The Impact of Nonverbal Communication on Iranian Young EFL Learners' Attitudes and Understanding of Lexical Items

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Abstract: *The present research sets at investigating the importance of nonverbal communication (NVC) in L2 teaching and learning. More specifically, it studies the effect of teaching gestures that can be perceived and do not come directly from physical language. Communication is a means of sharing ideas, feelings, and attitudes. It is separated into two parts; verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication uses language, while nonverbal communication is behaviors that can be perceived indirectly from physical language. The participants of the study included 60 Iranian young learners of English selected from among a population of 100 EFL young learners at a private language institute. The participants were divided into two experimental and control groups based on random sampling. Both groups were instructed 15 lexical items. Experimental group was taught using NVC such as gesture and some pertinent pictures whereas control group was instructed using verbal communication (VC) and some relevant pictures for six sessions during a month. Then the participants in both groups were tested orally to check their amount of progress. The data were fed into the computer and were analyzed by SPSS using t-test. The results show significant differences between experimental and control groups displaying that experimental group outperformed control group. Also, a questionnaire was distributed among the participants based on Likert scale. The achieved data were analyzed by SPSS and the mean score showed high positive attitudes towards NVC in L2 teaching and learning.*

Keywords: nonverbal communication; verbal communication; gesture; eye contact; posture.

1. Introduction

Communication is the influence of the sender's behavior on the receiver's behavior also it is a continuous process of sending and receiving messages that allows people to share knowledge, ideas, thoughts, information, feelings, emotions, and attitudes (Negi, 2009). This is what separates humans from other animals. Communication is divided mainly into two types: verbal and nonverbal.

Verbal communication (VC) refers to the spoken or written form of communication which humans produce intentionally for obvious purposes (Burgoon, Birk, Pfau, 1990), whereas nonverbal communication (NVC) hints at sending and receiving wordless messages by means of facial expression, eye contact, gesture, posture, touch, distance, tone of voice, etc., (Knapp & Hall, 2002). Miller (1988) claims that NVC is "communication without words. It includes overt behaviors such as facial expressions, eyes, touching, and tone of voice as well as less obvious messages such as dress, postures, and spatial distance between two or more people" (p.3).

NVC plays a great role in our daily face to face communications. It involves 65% to 70% of our social meanings (Birdwhistell, 1970). Mehrabian and Ferris (1967) ranked it as high as 93%. Although great caution should be taken in accepting these assertions (Lapakko, 1997), most L2 researchers, such as Birdwhistell, Mehrabian, and Ferris admit that nonverbal behaviors (NVB) play an important role in human interaction, and an extensive number of NVC studies (Harris, 2002; Davis, 1990) stress the importance of NVB. The teacher's attempt to communicate with learners may influence the learners' affective state. Kusanagi (2003) admitted that 19 of 35 learners responded that teacher's gestures made them relax. Both Allen (2000) and Kusanagi reported that the learners said the teacher's gestures were stimulating and fun. Toyama (1993) and Kita (2000) similarly concluded that one key function of gestures is to build positive relationships between the interlocutors.

There are some special differences between VC and NVC: the former is highly structured and needs extensive learning process, while the latter is intuitive and based on normative rules (Harris, 2002). Many different forms of NVC are used in every day social communications such as: kinesics, facial expressions, haptics, paralanguage, proxemics, oculesics, physical appearance, chronemics, olfactics, and so forth. Birdwhistle (1970) defined kinesics as the study of all aspects of nonverbal communication including gesture and touch. It also involves facial animation, open postures, gestural activity, body relaxation, head movements and limbs, etc. Haptics is also called physical touch and tactile communication. It refers to handshakes, pats on the back, and so on. Touch can be used for both congratulations and consolation (Harris, 2002). Facial expression is the most important channel of expressing emotions and feelings such as: happiness, anger, surprise, fear, sadness, disgust or contempt (Argyle, 1988). Paralanguage or vocal cues hints at the way of uttering voice involving intonation, tone, pacing, intensity, pitch, and pauses. Proxemics shows the physical distance or territory of individuals when meet each other. It means appropriate space necessary for communication (Argyle, 1988). Oculesics, eye contact, occurs during 10-30% of the conversation. Eye contact is used to praise or avoid the presence of others and can display information about attitudes, emotion, dominance and power in social relationships. Physical appearance is the first aspect of NVC (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004). It refers to the attributes

of image such as attractiveness, height, weight, body shape, hair style, dress and so on. Chronomics is the study of time and punctuality in communications or social behaviors (Knapp & Hall, 2002). Olfactics shows the interpersonal communication through smell.

