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NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT IN TEACHING TURKISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The most important element that provides personal and social communication is language. Although the verbal communication aspect of the language predominates, non-verbal language elements are also at the forefront of communication. In addition to some sounds that cannot be described as words, body language along with gestures and facial expressions, is also called “non-verbal communication”. According to research, “non-verbal communication” is more effective than other language elements in ensuring linguistic understanding.

Learning a language as a mother tongue or a foreign language is basically similar but different from each other. The most obvious of these differences emerges when using language in the sociocultural field. Because an individual who communicates in his native language does not experience any hesitation in choosing internalized word meanings or in the use of non-verbal communication elements. So much so that native speakers perform non-verbal communication elements that show emotional states compatible with the meaning of the words used in verbal communication, almost involuntarily, that is, as a reflex. However, the same convenience is not available for those who learn the same language as a foreign language: Foreigners who learn the target language must first choose the word to be used in verbal communication, determine which meaning corresponds to the situation, and then try to add non-verbal communication elements compatible with the context to the word.

Some of the non-verbal communication elements can sometimes have meaning on their own, without being added to words, that is, as voice or body language. Some non-verbal communication elements, which may be different from the culture of foreign students learning Turkish, are frequently used in Turkish society. In addition to body language, including

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gestures and facial expressions, there are also some sounds that contain meaning. Learning these sounds and body language, which are unique to Turks and cannot be described as words, by foreigners learning Turkish, is important in terms of adapting to the sociocultural structure of the society in which they learn the language, as well as knowing the meaning details of the target language. Because knowing some sounds or body language movements that have different meanings or no meaning in the student's own culture will eliminate possible misunderstandings or disagreements. As the foreign student's communication becomes easier, his positive thoughts about the target language increase, it will be easier for him to adapt to the new society he joins without experiencing culture shock.

Considering the importance of the communicative approach in foreign language teaching, learning the non-verbal communication elements of the target language should be a priority for language learners.

Keywords: teaching Turkish, foreign language, non-verbal communication.

1. Introduction

Dictionaries have a clear place in teaching a language as a native language or a foreign language. While dictionaries for the vocabulary of a language such as words, idioms, proverbs and terms can be easily found, it is not always possible to find comprehensive explanations for the non-verbal communication elements of the same language. However, in ensuring mutual understanding - as research shows - the role of non-verbal communication is much greater than verbal communication. Despite this, non-verbal communication is not included sufficiently in the sets for teaching Turkish as a foreign language. Academic studies on non-verbal communication elements in Turkish are also limited in number. The aims of the research are to gather the findings in these studies, complete the deficiencies, compare them with different cultures, and present the non-verbal communication elements that are most frequently used in Turkish to foreign students.

2. Non-verbal communication

The most important element that enables communication is language. "Interpersonal communication is divided into 'verbal communication' and 'non-verbal communication'. Body language is within the scope of empowering, meaning-enhancing non-verbal communication that supports verbal communication." (Khashoggi, 2002, p. 26). Although the verbal communication aspect of the language predominates, non-verbal language elements are also at the forefront in communication. In addition to some sounds that cannot be described as

words, body language along with gestures and facial expressions are also called “non-verbal communication”. Non-verbal communication is more than body language. In other words, body language is a part of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication is more effective than other language elements for linguistic understanding. (Figure N°01) Because the words are 10% effective in communication, the phonological elements are 30% effective, and the body language is 60% effective (Cooper, 1989, p. 56).

As a result of his research, Ray L. Birdwhistell revealed that 35% of the message is carried out through verbal means and 65% through non-verbal means. In his research on the same subject, Albert Mehrabian developed a formula that reveals that 7% of the message is transmitted verbally, 38% is phonetic (related to the tone of voice, etc.), and 55% is transmitted non-verbally. (Trans. Üstünel, 2011, p. 40).

