



Teachers' Gestures in EFL Classroom

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Abstract: The research analyzed the teachers' gestures in EFL classrooms. It covered the teachers' gestures, the functions of the teachers' gestures, and the effect of the teachers' gestures on the students. The research applied a qualitative research design. The subjects of the research were 2 English teachers and 14 students of a senior high school in Majene. The research instruments were classroom observation, teachers' and students interviews. The results of this research revealed that the teachers performed hand gestures and head gestures in the classroom. The hand gestures were pointing, beckoning/inviting, giving examples, clapping hands, knocking on the table, hitting the whiteboard, illustrating, and numbering. In contrast, for head gestures, they used nodding and shaking head. The teachers used the gestures mainly regarding management, regulation, input, and instruction. But in some meetings, one of the teachers used head gestures combined with a smile when rewarding students and showing affection. These teachers' gestures were primarily used in conjunction with words or verbal messages (speech-related gestures) to complement, accentuate, and repeat the words. On the other hand, a small number of gestures are also used to substitute words. These gestures are stand-alone or are called speech-independent gestures. Teachers' use of gestures in the classroom consciously and unconsciously affects students and the learning process. Students agreed that using gestures by the teacher could improve their understanding of the material. However, using improper or too many gestures can distract their focus, making it difficult for them, to be nervous and difficult to engage in the learning process. So, it is urgent for the teachers to understand that some gestures should be increased or decreased to create a better learning atmosphere.

Keywords: *Hand gestures; head gestures; EFL classroom*

A. INTRODUCTION

Communication is an integral part of human life. It takes various forms, and one of them is oral or speech. When people speak, they normally use their hands, head, eyes, facial expression, bodily postures, and symbols to communicate, which always accompany oral discourse-intended or not; The impact of these nonlinguistic cues in

conversation is called nonverbal communication (Negi, 2009). Thus, during communication, people deliver two kinds of communication: verbal and nonverbal communication. Verbal Communication (VC) is a form of communication that uses spoken and written words. In contrast, nonverbal communication (NVC) is a form of communication that is done without words orally (paralanguage) and nonorally (posture and gesture, facial expression and eye contact, voice, proximity, appearance, etc.). Although verbal and nonverbal messages differ in many ways, these have to be considered together to understand the conveyed messages (Hall et al., 2019).

NVC is essential, considering people tend to use more NVC in sharing their feeling or emotion than verbal ones. Mehrabian (1972) claimed that 7% of message relating to feelings and attitudes is conveyed through words or verbally, and the rest 93%, is conveyed nonverbally. Therefore, nonverbal signals are crucial to be understood in face-to-face interactions to interpret what someone exactly intended and how well the words are being received. Having a greater understanding of nonverbal communication will enhance the quality of life and give the ability to relate to others with greater understanding, empathy, sympathy, and compassion (Calero, 2005).

Moreover, some nonverbal cues are interpreted differently in other cultures. For instance, nodding is associated with positivity, and shaking heads denotes negativity, but the meaning is reversed in Bulgarian culture; that is, nodding means “no,” and shaking heads means “yes” (Andonova & Taylor, 2012). These kinds of nonverbal cues may create misunderstandings and ambiguities, so knowing about nonverbal communication across cultures is important.

Understanding NVC is very important for teachers in the teaching and learning process. The teacher’s nonverbal behavior may convey many messages and create a positive or negative classroom atmosphere. Teacher’s appearance, gestures and posture, face and eye contact, voice, touching, and proximity will play an important role in the student-teacher relationship. It may further affect the students’ motivation and understanding of learning. Richmond (2002) stated that when the teacher improves affect through effective nonverbal behavior, the students tend to listen more, learn more, and have a more positive attitude about school. Effective classroom communication between teacher and student is the key to a positive effect on students’ affective and cognitive learning. Similarly, Witt and Wheelless (1999) suggested that when teachers



engage in nonverbally immediate behavior, students are more satisfied and learn more. Nonverbal behaviors adopted by a classroom teacher, such as communicating from a close distance, smiling, engaging in eye contact, and making gestures, increase the learners' commitment level.

