Nonverbal Communication

Implications for the Global Music Classroom

Abstract: Many American schools today have richly diverse classrooms composed of immigrants with a limited vocabulary or little command of the English language. Now more than ever, music educators must explore new, creative, and effective ways to communicate with this ever-changing student population. Although most teachers rely primarily on verbal communication in the classroom, others are introducing nonverbal communication—the process of communicating through sending and receiving wordless messages with their students. This technique has become increasingly helpful in communicating with students when English is not their primary language. Music educators must be prepared to teach students from many cultures. We need to develop effective strategies of communication, which in turn will contribute to the success of our music programs.

Keywords: elementary, classroom management, communication, cross-cultural competency, ELL, gesture, message, multicultural, nonverbal, strings, teacher education

Sude is from Turkey, Nahom is from Ethiopia, Yji is from Mongolia, and Rano is from Uzbekistan. These are just four of the students in Jami Bolton’s string class in Alexandria, Virginia, who are recent arrivals to the United States and who speak very little English. Since this has become a common scenario in a number of schools—richly diverse classrooms composed of immigrants with a limited vocabulary or scant knowledge of the English language—Bolton has found a way to communicate with all her students, and it involves very little talking. Although most teachers primarily use verbal communication in the classroom, she relies heavily on that second dimension of communication—nonverbal—communicating by sending and receiving wordless messages. This technique is increasingly helpful when communicating to students who are English language learners (ELL).

A Typical Rehearsal Day

Bolton’s classroom may look like a typical instrumental music class when you walk through the door, but when you look around, you will see a bead jar used as part of a classroom management strategy. Bolton explains:

When the students are either following the class rules or they are on task, I add beads to the jar. When they fill the jar

Gestures can mean different things in various cultures. Here’s how one music educator uses nonverbal communication to make sure all students understand directions and remain on task.
completely, they are rewarded with a day of musical games or music-related movies. I encourage them to make individual suggestions, and then they vote as a class. When students are not following directions or paying attention, I remind them to focus and get back on task by shaking the jar. The shaking is a warning that means if they continue to be disruptive, I will remove a small number of beads. If it should come to that, they immediately refocus on the task at hand. They do not want to make the class lose beads and delay reward day. This strategy allows them to monitor each other’s behavior, which leaves more time for music learning.

Bolton greets her class at the door with a smile, and the students quickly find their seats, guided by the nametags on the music stands. She has a list of four rules on a poster board mounted at the front of the class: (1) Be respectful, (2) Be responsible, (3) Work hard, and (4) Have fun. She points to a rule when she notices students are off task, but she does not say anything. She also has a song list written on the whiteboard as part of the day’s agenda, so that as she is tuning the violins and cellos, students see her hold up a flash card with a musical symbol that looks like a staple ( الفني ), they know it means “down-bow.” When they see a flash card of a Y symbol, they know it means “up-bow.” After tuning the instruments, she claps her hands twice and makes a two-handed cutoff gesture while positioned in front of the ensemble. The students know that the rehearsal is about to begin, so they put their instruments in rest position.

Once Bolton is sure she has their attention, she steps to the board, points to a rhythm, and says, “Please count this with me.” After the rhythm has been counted four times, she uses a big red magnetic arrow to point to the top of the day’s work, an agenda, where “D scale” is written. She affixes another magnet on the board that says “pizz” (pizzicato), then taps each foot on the floor once, bringing an imaginary instrument into playing position. The students tap their feet on the floor in response as they scoot to the edge of their chairs, sit up straight, and bring their instruments into playing position. With an inhale and a nod from the teacher, the students begin to play the scale pizzicato in the rhythm shown on the board.

After the pizzicato scale is complete, Bolton removes the magnet that says “pizz” and replaces it with one that says “arco.” She again taps each foot on the floor and raises another imaginary instrument to playing position. The students respond again by sitting in proper playing position and picking up their bows. Once more with an inhale and a nod from the teacher, the students play the scale, this time using their bows. After they finish playing the scale, Bolton gestures to put her imaginary bow on her stand and her imaginary instrument in rest position, and the students respond by mirroring her with their real instruments. “Thank you for carefully using the rhythm we counted as you played the D scale. Now, please turn to song number 23,” she says as she points to the number on the board. With very few words, the students are warmed up and attentive, and they continue to participate in the rehearsal.