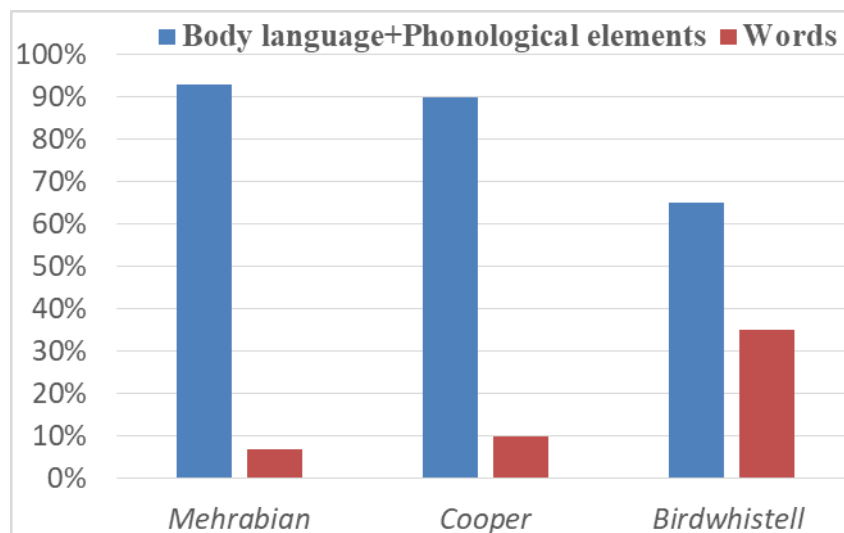


Figure N°01: Effectiveness in verbal communication

The body language and vocal elements are so important that some symbols are used even in social media messages where non-verbal communication cannot be demonstrated, especially in the transmission of emotions.

3. Non-verbal communication in “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)”

“Communication is culture, culture is communication.” based on the understanding of (Hall, 1966, p. 186), it can be said that the communication culture of societies is different. Because non-verbal communication elements vary and vary according to cultures. These

communication culture differences have been extensively discussed in the literature with multicultural, intercultural and transcultural approaches.

In addition to teaching the syntax, grammar and correct pronunciation of a language, transferring the body language characteristics that may be specific to the cultures of the people speaking that language in foreign language classes is inevitable for an efficient foreign language teaching and effective intercultural communication. (Erigkon Cangil, 2004, p. 72).

Especially in the 21st century, curricula and practices based on the communicative approach, which is mostly preferred in foreign language teaching, have increased. One of the most important curricula on the subject was created by the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (CEFR).

According to CEFR (2013, p. 89), “translingual tools” (Figure N°02), which may vary from culture to culture, are used in the non-verbal communication of many societies and can be generally classified under the following headings:

<i>Paralinguistics includes</i>		
<i>Body language</i>	<i>gesture</i>	<i>(e.g. shaken fist for ‘protest’)</i>
	<i>facial expression</i>	<i>(e.g. smile or scowl)</i>
	<i>posture</i>	<i>(e.g. slump for ‘despair’ or sitting forward for ‘keen interest’)</i>
	<i>eye contact</i>	<i>(e.g. a conspiratorial wink or a disbelieving stare)</i>
	<i>body contact</i>	<i>(e.g. kiss or handshake)</i>
	<i>proxemics</i>	<i>(e.g. standing close or aloof)</i>
<i>Use of extra-linguistic speech-sounds</i>	<i>Such sounds (or syllables) are paralinguistic in that they carry conventionalised meanings but lie outside the regular phonological system of a language.</i>	<i>for example: (in English): ‘sh’ requesting silence, ‘s-s-s’ expressing public disapproval, ‘ugh’ expressing disgust, ‘humph’ expressing disgruntlement, ‘tut, tut’ expressing polite disapproval.</i>

Prosodic qualities	<p><i>The use of these qualities is paralinguistic if they carry conventionalised meanings (e.g. related to attitudes and states of mind), but fall outside the regular phonological system in which prosodic features of length, tone, stress may play a part.</i></p>	<p><i>for example: voice quality (gruff, breathy, piercing, etc.) pitch (growling, whining, screaming, etc.) loudness (whispering, murmuring, shouting, etc.) length (e.g. ve-e-e-ery good!)</i></p>
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Figure N°02: Translingual tools according to CEFR.

CEFR also leaves it up to experts in each language to sort out which elements of non-verbal communication are needed and should be taught so that foreign language learners can understand and use them:

Paralinguistic communication should be carefully distinguished from developed sign languages, which fall outside the present scope of CEF, though experts in that field may find many of its concepts and categories relevant to their concerns. Users of the Framework may wish to consider and where appropriate state: which target paralinguistic behaviours, the learner will need/be equipped/be required to a) recognise and understand b) use. (CEFR, 2013, p. 90).

