



ALTERNATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Nonverbal Communication in Diverse Classrooms: Intercultural Competence Considerations for Supporting English Learners With Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Project Background

The ALTELLA project researches instructional practices, accessibility features and accommodations, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to develop an evidence-centered design approach that informs our understanding of alternate English language proficiency assessment for these students.

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English learners who have significant cognitive disabilities are a small but important subgroup of students in U.S. schools. One characteristic of this group is that communication may be a greater challenge for them than for other students. Nonverbal communication is an important component of communication, and so it is important to consider the individual cultural differences in nonverbal communication for these English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

Definition of Culture

The Alternate English Language Learning Assessment (ALTELLA) project supports the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2001) definition of culture, which defines it in a broad sense as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group. ... [I]t encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”

Culture is much more than ethnicity—it includes gender, region, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. These and other aspects of culture can be visible or invisible. Visible features may include the foods we eat and the clothes we wear. Invisible components include ways of thinking, such as values, attitudes, and beliefs.

For English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, it is difficult to generalize across settings, so understanding differences in cultures may be very challenging for the student. Educators cannot provide effective instruction without solid intercultural competence (understanding the meaning and importance of culture in people’s lives) – skills needed in the highly diversifying U.S. classrooms (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003). However, teacher preparation programs vary widely in how they offer intercultural education courses (Christensen, 2007), at the same time, teachers need to be cognizant of implications of intercultural similarities and differences particularly when it comes to such a diverse population as English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

Nonverbal communication behaviors exist in both the student’s home culture as well as the school

culture. In some cases, these behaviors may have the same meaning, and in other cases, they may differ to various extents. Also, there may be nonverbal communication patterns that exist in only the student’s home or school culture. In all cases, it is important to know what these individual nonverbal communication behaviors are in order to effectively communicate with the student. For some students, due to the nature of their disabilities, nonverbal communication can have even greater significance than for those of their peers who can express themselves verbally. This is the case for all students, and this brief focuses on the implications of nonverbal communication for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

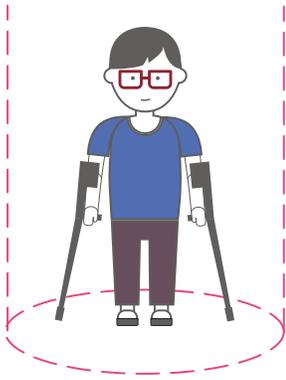
Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication includes actions that do not involve spoken language, such as tone, touch and personal distance, facial expressions, eye contact, turn-taking, and gestures.



Tone. Researchers, including Craig Storti (1994), have analyzed language families and observed that different spoken languages have different tone patterns, particularly related to loudness and pitch. Some languages, for example, Cantonese, may rely on tone for meaning. Other languages, such as Japanese, may use tone only in a limited way to

convey meaning. Similarly, volume may have different meanings in different cultures. In some, loudness may be associated with anger or agitation, while in others it may convey more neutral messages. For English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, meaning associated with tone or volume may be difficult to interpret, and educators need to pay special attention to students’ communication patterns to have a better understanding of the significance of cultural components in their communication. Some students with hearing impairments may experience challenges in understanding tone and loudness.



Touch and personal distance. Appropriate touching and personal space vary widely across cultures. In some cultures, a wide personal bubble is expected, whereas in other cultures, having very little distance between two people may be acceptable. Consider, for example, how much space is needed

between children standing in line for lunch. In contrast, consider how much space people leave around them when lining up at a cash machine. Personal space may differ according to age, ethnicity, gender, disability, family status, and other cultural dimensions. Personal space may also vary depending on the relationships among the people involved.

Similarly, the frequency with which one person touches another may vary, as well as what parts of the body are acceptable places to touch. In some cultures, for example, it is not appropriate to touch a person on the top of the head. When serving English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, educators need to be able to understand the cultural expectations around touch and personal space, as students may experience cultural misunderstandings with their peers or teachers around cultural differences.



Facial expressions. People can create facial expressions with the head, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, chin, etc. Facial expressions may be different across cultures and may convey different meanings for people with varying backgrounds. In mainstream

U.S. culture, a smile often means that someone is happy. However, in other cultures, a smile may mean the person is embarrassed.

Teachers who work with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities should make sure they are familiar with what facial expressions mean

in the student's home culture so they understand what the student is communicating. In addition, educators can help students learn about differences in the meanings of facial expressions, especially those used by people at school.



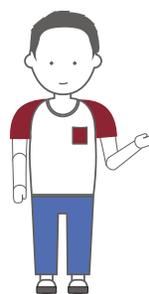
Eye contact. Looking directly into another person's eyes is often considered to be a show of respect or a way of demonstrating honesty in U.S. education culture. However, for some students, making eye contact may be considered disrespectful. Again, people's age, gender, ability, social hierarchy, or other contextual factors may lead to differences in

how or whether people make eye contact.



Turn-taking. Methods of turn-taking may vary across cultures. In some cultures, teachers will formally call on students whereas in other cultures students may feel more comfortable jumping in. Teachers may want to be explicit about how turn-taking will occur in

the classroom. Additionally, wait times vary across cultures. English learners, including those with significant cognitive disabilities, may take more time than is common in the teacher's culture because they need more time to process receptive and expressive language.



Gestures. Using one's hands, head, or other parts of the body to communicate meaning is a common form of nonverbal communication; however, gestures can mean different things in different cultures. Even a simple head nod up and down is not a universal symbol for "yes." In some cultures, the same motion may indicate "no." In

addition students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities may have trouble making certain gestures that convey the intended meaning.

Responding to Nonverbal Communication

One approach to encountering new communication patterns is to employ the strategy “describe, interpret, evaluate.” This process-based approach to encountering something new allows a person to step back from the rush to interpret or judge and consider multiple possibilities and interpretations. The Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation Exercise is a lesson plan that can be used for staff professional learning, and it can be adapted for classroom use (available online: <http://www2.rdrop.com/users/www.intercultural.org/die.php>).

Other strategies that lead to increasing intercultural competence in diverse classrooms are identifying similarities and differences among people of different cultural backgrounds, meaningfully sharing pictures relevant to various cultures, and contrasting values by considering how different cultures perceive different values (Shyyan, 2018).

Using short scenarios, or critical incidents that describe situations in which there may be cultural misunderstandings can be helpful as well.

Questions to Consider

To further understanding of nonverbal communication in diverse classrooms, educators may want to consider the following questions:

- How can I learn more about nonverbal communication across cultures so that I can best support my students in my classroom?
- Which cultural characteristics of nonverbal communication should I take into consideration when working with each individual student?
- With whom should I collaborate to generate a better understanding of my students’ nonverbal communication patterns and needs?
- How can I incorporate intercultural strategies in my classroom?

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