Global Communities of the Future

More than 60 percent of the students at Bolton’s school are ELL, a trend that is common in the United States. Schools in the United States, because of diversity through immigration, will continue to reflect a growing multicultural society. According to the Pew Research Center, nearly one in five Americans (19 percent) will be an immigrant in 2050, compared with one in eight (12 percent) in 2005. Many of our classrooms already reflect this cultural diversity, and yet there is a need for increased awareness about reaching all our students. Experts indicate, although there is no precise account, that New York City alone is home to more than eight hundred languages. English is a second language to 5.5 million students in the United States, and by 2025, one of every four students in this country’s public school system is expected to be limited in English proficiency when he or she enters the public school system.3

Defining Nonverbal Communication

Before teachers can implement the principles of positive nonverbal communication, they must recognize the existence of nonverbal language. There are three areas of nonverbal communication: paralanguage (which refers to the extraverbal elements, such as tone, volume, and hesitations, that are associated with speech); proxemics (the study of the ways that individuals use space in their environment), a term coined by cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall; and kinesics (the study of the pattern of body movement in human interaction), coined by anthropologist Ray L. Birdwhistell. Nonverbal communication can also be intentional or unintentional. This article focuses primarily on kinesics as we explore how body movement can affect communication in music classrooms and rehearsals.

Communication professors Barbara M. Grant and Dorothy Grant Hennings, in their study of teacher behavior and in their book The Teacher Moves: An Analysis of Nonverbal Activity, identified three categories of instructional motions: conducting, acting, and wielding. They contend that teachers consciously perform these instructional motions because they add to rather than detract from their verbal teaching. They also believe that all teachers possess a personal nonverbal repertoire of motions. For instance, many educators use a short clapping pattern in which the teacher claps the rhythm and the students clap the pattern back as an echo. This technique is usually implemented when the teacher is trying to gain students’ attention, such as when the class has lost focus, or perhaps when it is time to put music or books away to get ready for dismissal. This type of behavior would fall under the conducting category. One could think of it in the same way as one might imagine a conductor leading a symphony.
orchestra in a performance through various gestures without speaking. Clapping is a physical motion used by teachers in a variety of ways to get their students to focus. It prevents the teacher from having to shout over the cacophony of voices and instrumental sounds, and the side benefit is that it contributes to preserving vocal health. (It should be noted that in Jamaica, clapping one’s hands is one way to hail a cab.) Another example of conducting is to shut the lights off and on again to quiet the class down or to transition from one teaching segment to another. Once the teacher has the students’ attention, he or she may also use a gesture in an effort to continue in silence to the next activity of the day, such as placing a pointer finger vertically in front of closed lips without uttering a shhh sound.

The second instructional motion, acting, occurs when teachers use their bodies to clarify what they are trying to communicate. For instance, the teacher might use an index finger to point to his or her head to communicate, “Think through this.” Holding up five fingers can tell the clarinet players to begin at measure 5, so the teacher holds up five fingers while pointing to the fifth measure of a piece. Sometimes the teacher uses role-playing to assume the identity of an object. For example, to convey the fingering for the note F♯ on the D string of a violin, the teacher can use the right forearm as a representation for the fingerboard of the violins (forearm, bent at the elbow, arm facing toward him or her) while demonstrating with the left-hand fingers on the right forearm that the second finger is close to the third finger because it is a half step.

The wielding instructional motion occurs when the teacher interacts with objects or materials that are part of his or her environment. This may include thumping through a techniques book, looking at the clock on the wall to keep track of the time, or walking over to a music stand occupied by two fourth-grade students and writing a homework assignment in their techniques book. All of these motions take on meaning only in the context in which they occur. (The forearm example in the previous paragraph is just one example of a gesture within music-class culture that has absolutely no meaning in any other context.)