4. The importance of non-verbal communication in foreign language learning

“The most you can say is as much as the other person can understand.” Celaleddin Rûmî

Considering the importance of the communicative approach in foreign language teaching, learning the non-verbal communication elements of the target language should be a priority for language learners. Because, as Celaleddin Rûmî said, messages provide communication as much as they can be interpreted by the receiver. In communication, the way the message is understood is important rather than the message sent. In other words, it is not the state of the message sent by the sender, but the state in which it is interpreted by the receiver, that determines communication. A message that cannot be perceived by a learner from a different culture cannot be expected to provide communication.

“The concept of culture is so related to non-verbal communication that the obstacles to learning culture are more non-verbal than verbal.” (Brown, 2007, p. 237). For this reason, learning and using language-specific non-verbal communication elements by foreign learners is important in terms of mastering the details of meaning as well as adapting to the sociocultural structure of the society in which the language is spoken. Because the student's

knowledge of some sounds or body language movements that have different meanings or no meaning in his own culture will eliminate possible misunderstandings or disagreements. In this way, the positive thoughts of the foreign student about the language he/she learns will increase, whose communication becomes easier, and it will be easier for him/her to adapt to the new society he/she lives in without experiencing culture shock. For example, “A Tibetan uses the expression sticking out his tongue to mean 'hello'. In Turks, this action is described as 'ridicule'.” (Anık, 2012, p. 98).

5. Non-verbal communication examples from Turkish society

Since it constitutes a large part, even a significant part, of communication, it is inevitable for society to use non-verbal communication extremely effectively in daily life. In this regard, some non-verbal communication elements that may be different from the cultures of foreign learners are also frequently used by the Turkish society. The most important of these examples and those that are relatively different from other cultures will be examined in this article.

5.1. Distance and physical contact

Interpersonal distance and contact are the primary non-verbal communication elements that show sociocultural differences.

Interpersonal distance varies from culture to culture. While there is closer personal distance in Eastern and Southern societies, personal space distance is farther in Western and Northern societies. In Northern and Western cultures, the intimate area is at least 45 cm, and in Southern European, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures, it is generally 25 cm. For this reason, physical contact between people in these cultures is more frequent and intense. However, physical contact while talking is a cause of discomfort in other societies.

In Turkish society, physical contact while speaking is acceptable, provided that it is not exaggerated. However, even Turks who keep a close distance from the people they talk to want their private areas to be respected after a certain distance. For Turkish society, “intimate space is 0-25 cm., personal space is 25-100 cm., social space is 1-2.5 meters, and public space is 2.5 meters and above”. (Baltaş, Baltaş, 2002, p. 113-116).

5.2. Eye contact

In Far Eastern countries such as Japan, Korea, Thailand and African countries such as Zimbabwe and Niger, prolonged eye contact may be considered disrespectful and even

challenging. In North America and Europe, eye contact indicates respect for the speaker and self-confidence.

In Türkiye², making eye contact with the person you are talking to indicates respect for the other person. In fact, not making eye contact for a long time can be interpreted as disrespectful to the speaker and not taking him or her seriously.

5.3. Hug and kiss

In Japan, it is not nice to hug and kiss someone in public. In some Arab countries, there is a custom of hugging and kissing each other on the cheek three times. Generally, Mediterranean countries prefer hugging and kissing.

Turks can also hug people they just met and kiss them on both cheeks. Generally, kissing is done on the left cheek first and then on the right cheek. However, kissing men on the cheek is considered strange by societies outside Türkiye. Perhaps for this reason, kissing on the cheek among men has been replaced by butting heads in recent years. Nowadays, while women mostly hug and kiss on both cheeks, men prefer to lightly touch their cheeks together or generally shake hands and rub first their left and then their right temples.

5.4. Holding hands, linking arms, putting one's hand on the shoulder

Another form of non-verbal communication that has begun to be abandoned in Turkish society is holding hands between friends of the same gender. Holding hands between men and women, which is seen as an expression of appreciation and sincerity in Middle Eastern and Arab societies, used to have the same meaning in Turks. However, nowadays, it may be considered strange for two friends of the same gender to hold hands and walk around. Nowadays, only old people continue this behavior out of habit.

“While in our country, two men walking hand in hand and arm in arm is considered an expression of friendship and is not considered strange, the same behavior can be interpreted as a sexual display in some countries.” (Dökmen, 2003, p. 29). However, in Türkiye, it is common for two friends of the same gender to walk around arm in arm or even with their hands on each other's shoulders, and it is not considered as strange as holding hands.