A gesture is one of the teacher's most commonly used NVC in the classroom (Annisah, 2013). According to Adler and Rodman (2006), gestures are a fundamental element of communication: movements in which one part of the body. A gesture is an expressive motion or action, usually made with the hands and arms, the head or even the whole body (Bunglowala & Bunglowala, 2015).

There are many different types of gestures and variations of these types, but the most frequently studied are the following: (1) Speech-independent gesture. When viewed independently of speech, these gestures have a well-known verbal translation in their usage community, usually consisting of a word or phrase. The gestures used to represent okay or peace are examples of speech-independent gestures. (2) Speech-related gesture. These gestures are directly tied to or accompany speech and often illustrate what is being said verbally. These movements may accent or emphasize a word or phrase, sketch a path of thought, point to present objects, depict a spatial relationship, depict the rhythm or pacing of an event, draw a picture of a referent, depict a bodily action, or serve as commentary on the regulation and organization of the interactive process (Knapp et al. 2013)

The teachers' gestures can be very meaningful and helpful for the students in teaching and learning. Using hand gestures like thumbs up or hand clapping as a reward after students' performance will make students feel more appreciated for their work. When a student seems nervous or hesitant to do something like a performance in front of the class, the touch from the teacher on the student's shoulder will assure that he/she is able to do it. Having a relaxed body posture and proper gestures are positively and significantly associated with students' motivation to learn English (Hsu, 2010). Those were supported by Hanif et al. (2014). The findings showed that the teachers who use their body language properly in the classroom enhanced the level of students' motivation, retention, and understanding; Students can easily understand through symbols and gestures rather than words. Furthermore, Kusanagi (2005) identified that a



teacher's kinesics behavior, especially gesture, operates in five domains. These are (1) Management, (2) Instruction, (3) Input, (4) Regulation, and (5) Affect.

On the contrary, at the same time, the teacher's gesture may also give barriers to the students' learning process (Mahmud, 2014). Some teachers try to calm their students by banging the table when a class is considered too noisy. This kind of habit should be stopped. It will be better if the teacher uses her finger in front of the lips or claps his/her hands to ask the students to be quiet instead of banging the table or whiteboard. Understanding the role of gestures is important because they are very tightly linked to spoken language and are used in everyday communication. So, suppose a teacher has to be aware of the importance of proper gestures in teaching. In that case, any learner who wishes to become competent in a foreign language must also become adept in interpreting the gestures that accompany it as well (Antes, 1996).

In sum, If the teacher's NVC is vivid and alive, it will be helpful for the students to understand and be motivated in learning English, and it is also much easier for students to engage in the learning process. Furthermore, the proper use of facial expressions, body movements, eye contact, voice pitch, and spatial distance helps the teachers better understand the students' learning outcomes (Bunglowala and Bunglowala, 2015). However, nonverbal communication like gestures tends to be neglected or poorly understood and controlled by most teachers (Kožić, Žunac, & Bakić-Tomić, 2013). Neglecting it makes effective classroom communication impossible, which is considered essential for a better understanding of classroom instructions.

Some studies have been conducted related to this issue. Rahmat (2018) tried to figure out the kinds of gestures used by the teacher in the EFL classroom through qualitative descriptive research and found that the most dominant used of gestures by the teacher is natural hand gestures that accompany speech. Meanwhile, Cao and Chen (2017) conducted library research about the role of gestures in ESL classrooms. It showed that the presence of gestures could bring a positive outcome for the learners and can be used as a teaching strategy in ESL teaching and classroom management. In addition, Syahrir (2019) investigated the teachers' gestures that can be used to strengthen the students' understanding of the concept and ideas of mathematics. The findings showed that the mathematics teachers use pointing gestures, symbolic gestures,



and writing gestures, which have the power that leads the students to understand the learning materials delivered by the teachers quickly.