Bolton communicates with her students by using gestures so that she is understood without using many words. Psychologist Paul Ekman, in his article “Movement with Precise Meanings,” states that symbolic gestures (also known as emblems) must have a precise meaning or a limited set of alternative meanings and are used when speech is constrained or not possible. He continues to note that emblems vary within ethnic groups or cultures, and “if an action is truly an emblem, the message it stands for is unambiguous even when the action is seen totally out of context.” In her classroom, Bolton relies on intentional nonverbal behavior and gestures. For instance, an emblem she uses with her beginning band class to have students set their embouchure is to place her right-hand “pointer” finger over her lips with the finger pad touching the lips. (At times, she uses the pointer finger placed over the lips in a vertical position with the pad of the finger facing to the left in order to indicate quiet, as in “Shhh”).

According to researchers William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, symbols exist because “a group of people agree to consider them as such. There is not a natural connection between symbols and their referents” (which are the things or ideas that a symbol refers to). Therefore, when implementing such symbols, music teachers need to keep in mind that communication is contextual. According to communication professor Stephen W. Littlejohn, “communication always occurs in a context and the nature of communication depends in large measure on this context.” Music teachers communicate with students differently than do colleagues teaching math. Gesturing is integral in daily music classes that require routines, rehearsals, and performances.

The music ensemble class is a special culture of students who could all benefit from communicating through gestures during their rehearsals together. Whether it is the teacher generating the gestures, or the students expanding on them, sharing this form of communication is precisely what can tie together people who otherwise might not feel as if they are a unified group. Cross-cultural communication is the awareness of particular values or beliefs within cultures in order to be able to draw comparisons and communicate appropriately. It has become more commonplace for teachers to incorporate gestures to communicate with their students more effectively and universally in classrooms that are diverse. Teachers using gestures correctly are cross-culturally sensitive so as to facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

Emblems or gestures might have different meanings in different cultures, and therefore, misunderstandings are sometimes inevitable. Most children learn gesturing even before they master their verbal skills, so their nonverbal repertoire is extensive and growing. They are primed to learn how to communicate in a more sophisticated way with their music teacher as they learn to develop this new language. Confusion may be avoided by determining the languages that are represented in the classroom. This information can usually be accessed through guidance counselors in the school or from student responses in preassessment surveys. Aside from academic research, Bolton studies and familiarizes herself with cross-cultural gestures by reflecting on firsthand experiences, or even trial by error.

One day I used the “thumbs-up” gesture [the thumb pointing upward while the other fingers are closed into the palm of the hand] because my students did a wonderful job playing through their song and I wanted to compliment them. One boy raised his hand and told me that my gesture meant something bad. I was stunned, because I never thought that I would ever do something to offend one of my students. On further reflection, it occurred to me that the students and I could come up with our own gestures to replace those that some learned were offensive.

Researchers Andrea DeCapua and Ann C. Wintergerst warn us that “our
preconceptions and attitudes may often lead us to misunderstand, misinterpret, or even be completely unaware of a sensitive or offensive behavior in cross-cultural encounters. Prudent music teachers are reflective practitioners who respond to unexpected situations, such as when our students misunderstand or misinterpret our actions or intentions.

Even though we gesture all the time, for most of us, it is usually automatic—we rarely give it a second thought. In most of our daily interactions, we regularly use various symbolic gestures to indicate or reflect certain emotions or sentiments. One gesture may be familiar to some and have a specific and clear meaning, but it may be meaningless in another culture. For example, the V sign (with the two fingers and the palm facing out) in the United States means victory; however, this same gesture in Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain has an insulting and offensive interpretation. Other examples are the thumbs-up gesture and the “okay” sign (in which an O is made with the thumb and forefinger or middle finger, with arm extended and bent at the elbow) that for most Americans indicate a job well done. In the United States, for instance, teachers often use these gestures to compliment their students because they are understood to be a positive form of nonverbal communication. These gestures might seem well suited when students are performing a scale or technique exercise during a group lesson and a teacher wants to show approval without spoiling the moment by uttering any words. However, these same, seemingly innocuous gestures are inappropriate or unacceptable in other cultures. The thumbs-up sign has unfavorable meanings in many other countries across the globe, including Australia and Nigeria, where a thumbs-up gesture is perceived as rude. A teacher should not be surprised if, when motioning to a student to “come here,” the student does not comply. When a teacher holds up his or her arm with palm facing inward and waves the fingers in the same direction (a gesture typically used in the United States to mean “come here”), students from the Philippines, Korea, and parts of Latin America would find the gesture rude; students from other countries, such as Vietnam, grew up learning that this gesture was reserved for someone attempting to summon his or her dog. The “okay” sign (with thumb and forefinger or middle finger forming a circle) is an American gesture that is well known and used often; however, in Brazil and Argentina, it is considered rude. A French person, on the other hand, would read the gesture as meaning “zero” or worthless, and in Japan, it is a symbol for money.