² In the mid-2022, the government made an official request to international organizations to use the name “TÜRKİYE” in foreign language correspondence. Upon Türkiye's request, the UN announced in June last year that “Türkiye” would be used as the country name in foreign languages. International organizations such as NATO, the European Union, the World Health Organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the World Trade Organization also implemented TÜRKİYE's request in official contacts and correspondence in 2022.

5.5. Kissing hands

The tradition of kissing the hands of older people is a sign of respect for elders in Turks. The older person holds his right hand with the outside facing up. The person who will kiss the hand grasps the elder's hand with his right hand, with his palm facing down. He kisses the elder's hand on top and touches it to his forehead. This means "You have a place above my head. You are that precious." means.

However, in recent years, if the younger person is a woman, instead of kissing the older person's hand, she just touches her chin to his hand. In addition, while in the past, even if there was a slight age difference, the hand of the older person was kissed, nowadays people of similar age only shake hands with each other.

5.6. Not crossing legs or stretching feet in front of older people

Crossing one's legs or stretching one's feet in front of someone who is older, in a higher social position, or who has just met someone is not shown much sensitivity, as it is a symbol of comfort in North American and European culture. However, in Türkiye and some Far Eastern cultures such as Thailand, such actions are considered disrespectful and shameful. A person who sits with his feet stretched out or his legs crossed will regain his composure if an elder or someone he doesn't know enters the same environment. This is a sign of respect.

Again, as a sign of respect, in Türkiye, legs are not crossed or feet are not extended, especially while reciting the Holy Quran or the call to prayer. If the feet are in that position, they will recover. In addition, the same respect applies to sacred places such as mosques. Unless there is a health problem, one cannot stretch one's feet or lie down in the mosque. This is considered very disrespectful behavior and those who do this will be warned.

5.7. Raising hand in greeting

In some cultures, such as India, showing your palm to the other party may mean insult or threat. However, the non-contact greeting style in Türkiye is to raise the right hand with the palm facing each other. If the hand in this position is waved, it usually means "Goodbye". Additionally, in high schools and universities in Türkiye, the hand is raised and held steady to ask the teacher for a word.

5.8. Bringing the right hand over the heart

Another way of greeting is to place the hand over the heart and sometimes at the same time tilt the head slightly forward or diagonally. Although it is an old form of greeting, it has been revived especially due to recent historical TV series in Türkiye.

However, if you tap your hand over your heart once or twice in a row and tilt your head slightly, it can mean a sincere “thank you” or “rejection” depending on the situation. For example, if you make this gesture when you are offered or ordered food by your friend, you will say “Thank you”, but if it is done only when the food is offered before being offered or ordered, you will say “No, thank you.” means.

5.9. Tilting the head forward, shaking the head up and down

Tilting the head forward slightly or shaking the head up and down means “approval, acceptance” in many societies (such as China, Mexico, the Middle East, most African countries, most Western European countries, Canada, the USA). The same gesture is used in Turkish culture to confirm what the other person has said or to affirm “Yes”. But in some countries, such as Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Sri Lanka, shaking the head up and down is used for negation, meaning “No”.

5.10. “Hı hı”³ duplication

Like the previous head gesture, it is a sound that means approval or acceptance. Although it cannot be written exactly, a nasal sound in the form of “hı hı” is made without opening the mouth. In Türkiye, it is especially used to mean approving the person speaking. You can see many Turks talking on the phone making this sound to indicate that they are listening to the other person.

If you say the same sound once and in a short tone, “Okay”, if you say it in a short but question tone, “I don't understand?”, if you say it once but in a long way, “I understand now.” means.

5.11. Lifting the head backwards

In Turks, as in almost every society, shaking the head from side to side is an expression of negativity and is used to mean “No”. In addition, lifting the head backwards means “No” or “None” in Turkish society. However, in some societies, tilting your head back can be used to mean “yes”.

5.12. Raising eyebrows

³ /hw huw/ English: Aha! Ayuh! Yep!

If Turks raise both eyebrows up, this is a sign of “disapproval” and means “No” or “None”. The movement of raising the eyebrows is sometimes done simultaneously with lifting the head backwards. If the eyebrow is raised and held without lowering it, it means “surprise”.