Most of NV behaviors are unintentional, unconscious, and idiosyncratic. For example facial expression such as flushing, perspiring, and yawning are beyond the control of the person. Some emotional feelings are unconscious that the sender and receiver of the message cannot identify them. And hand gestures may have unusual features which they resemble the meaning of the objects and actions they try to display.

NVC communicates a variety of meanings, in most cases in conjunction with VC. In contrast to NVC, VC is "communication marked by: (a) complexity, for example, rules of grammatical ordering, (b) flexibility, as evidenced by verbal language's capacity for synonymy and rephraseability, and (c) precision, for example, the capacity to make specific reference" (Wescott, 1992).

2. Review of literature

Most researches and studies on communication focused on verbal cues until the 1970s, when the investigation of nonverbal messages started to gain greater prominence, under the influence of the pioneering work of social anthropologists such as Hall (1979) and social psychologists, such as Argyle (1992). Since this time, NVC has become a focus of interest in various disciplines and fields, including: anthropology (Poyatos, 2002), communication (Streeck & Knapp, 1992), education (Poyatos, 2002), health (McDonnell, 1992), psychology (Lowenthal, 1992), disability studies (McDonnell, 1992), and business and law (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004).

Weitz (1979) classifies the studies of NVC in conjunction with VC into 5 broad subcategories: (a) facial expression and visual interaction, (b) body movement and gesture, (c) paralanguage), (d) proximity behaviors, and (e) multichannel communication. I will briefly discuss each area of NVC relevant to this study, using a division that seems most salient and meaningful for this study of 6 separate dimensions, eye contact and gaze, facial expressions, posture and gesture, touching, vocalic communication, and proxemics.

Eye contact (mutual gaze) and gaze play an important role in intercultural communication, particularly in conjunction with VC. For example, different kinds of eye movements are associated with a wide range of human expressions. Downward glances are associated with modesty; wide eyes with frankness, wonder, or terror; raised upper eyelids, along with contraction of the orbicularis muscle, with displeasure (Knapp & Hall, 2002, Poyatos, 2002).

Functions of facial expressions have been classified differently by different scholars. Leathers (1997) proposed that facial expressions serve two functions in interpersonal communication. The first function is as the most important source of emotional information – interactants need to have the ability to differentiate the meanings of a range of emotional expressions (Collier, 1985; Levenson, 1988). The second function is as a means of identifying individuals, a function that is rarely required in everyday life, other than in criminal investigations (Laughery & Wogalter, 1989). Knapp and Hall (2002) identify three functions of facial expressions. First, they provide a means of opening and closing channels of communication, such as when speakers smile when they want a speaking turn or to indicate a desire to close the channels of communication (Brunner, 1979). The second function of interaction management is in complementing or qualifying verbal and/or nonverbal responses, for example, a smile in conjunction with some kind words (Kim, Liang, & Li, 2003), eyebrow movements being added when a speaker is delivering a sad message (Scribner, 2002), or winking in conjunction with the hand emblem for A-OK (Yingen & Quek 2006). The third function of facial expressions in interaction management is to replace speech by using facial emblems to express a meaning (Ekman & Friesen, 1975).

Argyle (1988) proposes 16 types of touching (patting, slapping, punching, pinching, stroking, shaking, etc.) in terms of bodily contact as most common in western society, while Heslin and Alper (1983) categorize these into 5 types of touching that based on function and formality; functional/professional, social/polite, friendship/warmth, love/intimacy, sexual/arousal.

McNeill (1992) has identified a number of different types of gestures that speakers routinely use when they talk: (1) ‘Iconic’ gestures transparently capture aspects of the semantic content of speech. (2) ‘Metaphoric’ gestures are like iconics in that they are pictorial; however, the pictorial content is abstract rather than concrete. (3) ‘Beat’ gestures look as though they are beating musical time. (4) ‘Deictic’ or pointing gestures indicate entities in the conversational space, but they can also be used even when there is nothing to point at.

