



THINK TANK: Body Brain

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Teaching Language with Gesture, and More

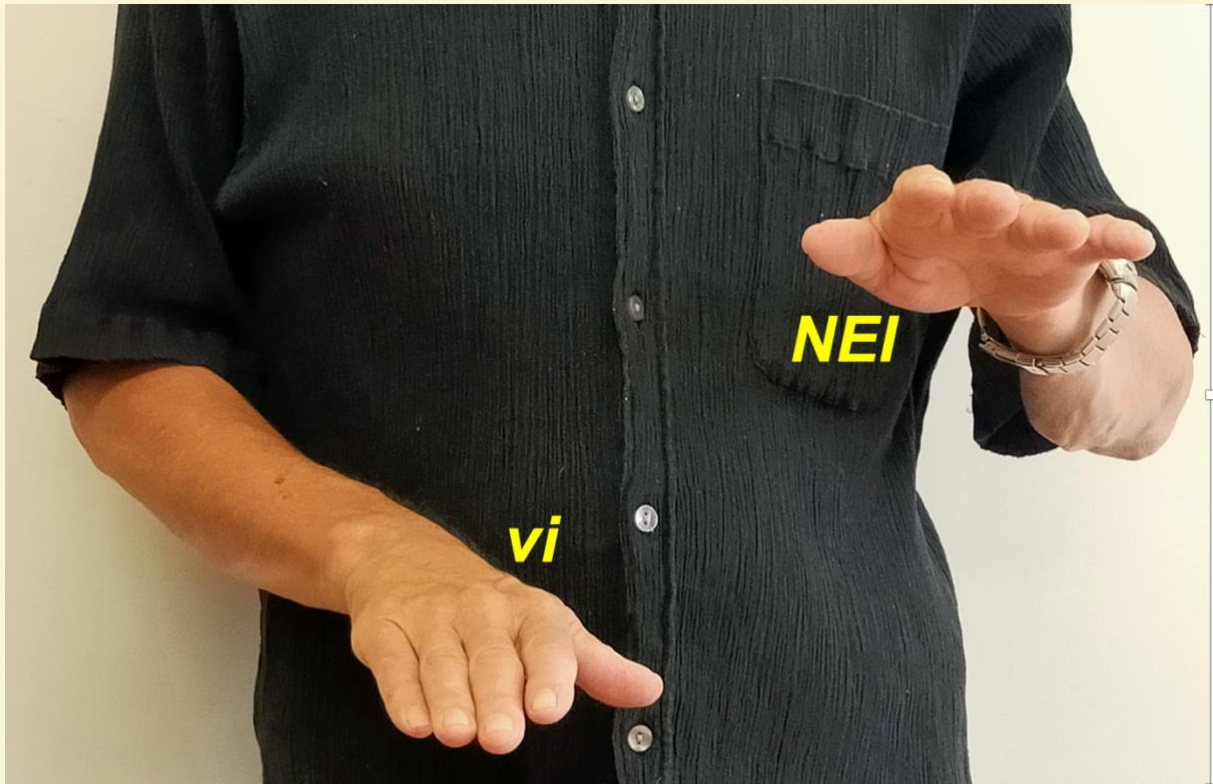
How talkative our hands are and how eloquent our body is! Actually, our hands and body can be powerful language teaching tools ([Paul, 2021](#)). Because cognition is embodied, so is language, making motor movement is a part of language processing, even if not externalized. Therefore, it is natural for us to communicate with gestures and body movements, but we can also use them strategically in teaching language.

This spring, I observed an elementary English class for sixth graders (Kimura, in press). The class was team-taught by a Japanese teacher, Natsuko, and two assistant language teachers, Doug and Matt (pseudonyms). Matt was a special guest for the day. Natsuko designed the class so that students could review question sentences that they had learned in the last two textbook chapters AND they would come to know what the special guest teacher was like. Doug asked Matt the following questions one by one.

