Learning gestures in Spanish as a second/foreign language

What this research was about and why it is important

When communicating in a second or a foreign language, both verbal and non-verbal elements are important. However, while the acquisition of verbal elements has been widely studied, few studies have considered the acquisition of non-verbal signs. This research examined the acquisition of gestures in students of Spanish in the USA. We focused on emblematic gestures, which can be used and understood without any verbal language. For example, the gesture in which the index finger circles around the temple meaning ‘crazy’ is an emblematic gesture. Within this type of gesture, we studied the learning of three different categories: common (same meaning and form in Spanish and English), different (different form but same or almost identical meaning in Spanish and English), and unique (Spanish gestures without an equivalent in form or meaning in English). The study found that the comprehension (gestures students can understand) of different and unique gestures improved more than common gestures, but the production (gestures they can perform) improved in the three types. In order to teach gestures effectively, it is essential to take into account not only the gestures from the second/foreign language, but also the characteristics of the students’ native language gestures.

What the researchers did

- Learners were 12 students of Spanish as a second/foreign language at a US university. Their proficiency in Spanish was equivalent to 5 years of studying the language.
- Learners attended 9 Spanish classes (taught by one of the authors) that focused on oral communication: 6 of those were devoted to emblematic gestures.
- In order to assess the effect the classes had on their learning, students completed the same test before and after the set of classes.
- The test included three types of gestures (different, common, and unique) and had four parts: 1) Students had to do a role-play in pairs; 2) Students had to read and dub a conversation in pairs, only using gestures; 3) Students had to watch an inaudible conversation between two people who are performing gestures and write down the gestures and their meaning; 4) Students had to watch a woman performing isolated gestures and select the correct meaning of the each gesture in a multiple-choice selection.

What the researchers found

- Learners produced and identified more emblematic gestures in the four parts of the test after the set of classes.
- Learners produced and identified more emblematic gestures from the three categories (common, different, and unique) after the set of classes.
- In the role play (part 1), they produced more emblematic gestures of the three types considered: common, different, and unique.
- In the other three parts of the test (2, 3, and 4), they only improved their production or identification of different and unique gestures; common gestures did not improve after the set of classes.

Things to consider

- This study confirms that emblematic gestures can be acquired in the Spanish as a second/foreign language classroom.
- Students did not improve in common emblematic gestures in parts 2, 3, and 4 of the test because before taking the classes, they correctly identified and produced common gestures: those that were already in their native language, which meant that there was no improvement.
- The improvement in common gestures in part 1 (role-play) can be explained by the fact that students could do the role-play satisfactorily without using any emblematic gestures in the first test. Following the classes, however, they did the role-play and included the three types of gestures. Students had not acquired common emblematic gestures, as they were already part of their non-verbal code, but had chosen to produce them when interacting in Spanish after explicit exposure and practice.
- More research is needed to find out if these results are replicable in other languages and educational contexts.

Material, data, open access article: N/A


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