia:	Distancia:

**VIDEO 3:**

1.a) CONTEXT .....

1.b) You can use the following vocabulary:

Amigo/a, conocido/a, enemigo/a, vecino/a, compañero/a, novio/a.

CHUSA	JOTA
Relación:	Relación:
Distancia:	Distancia:

As you have seen in the previous activity, the personal space in Spanish culture is much smaller than in Japan. If you travel to Spain you might find that people come closer to you on the streets.

In the following activities you will be aware that nonverbal components play significant roles in human communication. Some gestural and paralinguistic components might have universal meanings across cultures. Nevertheless, some of them might have different uses and social significance in certain cultures.

You will see in the following clips that Spanish might seem very emotionally expressive for you. As well, Spanish culture is a touch-oriented society compared to Asian or Germanic groups.

**Some Spanish Social Gestures**

***Greeting And Farewell Gestures***

3) After viewing the clips complete the following table describing the social relationships of participants, the parts of the body involved in greetings and farewells and other

features that might attract your attention or might differ from your culture.

Compare your responses with your classmate.

CLIPS	SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF THE PARTICIPANTS	PARTS OF THE BODY INVOLVED	OTHER SALIENT FEATURES
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

***Emotions***

4) Identify different emotions in the following video excerpts and complete the table.

Anguish Joy Surprise Impatience Anger Uncertainty Shame

How do the actors perform such feelings? Through gestures or paralanguage? Are they equal or different in your culture? Comment on all those issues with your partner.

CLIPS	EMOTIONS	DESCRIPTION OF GESTURES/ PARALANGUAGE	EQUAL OR DIFFERENT TO YOUR CULTURE
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

**Nonverbal Signals**

5) Nonverbal signals might substitute expressions or accompany them. Your mission will be discovering the verbal expressions that the characters do not verbalize in the videos. There might be more than one possibility. Use a dictionary if necessary.

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol> |
|--|

**True Or False Statements**

6) Tick your answer.

STATEMENTS	T	F
Hugging and kissing when greeting are uncommon in Spanish culture.		
Raising the voice might communicate one excessively demonstrative behaviour for Spanish.		
Spanish do not touch each other very much when they socialize.		
Eye contact is essential during communication among Spanish people.		
The social distance among Spanish speakers is very wide.		
Spanish gesticulate minimally when they talk.		
There is high sensory involvement in Spanish culture.		

Further exploitation of videos:

1. Learners watch a video clip without sound, then discuss and write the dialogue.
2. Learners act out a dialogue using gesture and expression only.
3. Learners, in pairs, take turns in listening to each other for 30 seconds, using only nonverbal responses.