



<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	pages
<b>WHY INCLUDE THE UNSPOKEN MEANINGS OF NONVERBAL BODY LANGUAGE IN TEACHING &amp; LEARNING ENGLISH?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>HOW CAN “BODY LANGUAGE” BE TAUGHT OR LEARNED?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>THE GENERAL FEATURES OF BODY LANGUAGE</b>	<b>6-7</b>
<b>SOME UNIVERSAL EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTION (REPRODUCIBLE HANDOUT)</b>	<b>8-9</b>
<b>SOME RELATIONSHIP POSTURES (REPRODUCIBLE HANDOUT)</b>	<b>10-13</b>
<b>USING THE NON-VERBAL IMAGE CARD DECKS A-M AND N-Z: “THE MEANINGS OF BODY LANGUAGE”</b>	<b>14-18</b>
<i>1 Categorizing Non-Verbal Expressions and Movements According to Meaning</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>2 Identifying and Comparing Expressions of Body Language</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>3 Positive, Negative, or Neutral?</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>4 Communicating Non-Verbal Meaning Quickly</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>CARD DECK &amp; ACTIVITY PREPARATION OR FOLLOW-UP: INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT, HOMEWORK, &amp; REVIEW</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>THE LANGUAGE OF BODY LANGUAGE (REPRODUCIBLE HANDOUTS WITH PHOTOS FROM “THE MEANINGS OF BODY LANGUAGE” CARD DECKS A-M AND N-Z)</b>	<b>20-26</b>
<b>CLASSIFYING BODY LANGUAGE IN OTHER WAYS</b>	<b>27</b>

**by Elaine Kirn, West Los Angeles College, Culver City CA 90230**

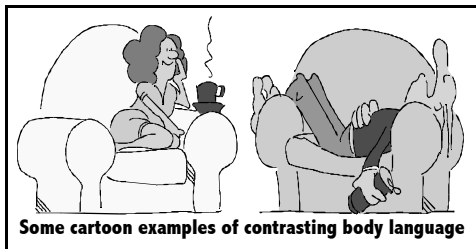
© 2000 Authors & Editors, 10736 Jefferson Blvd., #604,  
 Culver City CA 90230-4933. E-Mail [info@2learn-english.com](mailto:info@2learn-english.com)  
 Tel. 310-836-2014.

# WHY INCLUDE THE UNSPOKEN MEANINGS OF NONVERBAL BODY LANGUAGE IN TEACHING & LEARNING ENGLISH?

As its primary purpose, spoken language attempts to convey or communicate meaning effectively. The unspoken “message of body language” has the same goal. The term “body language” refers to posture (usually standing or sitting), the movements of body parts, hand gestures, and facial expressions. These are all important in the nonverbal expression of meaning, especially emotions and attitudes. Body language even includes cultural factors such as personal distance or space, timing, eye contact, and the amount or degree of expressiveness or movement. Here are some reasons that the unspoken meanings of body language should be presented, discussed, and practiced in language and culture teaching and learning:

- Language learners at all levels of proficiency often have difficulty understanding fluent, rapid, uninterrupted native-speaker speech, especially in media presentations, academic lectures, or involved discussions of complex issues. Attention to and understanding of nonverbal signals and expressions of meaning can help them get the main point or message.
- The meaning conveyed through body language is likely to override the intended message of words, even carefully planned and clearly articulated oral language. A discrepancy between speech and movements or facial expressions creates not only discomfort but often misunderstanding or mistrust. An *apparent* discrepancy between different kinds of body language is likely to confuse. That’s because generally, the nonverbal expression of emotions and attitudes leaves a much stronger impression than verbal attempts at communication.
- The same body language can have different meanings or connotations—depending on the accompanying facial expressions, tone of voice, timing, context, and other factors. Conversely, different kinds of body signals can convey similar messages.
- Some nonverbal expressions of universal emotions—such as hunger, fear, happiness, sadness, love, and so on—are similar or comparable all over the world. On the other hand, culture-specific gestures and movements may have different meanings in various places. In the wrong contexts, some kinds of body language can even convey unintended but insulting or offensive or dangerous messages.
- Successful communication is such a complex process that both the initiator and the receiver need all they help they can get to convey meaning clearly, avoiding or preventing wasteful or even harmful miscommunication.

Some body language signals are cultural, used and understood by most members of a national or ethnic group. Others are confined to, or even spread by, certain age groups or small groups of friends or associates. Nevertheless, even within a group, no two individuals behave exactly the same nonverbally. Body language expresses personality. It makes a difference in how a person interacts with and is perceived by others. Though perhaps not as complex or difficult to analyze as the range of meaning that can be expressed verbally, non-verbal body language is worth a great deal of attention. In the language and culture classroom, nonverbal communication deserves observation, analysis, discussion, and practice.



# HOW CAN “BODY LANGUAGE” BE TAUGHT OR LEARNED?

Like other kinds of language, body language is best taught or learned “in context.” If meaningful facial expressions, body part movements, and/or gestures are appropriately connected to oral language and real-life situations, the meaning of the intended messages becomes clearer—much easier for listeners and observers to interpret correctly. Therefore, the most effective and efficient ways to teach and learn body language must involve their meanings—both the intended messages and the “side effects” or “connotations” (suggested meanings) of the expressions and movements.

The most successful language learners tend to be accurate imitators—of native or near-native speakers whose personalities and expressions of meaning they most admire or wish to emulate. For this reason, body-language lessons have to include visuals—drawings, photos, videotaped segments, demonstrations, and as much pantomime—or even better, as many real movements, expressions, and gestures—as possible.

Of course, the topic of body language lends itself naturally to discussions of culture, including the general similarities and differences in the nonverbal expression and understanding of various groups of people. It will naturally elicit “cross-cultural anecdotes”—usually personal true stories about body language mistakes to avoid because they have caused misunderstanding in the past. And it will stimulate the creation of instructive roleplay demonstrations, amusing and effective cooperative learning activities that will benefit all members of the class, including the instructor.

Here are four very general suggestions for steps to follow in a unit or series of lessons on nonverbal expression and communication:

1. **Present examples of body language** to be observed, discussed, and/or practiced. Some source materials are articles about body language or nonverbal communication and plenty of visuals—drawings or photos on handouts, cards, and/or overhead transparencies, as well as videotaped segments (perhaps with the sound turned off) and live pantomime to analyze.
2. **Set up and monitor group or individual activities** involving the meanings of body language. The topic lends itself easily to categorizing tasks, such as classifying visuals or descriptions of nonverbal behavior according to (a) the body parts involved, (b) the connotation of the expressions or movements (positive or negative), (c) the general meanings of the expressions or gestures in North American culture, (d) the universality or uniqueness of the language, etc. It is also appropriate for matching activities—putting together examples of body language with similar and/or opposite meanings in North American culture or the world.
3. **Create or have participants create printed or oral “quizzes”** that test learners’ knowledge of body language vocabulary, such as descriptions or pantomimes of situations with multiple choices of appropriate reactions to each context.
4. **Have participants demonstrate their understanding** of body language by creating (a) real or imaginary anecdotes or stories illustrating nonverbal communication or misunderstandings (cultural gaffes) and/or (b) brief “skits” or role plays in which there are plenty of movements carrying (part of) the meaning of the interactions and situations.

On the following pages are reproducible worksheets that may be used in class activities like those suggested above. They may be made into overhead transparencies, copied onto card stock and cut apart as individual cards, reproduced as class handouts, and/or used in other ways appropriate and helpful to the language learner, the informal study group, or the organized language and culture classroom.