- (1) *“What’s your name? How do you spell your name?”*
- (2) *“Where are you from?”*
- (3) *“What color do you like?”*
- (4) *“What sport do you like?”*
- (5) *“What food do you like?”*
- (6) *“When is your birthday?”*
- (7) *“What do you want for your birthday?”*

In response to the favorite color question (3), Matt answered, “Navy.” Although students had already learned basic color words such as “red” and “green,” “navy” was not one of the words listed in their textbook. Also, the Japanese counterpart, *ne-i-bi*, is a loan word from English, but it has three moras instead of the two syllables of the

original English word. The students did not seem to have aurally perceived or conceptually understood the word in one listening. Then, Matt acted out the word's pronunciation using his hands. He uttered the first syllable, *nei*, in a strong voice with his left hand, palm down, up above his chest. Soon after that, he uttered the second syllable, *vi*, in a less strong voice with his right hand, also palm down, a little bit below his chest.



After a short pause, Matt repeated the word with the same hand gestures, this time a bit faster. Most of the students said the word after him. In fact, I spotted some students imitating his hand gestures.

The hand gestures Matt made stood for the way the word was articulated. First, his hands punctuated the two syllables. Second, they visualized their distinct characteristics: One was higher and stronger than the other and probably one was longer than the other, I guess. Accented syllables are pronounced higher in pitch, stronger, and longer. Come to think of it, it would have been better if he had shown the first syllable, *nei*, with his left hand and the second syllable, *vi*, with his right.



Students saw the gesture from the opposite side. It would have made more sense for them if the gestures had run from the left to right.

Something more dramatic happened for the favorite sport question (4). Matt did not answer the question aurally at first. He quietly mimed slowly

hitting an attack shot in a volleyball game. Gesture primed speech! After some students murmured the word, “volleyball,” with a Japanese accent, Matt clearly pronounced the same word with an English accent, miming the hitting movement at the same time. When students repeated the English counterpart, some of them imitated the same body movement as their teacher.

In both instances, Matt reinforced the spoken words with visual and motor signals. Hand gestures and body movements enhance memory, and the more hooks or scaffolding we have for memory, the better. Using SLA terms, multi-sensory input is stronger than listening only or reading only (See Helgesen’s article of this issue). Also, Matt translated the verbal language into body language. He seemed naturally haptic, or bodily-kinesthetic ([Gardner, 1999](#)). People may differ in their propensity for body movements. Matt is a great teacher who uses his hands and body skillfully. Yes, indeed! Let our hands and body speak when we teach. Yes, let’s!

However, I have a feeling that we should go a little bit deeper than that as language teachers. Paul writes “[g]esture was humanity’s first language” (2021, p. 72). This means three things, as I understand it. First, we learn to communicate by gesture before we learn to do so by speech. For example, infants ask for food by pointing at it. By looking away from an object, they show they don’t like it. Second, oftentimes “people gesture first and speak second” (p. 71). This may sound surprising, but according to Paul, research has demonstrated that we start gesturing before we articulate the word(s). Have you noticed that you start making hand movements while you are searching for an appropriate word or formulating a concept or idea to express? Here again, gesture is not secondary to speech, but primary. Third, our language use is dependent on access to resources outside our brain: our hands and body, and, believe it or not, more than hands and body.

Paul (2021) uses a magpie metaphor to promote thinking outside the brain. Magpies use whatever they can find in their environment to make their nests: not only twigs and moss but also dental floss, spoons, shoelaces, eye-glass frames, and more. The materials and tools we use to think “with” (p. 11) affect our thinking, she writes, and also our subsequent behaviors, I believe. The thinking tools she refers to are our body, our environment, and our relationships with others.

“... tools we use to think *with* ...”

When Matt introduced the word “navy,” Natsuko, the Japanese teacher, had students point to something navy in the classroom. She said, “Find something navy!” Some students noticed and pointed to navy-blue pants one student wore. Other students did the same, one after another. The student who wore the navy pants first did not notice the color of his pants.

Actually, he was almost the last one to point. Seeing him do that, other students and the teachers laughed a good laugh. This way of learning expanded the scope of the language beyond the word itself through the motions of hands, the learning environment (the pants), and collaborative learning behavior (contagious pointing). Using gestures and body movements in language learning can go beyond making mental simulation possible and toward generating a dynamic interplay of whatever we can use in classrooms.

Harumi Kimura (EdD.) is a professor at Miyagi Gakuin Women’s University. She studied L2 listening anxiety in her doctoral study, and her academic interests include second language acquisition, learner development, learner psychology, multilingualism, and cooperative learning. She thinks that her mission is “to make learning another language less intimidating and a bit more rewarding plus fun.”

References

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