

Non-verbal communication

Tutorial

For most people, non-verbal communication signifies body language. However, there are many different types of non-verbal communication and here we will raise your awareness of the non-verbal signals that can enhance your relationship with your learners.

Body movements

Whether you are talking or listening, you are sending a continuous stream of information from:

- the way you hold your head;
- the angle at which you hold your body;
- what you do with your limbs;
- your changing – or unchanging – facial expressions.

Silence

When you allow silence in your conversations, you are letting learners know that you:

- genuinely want to listen to them;
- are willing to hold back from giving advice or opinions;
- are seeking collaboration, rather than telling them what to do.



Watch out for ...

If a silence lasts more than about five or six seconds, the learner will begin to feel uncomfortable. So be prepared to make a gentle intervention, perhaps with a slightly different question, a prompt, or an empathic suggestion such as "I guess it's hard to think of an answer right now".

Paralinguistics

When you listen, you will rarely stay completely silent for long. You will make sounds (like 'Mmm', 'Ah', 'Hmmm') that are difficult to capture in writing but that signal that you are listening. Used in a neutral way, they invite a learner to continue talking.

Watch out for ...

Some of these sounds are not neutral. They can express disapproval, disappointment or even lack of interest. Guard against sending negative messages.

Activity: Watch the language

Purpose

To heighten your awareness of your own non-verbal communication.

Description

A structured reflection on your non-verbal communication.

Instructions

Part 1

The next time you watch an interview on the television, look out for:

- how the interviewer holds their head and body;
- their facial expressions;
- how they shift their posture when they hear something they disagree with or disapprove of;
- how they change their posture when they hear something they interpret as positive;
- non-verbal paralinguistic noises.

You might like to try turning off the sound and concentrating purely on what you see.

Put yourself in the interviewee's place and notice the effect the interviewer's non-verbal behaviour has on you.



Part 2

The next time you are having a significant conversation with a learner, take a few seconds to think about:

- how you are holding your head and body;
- your facial expression;
- how you change your posture when you hear something that troubles you;
- how you change your posture when you hear something to celebrate;
- how comfortable you are with allowing silences;
- whether you are using paralinguistics in a neutral way to encourage learners to continue talking – or if your non-verbal sounds express judgement or disapproval.

Learning points

Being more aware of what you do and do not do is an important stage in building positive and productive non-verbal skills.

Activity: Taking things forward

Purpose

To heighten your awareness of your own non-verbal signals.

Description

A way of seeing yourself as others see you.

Instructions

Invite feedback from people you trust by asking them to tell you what they notice about your non-verbal behaviour. You may behave differently in different contexts, so ask:

- members of your family;
- close friends;
- colleagues.

If you have a sufficiently open and trusting relationship with certain learners, you might like to ask them too.

Watch out for ...

You will find it impossible not to communicate. Whatever you do non-verbally, you will inevitably be sending out messages. So keep checking how you are sitting, how you use your hands, and how your expression changes when you hear a learner say something you are uncomfortable with.

Learning points

Other people can give you a perspective on yourself that you might be unaware of. With this information, you can make choices about the messages you send out.

Notes