The previous studies above offered this study's different kinds of research design, research subjects and objectives. The present study tried to find out the kinds and functions of gestures and the effect of the teachers' gestures from the students' perspective. The data was collected qualitatively and presented by using the descriptive method. The study's expected result can raise the teachers' awareness of the importance of gestures in EFL teaching.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed descriptive qualitative research. It aimed to figure out the role of the teachers' gestures in the EFL classroom. The research was conducted in SMAN 1 Pamboang, Majene, West Sulawesi. The subjects of the research were two English teachers and fourteen students of the school. The study applied purposive sampling technique to select the teacher and the student participants. The researcher selected those with the longest teaching experience, Teacher R and Teacher W while fourteen students were chosen from their classes. The research subjects asked for anonymity, so for the sake of research ethics, the researcher decided to hide the subjects' identities by only putting their initials.

The data were collected through observation and interview and followed some procedures. First, the researcher analyzed the data using the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three concurrent flows of activity, those are data reduction, data display, and conclusion. The researcher performed classroom observation of the teachers' teaching process. In addition, the researcher used a camcorder to record the classroom meeting and an audio recorder to record the interview process. Both of them were observed and transcribed.

The classroom observation was carried out for four classroom meetings. In this stage, the researcher recorded the proses of teaching and learning activity from opening to closing. The researcher then observed, transcribed, and analyzed the video recording. The result would be presented descriptively and be the interview guide material for the teachers and students.

The interview session was performed after the data from video recordings had been analyzed. The researcher employed an interview guide that contains the data of the

teachers' gestures and their potential function based on the theory and the researcher's point of view. The teachers' interview was carried out to clarify the function of the teachers' gestures or in this case, whether or not those were performed consciously by the teachers to assist them in the EFL classroom. Meanwhile, the students' interview session was performed to find out the effect of the teachers' gestures on the students. The students were asked what they felt and thought about the teachers' gestures on this occasion. The questions were linked to the data found from classroom observation.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Kinds and Function of Teachers' Gestures

The researcher has analyzed the video recordings of teachers' teaching activities and found that both teachers frequently used gestures in EFL classrooms. Some were stand-alone or utilized to substitute the words; most were not stand-alone or combined and followed particular verbal messages. The findings have been summarized in the table below:

Table 1. Kinds and Function of Teachers' Gestures

Teacher	Kinds of gestures	Hand gesture	Head gesture	Function	Function related to Verbal Message
Teacher R	Pointing	✓		Management	Complementing Substituting
	Beckoning/ Inviting	✓		Regulation	Complementing
	Giving example	✓		input	Complementing
	Clapping Hand	✓		Management	Accenting
	Knocking on the table	✓		Management	Complementing
	Hitting the Whiteboard	✓		Management	Complementing
	Nodding		✓	Regulation Management	Complementing
	Shaking head		✓	input	Repeating and accenting
Teacher W	Pointing	✓		Regulation	Complementing
	Beckoning/ inviting	✓		regulation	Complementing



illustrating	✓	Regulation and input Management	complementing
Numbering	✓	Instruction and input	Accenting
Nodding		Instruction and affect	Complementing

Meanwhile, below is the table of percentage of the head and hand gestures used by both teachers during learning process. This table inform how often the teachers performed the gestures.

Table 2. Percentage of Gestures Used by the Teachers in Learning Process

Kinds of gestures	Hand gesture	Head gesture	Percentage (%)
Pointing	✓		49%
Beckoning/ Inviting	✓		14.9%
Giving example	✓		3.2%
Illustrating			7.4 %
Numbering			4.25%
Clapping Hand	✓		1%
Knocking on the table	✓		5.3%
Hitting the Whiteboard	✓		1%
Nodding		✓	10.6%
Shaking head		✓	3.2 %

There are two kinds of gestures commonly used by the teachers, those are hand gestures and head gestures.

1) Hand Gesture

Both teachers performed various hand gestures when teaching. They used those hand gestures not only in explaining material but also in managing the classroom. The data presented below were chosen and taken from teachers' classroom recordings.

a) Pointing

Both teachers ranked this gesture as the most frequently used gesture. In four meetings, pointing dominated up to 49% of the total gestures. This gesture was performed in the classroom management and regulation domain.

Teacher R frequently used this hand gesture to manage the classroom. For example, in the first meeting, the teacher asked a student who still moved around to sit on his seat back. The teacher pointed and said, "*back to your seat!*". She also performed this in the fourth meeting, she raised her right hand and pointed to the student who is standing in front of the door. At that time, two students were reading a dialog while another student

came late knocking on the door. The teacher signaled the student to enter the class using hand gestures instead of words, so she did not interrupt the teaching and learning activity. The hand gesture was used to substitute the teacher's verbal messages, while the first-hand gesture was used to complement the teacher's verbal messages. However, both were used in classroom management.