5.13. “I ɪ”⁴ doubling

This sound is frequently used by Turks instead of saying “No” or “None” in negation meanings. Although it is usually voiced twice, it has the same meaning when voiced once. This sound, which cannot be fully written down, is made through the nasal passage without opening the mouth. If the same sound is made uninterruptedly in the form of “ıııııı”⁵, it gives the meaning of “thinking”.

5.14. “Cık”⁶ sound

This sound, which is made by suddenly retracting the lips half open and the tongue touching the upper teeth, cannot be fully transcribed. Turks, who make this sound once or twice, use this form of non-verbal communication to mean “No”, “None”, “No way”. There is no such usage in many cultures. However, the same usage is also valid in some Balkan countries such as Greece. This sound can also be made by raising the eyebrows while tilting the head back. In addition, if Turks make the same sound three or more times in the form of “cık cık cık”⁷, it means “anger”, “sadness”, “regret”, “surprise”, depending on the place.

In some African countries such as Mauritania and Algeria, the sound used when the mouth is half open and the tongue touches the side teeth and suddenly withdraws is slightly different and means “Yes”, “Okay”. Additionally, this sound is often seen as a doubling.

5.15. Thumb up

This finger gesture, which means “Everything is fine” throughout the world, includes an insult like “showing the middle finger” in some parts of Italy, Iran, Australia, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Greece. It is said that the thumbs up gesture is used to mean “Go away” in some West African countries.

In Türkiye, the same sign is used to mean “OK” for “like” and “approval” depending on the location.

5.16. Making a circle with thumb and index finger

⁴ /u ɪ/ English: Nah! Nay!

⁵ /u u u u u u u u/ English: Uh! Hum! Um!

⁶ /d͡ʒɯk/

⁷ /d͡ʒɯk d͡ʒɯk d͡ʒɯk/

“This hand sign means 'OK', 'Everything is fine' in Western countries and North America, 'money' in Japan, 'zero' in France, 'homosexuality' in some Mediterranean countries, and 'congratulations' in some cities of India.” (Dutta, 2011, p. 36).

In Türkiye, when the same hand sign, with the circle up, is used for a man, it means “homosexual” and is used as an insult. This hand sign is an insulting sign used in France and Brazil, with a meaning similar to that in Türkiye.

5.17. Shaking up and down by bringing the fingertips together and lifting them up

“In Arabia, it means 'slow down', in Turkish Cypriots it means 'You will see your day', and in Italian culture it means 'disgrace, blasphemy'.” (Alikılıç, 2013, p. 18). This hand sign, used as a form of greeting from afar in Algeria, means “How are you? Are you okay?” In eastern Arab countries such as Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, it has meanings such as “Calm down”, “Wait”, “Just a minute”.

In Türkiye, the same hand gesture is made to mean “Very nice”, especially for food and clothes. If a kiss is placed on the fingertips that are brought together and lifted up, it means “Very very nice”.

5.18. Stroking the chin

“In France, the French-speaking part of Switzerland and Belgium, it means 'boredom'.” (Savaş, 2017, p. 99). In Arabic culture, it is used in the sense of “threat”.

In Turkish society, the chin-stroking gesture usually occurs involuntarily when thinking deeply or trying to make a decision, and this hand gesture has no bad meaning.

5.19. Waving index finger back and forth

In Turkish society, the index finger of the right hand is usually extended and shaken back and forth to threaten or warn. Germans also use their index fingers for warning, but with their palms facing themselves, they wave them left and right, not back and forth.

Additionally, in Türkiye, raising the index finger in the air and holding it still is used in primary and secondary schools to ask the teacher for a word. In some African countries, such as Chad, the teacher is asked to speak by snapping his fingers. In Türkiye, snapping your fingers at a teacher to get a word is considered disrespectful.

5.20. Bringing the thumb of the same hand to the ear and the little finger to the mouth

This sign, made with the thumb and little fingers open and the other three fingers closed, means “calling on the phone” in Turkish society. Signs like this indicate offering to drink in Spain, getting drunk in New Zealand and Australia, surfing in Hawaii and the number 6 in China.

5.21. Opening the hands to the sides with palms up

In Türkiye, this body language movement, which is used to mean “I don't know” or “There is nothing I can do”, sometimes purses the lips or raises both shoulders at the same time. In Algeria, the palms face forward rather than upward for the same body language gesture.

5.22. “Not bad” hand gesture

This hand gesture, which is made by extending the hand forward with the fingers open and spaced apart and bringing the palm up twice, means “Well, that's right”, “Not bad”, “So so” in Türkiye. These words can also be said while performing the movement.