Vocal cues are related to speaker recognition, personality, group perceptions, and the expression of emotions (Neumann & Strack, 2000). Leathers (1997) proposes three communicative functions of vocal cues as (1) a medium of emotional communication, (2) formation and management of interpersonal impressions in communication, and (3) regulating the communicative interaction taking place in interpersonal communication.

3. Statement of the problem

The most important part of a communication is the meaning which is dispatched by the message. The meaning can be conveyed in different forms such as verbal communication and nonverbal communication. We know the importance of verbal communication, but how about the importance of nonverbal communication? There are some autistic learners that cannot communicate verbally. Therefore they need nonverbal communication to participate in learning process. Also some deaf students have problems in learning their L1 and L2 in this regard some researches have been done by some scholars and researchers and some interesting results have been achieved mentioned in the review of the literature. Nonverbal messages have a powerful influence over a child's behaviors, attitudes, self-esteem, confidence, and many other aspects of their growth and development. Hereby, the problem investigated in this study is whether nonverbal communication has any effect on Iranian young EFL learners' understanding and attitude.

4. Research Questions

The study, therefore, seeks answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent does learning nonverbal communication affect better understanding of L2 lexical items?
2. To what extent does learning nonverbal communication speed up L2 lexical Items learning?
3. To what extent does learning nonverbal communication enhance L2 learners' attitudes towards L2 learning?

5. Research Hypotheses

In line with the aforementioned questions, the following null hypotheses have been formulated:

$H_{01:}$ Learning nonverbal communication does not affect better understanding of L2 lexical items.

$H_{02:}$ Learning nonverbal communication does not speed up L2 lexical items learning.

$H_{03:}$ Learning nonverbal communication does not enhance L2 learners' attitude towards L2 learning?

6. Objectives of the Study

Now that learning a second language has become an inseparable part of our educational system, a great attempt must be taken to improve it to enhance the level of L2 learning in our country, Iran. Also we must pave the way for the L2 learners, especially young

children, to have this opportunity. For intercultural communications one common language is needed and all of us also know that English is an international language and the language of knowledge in the world. So learning L2 especially English is absolutely essential for Iranian learners. Most L2 learners may think that L2 learning is just learning verbal communication and they might not be familiar with the nonverbal aspects of communication. Some L2 teachers also may not have enough knowledge about nonverbal communication and its importance in learning/teaching process. Thus, this study is going to scrutinize the effect of nonverbal communication on L2 learners' understanding of L2 lexical items and their attitudes towards NVC. It will be fruitful for both L2 teachers and learners to take advantages.

7. Methodology

7.1 Participants

The study was realized on 60 young male, 12 – 13 years old, Iranian L2 learners. They are at first grade of junior high school (Rahnemaei) in Sharif Language Institute (SLI) in Kian, a city in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. They are L2 beginners in English. Also, they are bilingual (Turkish and Persian). All the participants were randomly selected from among 100 L2 learners. Since all the participants were beginners no placement test was necessary to check their level of language proficiency. The 60 randomly chosen subjects were assigned at random to two groups: Control Group and Experimental Group.

7.2 Instrumentation

This study proceeded in applying four instruments: First, Fifteen common English words were selected and taught to both groups.

Second, some beautiful and relevant pictures were selected to facilitate the teaching process both for control and experimental group.

Third, in order to determine the attitudes of the L2 learners towards using NVC a questionnaire was delivered to the L2 learners. They were asked to choose an option among five options based on Likert scale.

And fourth, an oral test was administered to evaluate and check the process of the experiment in both groups.

7.3 Procedures

Fifteen English words were selected and associated with a picture: “sit down,” “stand up,” “come here,” “go there,” “jump,” “cry,” “laugh,” “smile,” “smell,” “listen,” “book,” “bird,” “snake,” “hot,” “swim.” The lexical items chosen for this experiment are very common words for children who are likely to be taught in L2 courses. They are also selected because they are easy to illustrate both with pictures and gestures. The gesture that represents ‘book’ is made by opening and closing hands, palms facing up, the gesture for “swim” is a mime of the action of swimming and the gesture for “cry” consists in drawing tears with a finger down the cheeks of a sad face.