This hand gesture was also performed by Teacher W in her teaching activity, but she used it for different functions. In the fourth meeting, teacher W pointed to a student by using her index finger. The teacher asked a student to read her answer and said “*yeah, you!*”. The teacher used the hand gesture to regulate the conversational flow and asked for the student's participation. It was clarified by the statement of the teacher W:

Teacher W

...for example, if we ask a question to the students, we appoint a student or we tell a student's turn to answer. The students must stand by to be appointed. Yes of course the use of gesture is very useful

b) Beckoning/Inviting

Beckoning/inviting gesture reached 14.9% of the total gestures used by the teachers. This gesture is effective in inviting the students' participation. In the second meeting, teacher R asked a question to the students and then the students answered the question with a hesitant and quiet voice. She raised her right hand and moved it back and forward, saying “*what? Come on, make it clear, ya what? What? What is the meaning?*”. It is shown in the following extract:

Extract 1

Teacher : okay, the next, simple past tense. So, if I say simple past tense, what is the meaning of simple past tense

A student : the event hmmm

Teacher : what? Come on, make it clear, ya what? What? What is the meaning?

A student : the events that occurred in the past

In this case, the teacher tried encouraging the students to speak up (regulation). She asked them to answer her question while using hand gestures. She used a hand gesture to complement/reinforce her verbal message. This kind of hand gesture was also performed by teacher W for the same purpose.

c) Giving Example

The use of this gesture reached 3.2 % of the total gestures. The teachers performed this when they tried to give examples. For instance, in the second meeting, teacher 1 hold a marker and showed it to the students by raising her right hand. She said, “*For*

example, I say *I have a pen*”. At that time, the teacher was trying to explain the teaching material to the students, as shown in the following extract:

Extract 2

Teacher : okay, before I continue, please remember this, have or has can be used as auxiliary and can be defined as? If it is followed by noun, what does it mean?

Students : possess

Teacher : yes possess. For example, I say **I have a pen**. It means I possess a pen. Because pen is a noun, so it is not functioned as auxiliary but?

Students : possess, verb.

The gesture was used to complement or reinforce her verbal message. In this case, the gesture function referred to input, because the teacher used hand gestures to understand the students better. This is in line with the statement of teacher R, as follows:

Teacher R

“Well, just like what I’ve said, in teaching, for example descriptive text, I often use it (hand gesture) to point directly to my body (to give example) or to appoint students, so that it complements verbal message. Using gesture is important so that the students can understand”

d) Illustrating

The use of this gesture was up to 7.4% of the total gestures. TeacherW used this hand gesture in the second meeting. She was saying “*when express the events in writing yah*” while using hand her hand to illustrate *writing and expressing*, this is used to make the student understand the material faster (regulation and input) as shown in the following extract:

Extract 3

Teacher : The last, what is the meaning? use vivid language in narrative event. we have to use vivid language **when express the events in writing yah**. the story or the story of life. hmmm I want to ask you, the biography. What is the genre of biography?

A student : descriptive

In addition, this kind of hand gesture was also used in classroom management. Teacher W performed the hand gesture to complement her verbal message. The teacher used hand gesture to illustrate a circle (group). She used her hand and said “*come on, make a group, please!*”.

e) Clapping Hands

In the first meeting the teacher R asked the students the meaning of the verb. There was no answer from the students. They were even busy talking to each other and paid

less attention to their teacher. The teacher then clapped her hands to ask the students' attention while repeating her question, "**hey! What is the meaning of verb!**", as shown in the following extract:

Extract 4

Teacher : okay, let's check it out, simple past tense. The pattern of simple past tense is subject plus verb two. What is irregular verb? You don't know that? how could you? what is the meaning of irregular verb? And how about the regular verb? oh my god, how about verb? hey! What is the meaning of verb?

Students : verb

Teacher : how about adjective ?

Students : hmmm...