Bolton saw a need to create another emblem that reflected a job well done so as not to offend or confuse her students. Instead, she will smile, or smile with a wink, or use the American Sign Language gesture for “thank you.” The thank-you gesture involves putting the fingers of your flat dominant hand near your lips and then moving your hand forward and a bit downward in the direction of the person you are thanking, and smiling.

**Teachers Generating Repertoire**

When teachers devise a repertoire of gestures and symbols, they should make sure that their students understand them and are able to use them themselves. Teachers also need to be receptive of their students’ input and incorporate their suggestions into the emblem-creating process. Bolton and her students have developed various emblems for her instrumental music class over time in order to accommodate diverse learners each year. The system uses the three categories of instructional motions (conducting, acting, and wielding) identified by Grant and Grant Hennings in their study of teacher behavior.

**Gestures in the Music Ensemble**

The best time to introduce students to the nonverbal classroom is in the first class on the first day of school. The best practice is to introduce a new nonverbal element into lessons one at a time. Eventually, a long-term goal would be to supplement the gestures with the English language equivalent. This should be done slowly and systematically when students reach the stage to be weaned from the system. Setting up a daily routine is easily accomplished beginning with simple, sequential gestures in a type of “Do as I’m doing; follow me” game. Bolton finds that the key to success with establishing nonverbal gestures is simple steps with constant eye contact and clear, encouraging, and slightly exaggerated facial expressions.

**Culture and Nonverbal Communication**

What is culture, and how is it related to nonverbal behavior? According to psychologist Aaron Wolfgang, “culture is an abstract term that defines a broad range of activities in which individuals express themselves.” He states that “culture can be viewed as an organized body of rules, allowing for individual differences, concerning the ways individuals bound together by such things as common boundaries, customs, institutions, values, languages, nonverbal behavior, arts, should behave toward one another and toward objects in their surroundings.”

Speech and communications professor Dale G. Leathers defines culture as “those values, beliefs, customs, rules, laws, and communicative behaviors that can be used to differentiate one societal group from another.” Different cultures see the world from different points of view.

**Culture Shock**

Images and messages we receive and transmit are profoundly shaped by our culture. It makes sense that the more commonalities there are between two cultures, the more the value of culture shock dissipates, while the more differences there are between two cultures, the greater one’s culture shock will be. According to researchers Andrea DeCapua and Ann C. Wintergerst, “culture shock is a combination of unfamiliar stimuli and a loss of familiar signs, signals, practices, and customs of social intercourse.” The phrase itself was
Elements to Ponder when Creating Nonverbal Communication for Music Classrooms

There are many variables to be aware of when designing symbolic gestures for a music-class culture. Consider the following:

- Each world culture has its own distinct nonverbal communication system.
- Gestural emblems are prone to misinterpretation within homogeneous and heterogeneous groups.
- Symbolic gestures are not perceived in the same way by different cultures.
- Teachers need to be sensitive to students' nonverbal style of communication and culture.
- Nonverbal behavior requires awareness in the multicultural classroom.
- Teachers in turn should learn to express some of their students' nonverbal gestures to show acceptance and understanding.
- Teachers need to be culturally flexible and learn to operate and adapt to their students' frames of reference.
- Teachers and students need to be aware of and respect cultural differences.
- Teachers need to show patience and allow time for students to become accustomed to new classroom procedures.
- Teachers need to be aware that some students come from a more formal and authoritarian school environment, and some come from school environments that may be characterized as permissive and informal.

Benefits of Nonverbal Communication

In addition to practicing good vocal health and preserving our voices, there are many benefits for both teachers and students when the teacher implements symbolic gestures in place of words. This is especially true in the choral rehearsal, where singers often strain their voices.

