

Alternatives to Verbal Interactions

Joseph Falkner, MST/CCC-SLP

Definition of Communication

- Floyd, 2006: “a dynamic and ongoing process whereby senders and receivers exchange messages.”
- “Nonverbal skill is an integral aspect of overall social competence or social skill” (Greene, 2007)
 - “social competence (is) a combination of...knowledge (i.e., cognitions) and translation (i.e., behavior).”
 - Effective learning requires the student to interpret both the verbal and nonverbal streams of information coming from the teacher.
 - Effective social interaction depends upon the ability to interpret the same information.

The Myth of Verbal Interactions

- In our culture, we place a high value on verbal interactions
 - Politicians
 - Celebrities
 - Teachers
- In truth, the narratives, or stories, that we tell about ourselves and others has a tremendous impact on our culture, our communities, our relationships, and our sense of self

The Typical Communication Message

55% visual

37% vocal

7-8% verbal

Nonverbal Communication

- Much of our message (as high as 92% in social settings) is conveyed by nonverbal means.
- Nonverbal communication refers to:
 - “...the vocal, facial, and body cues” used to convey messages. It “comprises all behaviors that are not words.” (Floyd, 2006)

Vocal Components of Nonverbal Communication

- The Vocal Components of Nonverbal Communication refer to:
 - “The way we say the words we say (that) helps us convey our intended meanings.”
 - More formally referred to as prosody
 - Prosody consists of distinctive variations of stress, tone, and timing in spoken language (how pitch changes from word to word, the speed of speech, the loudness of speech, and the duration of pauses all contribute to prosody) (wordIQ.com, 2011).

An Exercise in the Effects of Prosody

- I didn't say you were stupid.
- I didn't say you were stupid.
- I didn't say you were stupid.
- I didn't say you were stupid.
- I didn't say you were stupid.
- I didn't say you were stupid.

Sarcasm and Prosody

- One of the things that signals that we are being sarcastic is an alteration in the prosody of speech from what would be expected.
 - “Yeah right.”
- This can be very difficult for an individual who struggles with social perception and cognition to interpret
- Sarcasm can also be used by some individuals to distance themselves from others

Emotional “High jacking” of Prosody

- Our emotions can hijack our prosody.
- Our emotions can cause alterations in the stressing, pausing, production of pitch, etc...revealing a different message than the one that we may have intended.

Prosodic Cueing

- Alterations in the pitch, stress, rhythm, and loudness of the voice can be used to highlight and punctuate verbal information
- Unless we do so intentionally, prosodic cues for messages may be below our level of awareness
- Prosodic features can be very transient/fleeting; they can be difficult to replicate in the fashion that we previously produced

Proxemic Components of Nonverbal Communication

- “Personal distance influences the intensity of a relationship or of a communication within a relationship.” (Caswell, 1993)
- Distance between communication partners can convey a number of factors:
 - Emotional connection
 - Trust
 - Emotion
 - Sincerity

Personal Space and Power

- The perception of control of personal space can influence power relationships.
- Control of personal space, either closeness or distance, is itself ambiguous but it can significantly impact on the anxiety of the other person.
- An extreme form close personal space is touching
 - Touch is a powerful signal
 - Touch can be a potentially threatening stimuli

Proxemic Cueing

- Proximity—use of personal space
- “The message they (postural cues) convey depend on what else is happening at the time; they often indicate the intensity with which the main message is being sent.” (Caswell, 1993).
- As with all nonverbal messages, intentional control of personal space can be used to prompt and cue students

Facial Expression Components of Nonverbal Communication

- Facial expression refers to gestures produced by the facial muscles
- Facial expressions often relate to emotional expression, and can be both under voluntary and involuntary control
- The face is a multi-modal, multi-message system (Ekman, Friesen; 2003)
- We all have a “resting posture” to our face
 - This is the habitual position in which we hold our face
 - It can relate to a number of factors, but can convey unintentional messages to communication partners

Three Types of Signals from the Face (Ekman, Friesen; 2003)

- Static signals (signals that don't change, or have limited change, over time)—such as skin color, shape of the face, bone structure
- Slow signals (signals that change slowly over time)—such as wrinkles, changes in muscle tone, skin texture
- Rapid signals (signals produced by the facial muscles, resulting in temporary changes in facial appearances, shifts in the location and shape of the facial features, and temporary wrinkles; these changes flash on the face for seconds or fractions of a second)—what we conventionally refer to as facial expressions are the result of these rapid signals

Modifying These Signals

- All three types of signals can be modified or disguised by personal choice, although it is hardest to modify the static and slow signals.
- These can be modified by: cosmetics, hair styles, jewelry, glasses, plastic surgery
- We may intentionally try to inhibit the movements of the face—related to rapid signals/facial expressions of emotion

Facial Expression Interpretation and Persons Who Struggle with Social Interactions

- Many individuals who struggle with social interactions have difficulty interpreting the multi-modal and multi-message communication provided by facial signals
- Individuals with ASD may have difficulty attending to, and interpreting, key facial features that might help them interpret facial expressions
- Rapid changes in facial expression may be difficult to attend to, and interpret as a whole

Use of Facial Expressions in Prompting/Cueing

- It is important to make sure that there is a consonance between the message that we wish to convey and the facial expression that we are transmitting
- Awareness of the “resting posture” of our face and the message that it conveys allows us to alter this when there might be a potential dissonance with the message that we intend with our verbal information
 - A smile when delivering a consequence may be interpreted as enjoying the discomfort that the consequence may cause the person
- Be aware that the person may not be able to interpret complex facial cues, particularly when anxious, so another visual means may be necessary to help convey meaning—making the message more explicit

Gestural Components of Nonverbal Communication

- Gestures are the movements of body parts that convey nonverbal messages to the communication partner
- Gestures can be either formal (as in sign language) or informal (as in many hand gestures)
- Gestures are often used to punctuate verbal communication, although they can be used as prompts or cues to replace verbal messages

Gestures Used to Punctuate Verbal Communication (Caswell, 1993)

- They provide a concordance to the speech, marking out its structure and how it is to be interpreted, as well as forcing the listener to watch the speaker to obtain the “total” message
- Gestures may be used to punctuate the beats in verbal communication (the rhythmic structure)
- Gestures may be used to pantomime what is being described verbally—the person may trace out the shape or imitate the movement
- Gestures may serve as a metaphor—the person may manipulate the idea as objects, showing the audience how they should be handled mentally

Relationship/Situation/Context-Oriented Gestures (Caswell, 1993)

- These, like many nonverbal signals, are dependent upon the situation in which they occur.
- They may relate to status, confidence, relationship, expected role, etc...
- These include gestures such as:
 - Raising hand before speaking
 - Pointing to the person
 - Holding out hand to stop person from speaking

Different Types of Gestures and Their Use in Prompting/Cueing

- Head and body posture/body orientation--to signal interest/attention, to signal distance, to signal availability
- Hand movements—to replace verbal communication, to punctuate verbal speech, relationship-oriented
- Movement of objects—demonstration, to signal use, to help punctuate point

Other Nonverbal Prompts and Cues

- Room design and arrangement
- Workspace design and arrangement
- Dress
- Eye contact/Gaze
- Visual cues/supports