The teacher used a hand gesture to accentuate/amplify her verbal message, and the function of the gesture referred to management, where the teacher tried to control students' behaviors and interactions. The teachers rarely used this kind of gesture. Its usage was only about 1% of the total gestures.

f) Numbering

TeacherW used hand gesture in the first meeting when explained the material. She used her two fingers while said "**there are two types of biography**". It can be seen in the following extract:

Extract 5

Teacher : Please, read the background, you can see there on page sixty five, this is about the biography of Ki Hajar Dewantara, isn't? ehm... so there are two types of biography yah. There are long biography and?

Students : shooort

Teacher :if we see this, look at the picture, please! Ki Hajar Dewantoro, hmmm is this long or short biography?

Students : Looooong

In this case, the teacher used hand gestures to accentuate her verbal message that there are two types of biography. The function of teacher's gesture referred to instruction and input because the teacher used the representational gesture in teaching to understand the students better. The statement of teacher W below also supported it:

Teacher W

yes, I think it (gesture) is very helpful... it will be more attractive for the students if it (explanation) is followed by hand gesture

g) Knocking the table and Hitting the Whiteboard

Knocking on the table and hitting the whiteboard gesture reached 5.3% dan 1 %, respectively. They were used to discipline the students. In the fourth meeting, teacher R



asked some students to read a conversation, but the rests were very noisy and did not pay attention to their friends. The teacher then knocked on the table and shouted to calm down the students by saying, “*silent, please!*”. The teacher used a hand gesture to complement her verbal messages. It was used to control the students’ behavior. It is shown in the following extract:

Extract 6

Teacher: okay, once more, I want the girls reading it once more, who wants to be Orville?

A student: I want to be the Host ma’am

Teacher: okay You’re Host, Orvilleyou, Afrianti! and Suriyani as Wilbur okay, start from now!

silent, please!listen to your friend! look at your book!

In the next meeting, the teacher also hit the whiteboard to calm down the students.

These hand gestures are performed to discipline the students so these are operated in the Management domain.

2) Head Gesture

a) Nodding

This head gesture was the second primarily used gesture by the teachers. It was up to 10.6 % of the total gestures. This gesture was also the one that performed in four different domains; they were management, regulation, instruction and affection domain.

In the first meeting, teacher R used a head gesture. The teacher asked a student to read a paragraph. She nodded while saying “*yah the next, you. Paragraph two!*” She looked at the student, and then she nodded to signal the student to start reading the paragraph so that the function of the gesture referred to regulation.

Teacher W also performed this head gesture in different domains. She tended to achieve this every time her students answered her questions right. She nodded and smiled at the students as a reward and showing affection.

b) Shaking Head

In this meeting, teacher R used a head gesture while explaining the material. She said “*the word that have not been added, have not been added by affixes*” while shook her head. She used head gesture to repeat her verbal message. It was shown in the following extract:

Extract 7

Teacher: yeah the root, the basic! Do you know the meaning of root word? what?

A student: the word that have not been added by affixes

*Teacher :yah, the word that have not been added, **have not been added by affixes**. Okay, verb two! Verb two can be called as?*

A student : past tense

a. The Effect of the Teachers' Gestures on Students

The result of classroom observation led the researcher to compose an interview guide for students. The researcher conducted the interview to determine the effect of teacher gestures on students. The researcher attained at least seven important points from the students' interview session.

- 1) The students agree that some of teachers' hand gestures can help them to understand the material
- 2) The students are easy to memorize vocabularies if the teacher illustrates them using hand gestures
- 3) The students agreed that the teachers' gestures can help them to understand the instruction better
- 4) The students feel appreciated if the teacher use gestures such as clapping hand, thumb up or nodded combined with smile as reward
- 5) The students feel more appreciated when the teacher appoint them by using palm instead of index finger.
- 6) The students are scared, nervous and uncomfortable when the teacher reprimand them by hitting the table or whiteboard
- 7) The students state that too many unnecessary hand movements can distract their focus on material.