The study took place for 3 weeks with two sessions (each session lasted 45 minutes) per week. During each session children were taught 4 lexical items. In the first session they were not taught any items just some interesting games and music were played to attract them to the experiment. Children were told that it was a game to learn English. Each session, participants were tested individually. -

Subjects were randomly divided into two groups of 30, (a) experimental and (b) control. The former group was taught lexical items by using NVC. In each session 4 lexical items were taught and there was a review to the previous ones. Each item was pronounced three times and L2 learners were asked to repeat after their teacher as they were looking at their teacher's motions. All the items were presented by NVC devices such as gesture. Then L2 learners were asked to perform the gestures as they listen to the items. Afterwards the performance was done individually.

The lexical items were taught by using simple sentences, showing relevant pictures and using L1 for the latter group. Participants listened to their teacher and repeated after him.

Finally an oral test was administered so as to assess whether the participants were more successful or not by using NVC vs. VC.

Once the participants' performance on the oral test was measured, a t-test was performed to compare the performance of the two groups. The results and findings were analyzed by SPSS.

At the end, an attitudinal questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was prepared based on some common aspects of NVC such as eye contact, gesture and posture, paralanguage and so forth. Since the participants were beginners and could not read English the questionnaire was translated into their L1 i.e. Persian. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed through pilot study by two university professors and ten English language teachers. Cronbachs Alpha was applied to validate the internal consistency of the scale and achieved a Cronbachs Alpha level of 0.8377, which was considered to be quite acceptable. Sixty students completed in it in order to reflect their attitudes towards teachers' NVC and NVB. It included 20 items. The attitudes scale of the original 5-point Likert format was adapted from 'strongly agree ' to ' strongly disagree '. The scales were coded as (Strongly Agree = 1, Agree = 2, NAND

(Neither Agree Nor Disagree) = 3, Disagree = 4, Strongly Disagree= 5). The data from questionnaire was fed into the computer and then analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, & standard deviation) were computed for all items involved in the questionnaire of the study.

8. Results and Discussion

Several statistical analyses were conducted to answer the research questions in this study.

After random selection of the subjects, they were divided into two intact groups of experimental and control. Since the subjects had not learned English before it showed that both experimental and control groups were homogeneous. After 6 sessions of instruction, the lexical items were administered orally to the groups as the evaluation test. In order to answer the first and second question of this study, a t-test was applied to the scores of the test. Figure 1 shows the graphic representation of the means and Tables 1 and 2 represent the results of the t-test.

Table 1: The results of the T-Test on the oral test

	Mean	N	Std.Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	8.8333	30	2.24505	.40989
Experimental	10.6333	30	2.12511	.38799

Figure 1: The graphic representation of the means on the oral test

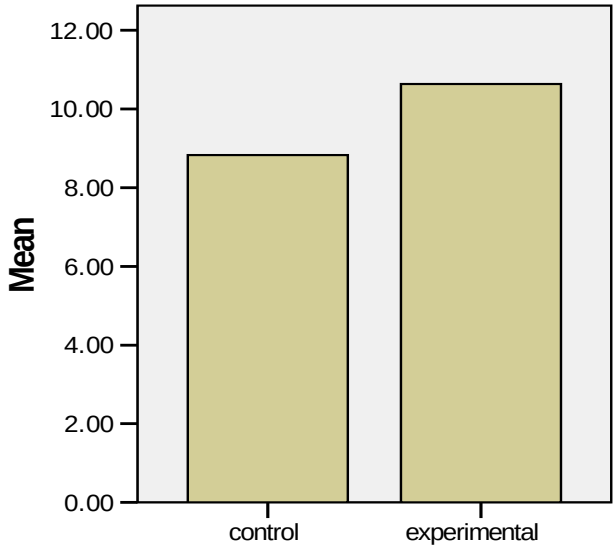

Table 2: The results of paired samples T-Test on the oral test

Pair 1	Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Control - Experimental	-1.80000	1.80803	.33010	-2.47513	-1.12487	-5.453	29	.000

As it is shown in Tables 1. and 2. the amount of t-observed for the effect of NVC on L2 learning is 5.453 at the probability level of .000 which shows a statistically significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the test of the effectiveness of teaching NVC on L2 learning. This result safely rejects the first and second null hypotheses, learning nonverbal communication does not affect better understanding of L2 lexical items, and learning nonverbal communication will not accelerate the process of L2 lexical item learning. So it can be claimed that the treatment did affect the participants' NVC learning.