One such technique choral directors can use is a simple scooping-up gesture of the hands with palms facing upward motioning for students to rise from their seats to a standing posture. Assigning three typical postures through the use of gestures (1 = sitting, ready to sing; 2 = standing; and 3 = sitting, rest position) that can all be conveyed by simply placing two fingers from the right hand into the palm of the left hand facing up indicating to stand; holding up the pointer finger of the right hand indicating posture 1, which is a seated but ready-to-sing posture; and the third, holding up three fingers of the right hand, indicating a seated rest position. The first two gestures can be used in general music classes when the teacher asks students to sit or stand contingent on the next activity. Use of such gestures puts the music at the center of attention; furthermore, a teacher's modeling through a nonverbal example rather than a verbal one is sometimes a more effective way to be understood and a quicker way of emphasizing the point.

Nonverbal communication (through the use of gestures) is one way that anxiety can be reduced in the classroom, especially for those students who do not speak the dominant language. Bolton states, “The more I find myself using gestures, the more I realize how it helps all the students, not just the students who are learning English. If everyone is gesturing, then we are all speaking the same language. Students do not have to worry about being heard or feeling foolish when they do not understand the meaning of the directions or because they cannot speak the dominant language. They can actively participate without worry about how they are perceived by others.”

Just as visual symbols are displayed as a matter of convenience at most tourist destinations where people are not expected to read or speak a particular language, teachers implementing gestures facilitate an understanding of what students are expected to do in the classroom without talking. Minimal teacher talk means more time for learning and making music. When students are able to express themselves more freely, confidence rebounds. When the students are more confident, they are more focused and have a heightened sense of listening.

They would likely feel that they were in a safe environment because their communication would be limited to the gestures required specifically for functioning in the music classroom. Delivery of instructions would be simplified and classroom management would be efficient because students would not only be listening to their playing, but they would be focused on watching the teacher for the next set of instructions or feedback. Nonverbal routines simplify classroom management so that instruction is facilitated and not overly explained. Since students share the same set of gestures, they are able to work in small groups, which encourages participation and teamwork while ensuring that the learning experience is not disrupted.
effective because students can implement gestures to help correct each other’s fingerings and to reinforce correct posture by mirroring through peer teaching. Students helping each other facilitates learning and promotes self-efficacy. Teachers and students who use this special classroom language put everyone on the same level playing field, afford all students the same learning experiences, and heighten intercultural awareness.

Increased Efficiency and Understanding

There are many benefits for implementing nonverbal emblems that, according to Steve Darn of the Teacher Development Unit at the Izmir University of Economic in Turkey, when used effectively, can add a positive extra dimension to the language by assisting in a wide range of classroom practices. Here, too, Darn cautions that the meanings of the gestures and symbols must be taught and learned in the same way that students learn essential classroom language, because they have meaning in the context of the classroom. The following is Darn’s list of benefits:

1. Reducing unnecessary teacher talking time
2. Increasing modes of expression
3. Confidence building
4. Reducing fear of silence
5. Encouraging active participation
6. Improving listening skills
7. Clear instructions
8. Efficient classroom management
9. Safe classroom environment
10. Improving performance in pair and group activities
11. Self and peer correction
12. Avoiding misunderstandings
13. Improving intercultural competence.

In an age of globalization or global interconnectedness, we will have to continue to meet new challenges it poses and acquire new intercultural communication skills as these changes occur and affect our lives on so many levels. We as music educators must be prepared to teach all students regardless of the number of languages spoken in our music rehearsals or classrooms. We need to develop effective strategies of communication, which in turn will contribute to the success of our music programs. The music classroom should be a safe environment where all students feel secure to be creative and comfortable with their peers and with their teachers. I think researcher Maeetta Johnson said it best when she wrote, “Using a variety of communication enhancers can make the classroom an exciting place to learn.”

Notes

15. DeCapua and Wintergerster, Crossing Cultures, 8.
19. Grant and Grant Hennings, The Teacher Moves.
21. Wolfgang, Nonverbal Behavior, 162.
22. Ibid.
23. Leathers, Successful Nonverbal Communication, 333.
32. Darn, “Aspects of Nonverbal Communication.”
34. Maeetta B. Johnson, Communication in the Classroom (Savannah, GA, 1999), 12 (ERIC ED 436802).
35. DeCapua and Wintergerster, Crossing Cultures, 8.