5.23. Asking for the bill hand gesture

When you want to ask for the bill at a restaurant in Türkiye, if the waiter is away, you can make a sign to ask for the bill. In this movement, the hand is first raised into the air and after making eye contact with the waiter, the hand is moved in the air as if writing with a pen.

5.24. Gesture of asking for tea

In Türkiye, tea is usually served free of charge after meals in restaurants. If the waiter is away, the waiter's attention is first drawn by raising the hand, and then the hand is moved in the air as if mixing sugar with a spoon.

5.25. Rubbing the thumb and index finger together

Rubbing at least twice with the thumb on top and the index finger on the bottom means “money” in Türkiye.

5.26. Waving your hand circularly

In Turkish society, this gesture is used for events that have already happened a long time ago. Sometimes the exclamation “Ohoo”⁸ is voiced with this movement. Be sound also means the same thing.

5.27. Rubbing the palms together as if to clean them

This hand gesture, made by rubbing the palms together two or three times, first one on top, then the other on top, is used in Türkiye to mean “It's over” or “There's no more”.

5.28. Gesture of protection from the evil eye

Turks do this when they fear that something beautiful will be damaged or an event going well will be disrupted. The right earlobe is pulled with the index finger and thumb of the right hand, and at the same time, the mouth makes a kissing sound twice and hits the wood or wall two or three times with the same hand.

The words “Mashallah”⁹, “May God protect you”, “May God protect you from the evil eye” can also be said at the same time. The purpose of this body language movement is to protect yourself from the evil looks of jealous people.

5.29. “Tü tü tü”¹⁰ sound

The word “Mashallah” is often added to this sound made by the Turks for protection from evil. The sound that is usually made like spitting three times should be voiced at least twice.

5.30. Hitting the outside of the right hand on the inside of the left hand

In Turkish culture, when a bad event occurs, exclamations such as “Tüh!”¹¹ and “Eyvah!”¹² can also be used with this movement. In some regions, the exclamation “Abov”¹³ is also used, but this word expresses “surprise” when said by covering the mouth with the palm.

5.31. Lifting the palate with the thumb of the right hand

In Turkish society, it is a movement made suddenly and when very frightened. One might also say, “I'm scared out of my wits” with the action.

⁸ /Ohoo/

⁹ English: Praise be! God forbid!

¹⁰ /ty ty ty/ English: Ptooeey! Ptooie!

¹¹ /tyh/ English: Oops! Wah! Yipe! Poo!

¹² /ejwah/ English: Oh no! Whoops! Woe!

¹³ /abov/ English: Oh! Ah! Wow! Jee!

6. Conclusion

The oldest form of communication, which has many ways, is non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is any form of communication that is not based on words, including “body language”. Since the main goal in learning a foreign language is “understanding”, “explaining”, in short “communication”, non-verbal language elements should be taken into consideration as well as verbal language elements. According to research, non-verbal communication contributes more to understanding than verbal communication. For this reason, if foreign language learners do not know the non-verbal communication forms of the target language, agreement will not be achieved or misunderstandings will occur. Because “People largely see, evaluate and make sense of their environment through the symbols and concepts that exist in their language.”

It has been determined that facial expressions created by the feelings of happiness, sadness, surprise, anger, disgust and fear are universal and therefore do not have different meanings from culture to culture (Ekman et *al.*, 1971, p. 51). However, it is also a fact that non-verbal communication styles other than facial expressions related to these six basic feelings vary from culture to culture. Because when it comes to intercultural interaction, it can be seen that the same non-verbal communication element sometimes has a different meaning and sometimes even a completely opposite meaning.

Since language and culture have very close ties with each other, learning a foreign language also involves learning the culture of the target language. Foreign language learners may experience culture shock and lose motivation in learning the target language if they cannot adapt to a culture different from their own.

In order to avoid loss of motivation due to culture shock and to prevent possible disagreements or misunderstandings, it would be appropriate to teach foreign language learners the non-verbal communication elements of the culture of the target language, along with grammar and the four basic language skills (Listening, speaking, reading, writing). Because a healthy and effective communication resulting from correct perception and correct interpretation in the target language will ensure intercultural harmony. For these reasons, the distinct non-verbal communication elements of Turkish culture must be taken into consideration in the context of a communicative approach when teaching/learning Turkish as a foreign language.

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