Attitudinal Questionnaire

At the end of the study, an attitudinal questionnaire including 20 items showing the students' attitudes towards NVC was administered. In order to answer the third question of this study, the data received from the questionnaire was fed into the computer and analyzed by using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, standard deviation) shown in Table 4. compared between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups. All the statements and the selected responses are displayed in Table 3. Each column contains the number of people who selected that choice out of 30. In Table 3. "E" stands for "experimental group" and "C" stands for "control group".

Table 3.

The Attitudinal Questionnaire

N ⇩	Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		NAND		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
		E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C
1	I love smiling teacher more than serious teacher.	15	14	7	6	5	5	2	3	1	2
2	I can learn better if my teacher looks at me kindly.	19	17	8	9	2	2	1	1	0	1
3	It is difficult to answer the questions when the teacher stares at the students coldly.	16	15	8	8	4	3	1	2	1	2
4	Teacher's body movements distract my attention.	2	2	5	5	8	9	7	7	8	7
5	I pay more attention to the lesson when my teacher makes eye contact with me in the classroom.	11	9	10	10	4	4	3	4	2	3
6	I become more active in the class when my teacher spruces himself up.	17	13	8	7	4	5	1	3	0	2
7	It is boring to see a dishevelled teacher.	17	14	9	8	4	4	0	3	0	1
8	When my teacher comes very close to me, I become anxious.	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	11	10
9	If my teacher pats on my back, I will lose my stress.	3	4	7	7	12	11	4	4	4	4
10	When my teacher uses gestures in teaching, the lesson sticks in my mind for a longer time.	12	10	11	9	5	6	2	4	0	1
11	When I talk to my teacher, he looks away. I hate this behavior.	15	12	7	5	5	4	2	4	1	5
12	It is very pleasurable for me to sit next to the teacher in the class or somewhere else.	7	6	8	8	8	9	3	4	4	3

13	I feel bore, when our teacher teaches in a monotonous tone.	12	10	8	6	7	6	2	4	1	4
14	The class will be boring and exhausting when the teacher speaks sadly and hopelessly.	17	15	6	5	2	4	2	3	3	3
15	I love those teachers who tell jokes and make me laugh.	17	17	7	6	5	5	1	1	0	1
16	I love those teachers who come to class on time.	11	10	5	5	4	3	2	3	8	9
17	I like those teachers who spend more time with students.	11	10	9	9	6	6	2	3	2	2
18	I like those teachers who never shout at their students.	17	15	5	7	5	4	1	2	2	2
19	I love those teachers who wear perfume.	11	11	9	8	8	9	1	1	1	1
20	When my teacher leans against the wall or cross his arms, it disgusts me.	5	5	5	4	10	10	4	4	6	7

The above table displays that in most of the statements about NVC, 15 statements, most of the students both in control and experimental group strongly agree with the use of NVC in L2 teaching and learning. In statements 1, 2, 4, 5, 14, and 15 most of the subjects both in Experimental and Control group strongly agree and agree with teacher's eye contact and facial expression. Statements 6 and 7 display the subjects' strong agreement with teacher's physical appearance. Statements 8, 9, and 12 show that proxemics and haptics are important for the subjects. Statement s10 and 20 indicate gesture and posture are important in teaching L2 and most of the students agree with it. Statement 13 shows the importance of paralanguage in L2 teaching that most of the subjects agree with this item. Statements 16 and 17 evince other aspects of NVC, chronomics, which most of the subjects are agree with this aspect. Statement 19 reveals the importance of olfactics in L2 teaching that most of the subjects agree with this aspect. Table 4. And 5. show the comparison results of the two groups down by SPSS.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of the students' attitudes towards NVC

