

LISTENING TO NON-VERBAL CUES IN COMMUNICATION

Teshaboyeva Nafisa Zubaydulla qizi

Scientific advisor: Jizzakh branch of the National university of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulug'bek. The faculty of psychology, the department of Foreign languages; Philology and teaching languages: English

Xamidova Mashxura Abror qizi

The faculty of psychology the department of Foreign languages: Philology and teaching languages: English, student of group 103-23

Abstract: *Non-verbal communication plays a crucial role in understanding and interpreting messages beyond the spoken word. While verbal communication relies on language and words, non-verbal cues—such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and tone of voice—often convey more than what is said. This article explores the significance of non-verbal cues in communication, their impact on how messages are received, and how individuals can enhance their listening skills by attending to these cues. The study of non-verbal communication enriches interpersonal interactions, fostering clearer understanding and reducing the risk of miscommunication.*

Keywords: *Non-verbal communication, body language, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, listening skills, communication, interpersonal interactions, cues*

In daily communication, the message conveyed is not only dependent on the words we speak but also on how we say them and the physical signals we give. Non-verbal cues—such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice—play a crucial role in communication. In fact, many studies suggest that a large portion of human communication is non-verbal, with some estimates placing it at around 65-90% of total communication. Listening to non-verbal cues involves more than just hearing words; it includes understanding the subtle

messages that accompany verbal communication. This ability to listen to non-verbal cues significantly enhances the effectiveness of interpersonal communication and helps individuals build stronger connections.

The Importance of Non-Verbal Cues in Communication

Non-verbal cues are powerful forms of communication that often convey emotions, intentions, and attitudes more clearly than words themselves. These cues can either complement or contradict verbal messages, adding richness and depth to conversations. For example, when a speaker expresses enthusiasm verbally but their body language suggests discomfort or disinterest, listeners can pick up on this incongruity and adjust their interpretation of the message accordingly. Understanding non-verbal communication is essential for interpreting the full meaning behind an interaction.

Key elements of non-verbal cues include:

- **Body Language:** The posture, movements, and gestures a person uses during communication can convey a wealth of information. Open body language may suggest receptiveness, while crossed arms might indicate defensiveness or discomfort.
- **Facial Expressions:** Facial expressions can reveal a person's emotional state, such as happiness, anger, surprise, or sadness. Even slight changes in the face can convey a message that is not verbally articulated.
- **Gestures:** Hand movements and other gestures can express emphasis or provide clarification. For instance, pointing, nodding, or waving can all serve as important cues in communication.
- **Eye Contact:** Eye contact is often considered a crucial element in non-verbal communication. It can signal attention, trust, or confidence. The lack of eye contact, however, might suggest dishonesty or discomfort.
- **Tone of Voice:** The way words are spoken—whether in a high, low, fast, or slow tone—can convey different emotions or intentions. A calm voice may indicate reassurance, while a raised voice may suggest anger or frustration.

By tuning into these cues, listeners can gain a more accurate understanding of the speaker's emotions and intent, which can improve the overall quality of communication.

Listening to Non-Verbal Cues

Listening to non-verbal cues is an essential skill that goes hand-in-hand with active listening. While verbal communication focuses on the literal meaning of words, non-verbal cues provide insights into the speaker's true feelings, attitudes, and emotions. Attending to non-verbal signals involves both conscious observation and interpretation.

- **Observation Skills:** Effective listening goes beyond hearing words. It requires observation of the speaker's body language, facial expressions, gestures, and tone. Pay attention to how the speaker's words align with their physical actions.
- **Contextual Understanding:** The meaning of non-verbal cues can vary depending on the context. A gesture may carry different meanings across cultures, and the same body language may convey different emotions depending on the situation. Understanding the context in which communication takes place is crucial for accurate interpretation.
- **Synchronizing Verbal and Non-Verbal Cues:** Successful communicators are often skilled in synchronizing their verbal and non-verbal messages. When a speaker's verbal message aligns with their non-verbal cues, the message becomes clearer and more trustworthy. Conversely, conflicting verbal and non-verbal cues can create confusion or mistrust. Skilled listeners are attentive to these discrepancies and seek clarification when needed.

Enhancing Communication Through Non-Verbal Cues

By actively listening to non-verbal cues, individuals can enhance both personal and professional relationships. Non-verbal cues help build rapport, foster empathy, and create a deeper level of understanding between individuals. Here are some ways non-verbal listening can improve communication:

- **Building Trust:** When verbal and non-verbal messages align, it builds trust between the communicator and listener. A genuine tone of voice and consistent body language help to convey sincerity.
- **Preventing Misunderstanding:** Non-verbal cues can provide additional clarification, reducing the likelihood of miscommunication. If someone says they are okay, but their facial expression shows distress, the listener can recognize the discrepancy and address it.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** The ability to read and respond to non-verbal cues is a key component of emotional intelligence. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are more adept at understanding others' feelings and responding appropriately.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Non-verbal cues can help in detecting tension or discomfort in a conversation, which is especially valuable in conflict resolution. Recognizing signs of disagreement or unease can prompt a more empathetic approach to resolving the issue.

The Role of Culture in Non-Verbal Communication

It is important to note that non-verbal cues can vary significantly across cultures. While direct eye contact is seen as a sign of confidence in many Western cultures, it may be considered rude or confrontational in some Eastern cultures. Similarly, the meaning of gestures like handshakes, nods, or hand movements can differ from one culture to another.

Cultural awareness plays a key role in interpreting non-verbal communication accurately. Therefore, listeners should be mindful of cultural differences and refrain from making assumptions based on their own cultural norms.

Listening to non-verbal cues is an essential aspect of effective communication. While words play a significant role in delivering messages, non-verbal cues often reveal the true meaning behind them. By developing the skill of observing and interpreting these cues, individuals can improve their ability to understand emotions, intentions, and the overall message being communicated.

As we become more attuned to non-verbal signals, our ability to communicate empathetically and meaningfully with others increases, fostering stronger relationships in both personal and professional contexts.

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