Discussion

Based on the findings, both teachers used hand and head gestures in their teaching activity. Those were pointing, beckoning, illustrating, clapping hands, numbering, knocking table/hitting the whiteboard, nodding and shaking head. Pointing was the mostly used gesture by the teachers during four recorded meetings. Both teachers performed this to manage the classroom and regulate conversation or facilitate turn-taking. Meanwhile, Nodding gesture was suprisingly performed very often by the teachers and operated in four domains.

Furthermore, the teachers' gestures mostly complement or reinforce their verbal messages when explaining the material and managing the classroom. Hand gesture



makes their verbal messages better and more attractive. Besides that, they also use hand gestures to accentuate their verbal messages many times. The teachers tried to accentuate the important parts of her verbal messages. Based on the teachers' statement and supported by the students' statement, some gestures are usually used to make students understand the lesson easier (giving examples, illustrating, numbering, etc.). Kusanagi (2005, p. 386), She stated that "gestures provide complimentary input to the speech...when a gestural explanation succeeds, students understand the new language well, and as a result, their better understanding may increase their motivation and learning"

In addition, both teachers used some gestures to facilitate turn-taking or control the students' interaction (pointing and nodding), to manage the classroom (pointing, clapping hands, and knocking table), and to give rewards and affection (nodded). Teacher R also used gestures to substitute her verbal messages. She preferred using hand gestures (pointing) and head gestures (nodding) combined with eye contact than words. She performed the gestures when she wanted a student to do something without interrupting the learning process or the other students. She also performed hand gestures to encourage students to speak (beckoning). On the other hand, teacher W used hand gestures to regulate the conversational flow many times. She used her index finger to control the classroom interaction (pointing).

Based on the analysis of students' interviews, most students agreed that a teacher who uses gestures to explain the material, especially hand gestures, increases their learning motivation and understanding. The hand gestures that the teachers mostly use are to accentuate and complement their verbal messages. Therefore, these kinds of hand gestures are beneficial for the students to understand the teachers' explanations. This is in line with the research findings of Zeki (2009), who found that the gesture performed by the teacher is significant for students' understanding and motivation; it helps them understand the topic better.

However, Some students stated that the use of gestures could distract the students' focus. A teacher who uses repeated hand movement too often can make the students lose track of what the teacher is talking. Some student also stated that the use of teacher gestures in the classroom affect the learning atmosphere in the classroom. For example, they tend to be nervous when the teacher knocks on the table or hits the whiteboard



while shouting to discipline them. Furthermore, the students also felt unappreciated when the teacher appointed them using her index finger. Instead of using the index finger, some students feel better if the teacher uses her palm or thumb or calls their names directly.

D. CONCLUSION

Both teachers at SMAN 1 Pamboang performed hand and head gestures in the teaching and learning process. For hand gestures, the teacher used pointing, beckoning/inviting, giving examples, clapping hands, knocking on the table, hitting the whiteboard, illustrating, and numbering. While for head gestures, they use nodding and shaking their head. The teachers used hand gestures mostly in terms of management, such as directing students, controlling student attitudes and disciplining the students. The second is in terms of regulation. Teachers performed it to invite students' participation. The third is in terms of input and instruction. The teacher used a representational hand gesture to make it easier for students to remember and understand the material. As with hand gestures, head gestures are also used in the same domain such as in management, regulation, instruction, and input. But in some meetings, one of the teachers used a head gesture combined with a smile when rewarding students and showing affection. The teachers' gestures are mostly used in conjunction with words or this case, named speech-related gestures. The teacher used these gestures to complement, accentuate, and repeat the words. On the other hand, a small number of gestures also used to substitute the words. These gestures are stand-alone or are called as speech-independent gestures. The teacher consciously and unconsciously uses gestures in the classroom affects students and the learning process. Students agreed that using gestures by the teacher could improve their understanding and motivation in learning. However, using too many or improper gestures can distract their focus and affect the learning atmosphere in the classroom.

This study showed the teachers' awareness of gestures in EFL classrooms is important. However, what teachers intend to accomplish by using gestures in their teaching activity is not always in sync with what the students perceive. So, teachers must understand what they should and should not do in EFL classrooms to create a better learning atmosphere. However, this study needs to be followed up to explore



more deeply what skills or language components can be improved or influenced by using appropriate gestures in EFL teaching.

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