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	SAE	11.9500	20	5.28628	1.18205
	SAC	10.7000	20	4.44972	.99499
Pair 2	AE	7.3500	20	1.78517	.39918
	AC	6.8500	20	1.72520	.38577
Pair 3	NANDE	5.6500	20	2.51888	.56324
	NANDC	5.7000	20	2.55672	.57170
Pair 4	DE	2.3000	20	1.65752	.37063
	DC	3.2500	20	1.44641	.32343
Pair 5	SDE	2.7500	20	3.17681	.71036
	SDC	3.5000	20	2.74341	.61345

The overall mean score: 6

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of the students' attitudes towards NVC

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	SAE - SAC	1.25000	1.33278	.29802	.62624	1.87376	4.194	19	.000
Pair 2	AE - AC	.50000	1.00000	.22361	.03199	.96801	2.236	19	.038
Pair 3	NANDE - NANDC	-.05000	.88704	.19835	-.46515	.36515	-.252	19	.804
Pair 4	DE - DC	-.95000	.88704	.19835	-1.36515	-.53485	-4.790	19	.000
Pair 5	SDE - SDC	-.75000	1.25132	.27980	-1.33563	-.16437	-2.680	19	.015

In Tables 4. and 5. "SAE" stands for "Strongly agree in Experimental group", "SAC" stands for "Strongly agree in Control group", "AE" stands for " Agree in Experimental Group", "AC" stands for "Agree in Control group", "NANDE" stands for "Neither agree nor disagree in Experimental group", "NANDC" stands for " Neither agree nor disagree in Control group", "DE" stands for "Disagree in Experimental group", "DC" stands for "Disagree in Control group", "SDE" stands for "Strongly disagree in Experimental group", and "SDC" stands for "Strongly disagree in Experimental group".

The results indicated in table 4. and 5. evince that the overall mean score is 6 for both experimental and control groups which displays the high positive attitude of the subjects toward using NVC in L2 teaching and learning. The results of the study safely reject the third null hypothesis which suggests that learning NVC does not enhance L2 learners' motivation and

attitude towards L2 learning? So it can be concluded that learning NVC does enhance L2 learners' motivation and attitude towards L2 learning. Therefore the third hypothesis is retained.

9. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the effects of teaching of NVC on L2 learners. In this regard, a t-test was conducted to probe the first and second questions in this study. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the means of the experimental and control groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that using NVC has a significant effect on Iranian EFL Junior high school students. In order to answer the third question an attitudinal questionnaire was administered. The results showed that both students in experimental and control groups had positive attitudes towards the application of NVC in teaching and learning L2.

These findings are compatible with some of the empirical studies conducted earlier and reported in introduction and literature review. In Kusanagi's study (2003), 19 of 35 learners responded that teacher's gestures made them relax. Both Allen (2000) and Kusanagi reported that the learners said the teacher's gestures were stimulating and fun. Toyama (1993) and Kita (2000) similarly concluded that one key function of gestures is to build positive relationships between the interlocutors. NVC plays a great role in our daily face to face communications. It involves 65% to 70% of our social meanings (Birdwhistell, 1970). Mehrabian and Ferris (1967) ranked it as high as 93%. Although great caution should be taken in accepting these assertions (Lapakko, 1997), most L2 researchers, such as Birdwhistell (1970), Mehrabian and Ferris (1967) admit that nonverbal behaviors (NVB) play an important role in human interaction, and an extensive number of NVC studies (Harris, 2002; Davis, 1990) stress the importance of NVB.

10. Conclusion

Teachers should be very cautious about what type of NVC they use and also how they perform NVC in their teaching process and their behaviors. Their NVC should be based on the students' understanding and reactions. Seaver (1992) advised that a teacher use comprehensible gestures, use exaggerated gestures for the sake of clarity, but be flexible in the use of gesture. Al-Shabbi (1993) mentioned that teacher can perform some artificial and exaggerative gesture to take the most advantage of his/her teaching.

The results of the present study seem to support the hypotheses formulated in this research. The first and second hypotheses have positive effects on understanding L2 lexical items and accelerating learning L2 lexical items .The results of the questionnaires used in this

study supported the third hypotheses that the students have positive attitudes towards the application of NVC.

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