

## **An Observational Study of Teacher's Gestures in EFL Classroom**

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### **Highlights**

The use EFL teacher's gestures in the classroom

**ABSTRACT:** Verbal utterances and nonverbal utterances are acknowledged to be semantically and pragmatically co-expressive. Previous theories reveal that gestures are useful for teacher's conceptual planning of messages and student's comprehension and learning motivation. This study is carried out using an observational study and aimed to give insight into the use of gestures by EFL teacher during the teaching in the language classroom. A senior high school EFL teacher with a bilingual classroom become the participant of this study. A video and audio recording are used to capture the teacher's gestures and teacher-student interaction. The data collected were transcribed then analysed using AS-Unit for recognizing the English utterances and the categorization of gestures was adopted from Wang and Loewen (2016). The finding elaboratively describes the use of gestures (i.e., iconics, metaphoric, deictics, beats, head movements, affect displays, kinetographs, and emblems) produced by the teacher in her classroom utterances. The finding shows that the gestures take a big part in supporting the teacher as speaker in teacher's complex lexical retrieval. The pictures of teacher's gestures is provided to show the visual evidence. Therefore, the result of this study serves as a teaching reflection and can be employed as a model to provide language learning comprehensible input in the language classroom.

**Keywords:** Gestures; EFL Teachers; Observational Study; Language Classroom

## **Introduction**

Delivering a comprehensible input is a fundamental aspect to be applied in a language classroom (Fajriah, 2020). It has been recommended that EFL teachers carry out the lesson in the target language, instead of conducting the lesson in the first language. However, some EFL teachers face problems in the process since the language system (phonological) and grammatical structure in the first language (e.g., Indonesian language) are different from English (Rahayu, 2015). Therefore, to support the teachers' verbal input, numerous studies strongly suggested utilizing nonverbal input which is gesture while speaking (e.g., Ranta & Harmawati, 2017; Sato, 2018, 2020; Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005). By sufficiently using gestures, EFL teachers show a fluency in conducting the lesson in the target language aimed

to provide high quality input to the students. Besides, the teacher-student interaction is built during the use of gestures to establish a positive atmosphere in the language classroom. However, the discussions of teachers' gestures implication in Indonesian EFL classroom are scarce to be found. Filling the gap of the previous studies, therefore, this paper carries out in the context of Indonesia, especially, in senior high school.

Gestures, the movements of the hands and arms that we can see people talk (McNeill, 1992), have been used by EFL teachers as an essential aspect of communication competence (Lazaraton, 2004; Allen, 2000) because the unity of speech and gesture are synchronous also semantically and pragmatically coexpressive (McNeill, 1992). Earlier studies have examined the types of gestures and each function of gestures in language classroom and discovered that gestures have speaker-internal (producing gestures helps the teachers organize the thought while speaking) and speaker external functions (providing gestures helps the students comprehend the input) (McCafferty, 2004).

In speaker-external purpose, gestures are important to make the EFL teacher's verbal input easier to be comprehended by the students. The students claimed that when the teacher uses gestures while teaching, they can comprehend the lessons better due to the visual cues that support memory encoding and information recall (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005; Dahl & Ludvigsen, 2014). Iranian students consider EFL teacher's gestures help them to understand the context (Karim & Sotoudehnama, 2017). Besides, the role of gestures has a relation to speech to establish zones of proximal development (ZPD) for ESL/EFL teaching and learning, facilitate teacher-student interaction, and help to establish a sense of shared social, symbolic, physical, and mental space (McCafferty, 2002). Gestures also play a big role in EFL learning are cognitive, emotional, and organizational (Sime, 2006). Emotionally, teacher's gestures have a significant influence on the students' perception of language learning that the students respond it in a positive way (Isnani, 2021) and show interest, happy, proud, enthusiastic, and eager to learn more (Ananda, Solihat, & Suryana, 2020). As a result, their language learning motivation has improved (Hsu, 2006). Also, Zeki (2009) stated that the gestures used by the teacher as a means to take and maintain the students' attention. In several cases, EFL teacher used gestures to provide feedback for the students' speaking performance, particularly pronunciation (Thompson & Renandya, 2020). A study on the proactive and reactive Focus on Form (FonF) and gestures reveals that deictic gestures take a big part in a specific correction of grammar (Kamiya (2012). By way of explanation, in facilitating the student's language learning comprehension and improving the student's language learning motivation, the use of gestures in EFL teaching is a substantial aspect to be considered in EFL classroom.

In speaker-internal purpose, previous studies expose that the use of gestures in speaking is the way in facilitating English speakers to organize the thought during speaking performance. A study has been conducted to explore how gestures assist speakers' performance, and it discloses that gestures aid English speakers to organize the speaking fluency by retrieving the complex words from lexical memory, consequently, the speakers show disfluency when they are not using gestures in their speaking (Krauss, 1998). The process of lexical access and retrieval itself is fundamental in producing the target language fluently and efficiently (Manchon, Murphy, & Roca de Larios, 2009). In the cognitive activity, gestures

have two major roles: helping the speaker to organize spatial information for utterance and conceptualizing the information to be verbalized (Alibali, Kita, & Young, 2000). Furthermore, the use of particular gestures influences the teachers' unplanned explanations of vocabulary in the language classroom; besides, it helped the teachers speaking fluently and illustrating English meaning contextually (Lazaraton, 2004; van Compernelle & Smotrova, 2017). Analyses of gesture types used by an English teacher in Indonesian junior high school supports Schmitz's (2012) nonverbal communication theory and shows that the gestures used are Kinesics (movement), Vocalics (voice and intonation), and Proxemics (distance), however, the teacher did not use Haptics (touch) (Antika & Ikhsan, 2018). In ELT classroom, a teacher uses particular gestures, such as kinesics, emblem, illustrators, affect displays, regulators, and adaptors, which is categorized by Ekman and Friesen (1969). Illustrators, regulators, emblems, and affect displays (happiness, smile, frown) are the most prominent gestures occur during the teaching, therefore, it is confirmed that the interaction and communication happening in the classroom felt more enjoyable, effective, and convincing (Malnab & Humaerah, 2021). EFL teachers use various specific gestures to maintain a well communication and interaction. Wang and Loewen (2016) find that several EFL teachers produce hand gestures (iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat), head movements, affect displays, kinetographs, and emblems, in their corrective feedback. Among those gestures, the teachers mostly use head movements and hand gestures, for example, nodding, head shaking, and pointing at an artifact and person.

Table 1  
*Definition of each gesture*

No.	Types of Gestures	Definition
1.	Iconic	Iconic gesture was defined as when the speaker moved hands or arms to present images of concrete entities and/or actions (McNeill, 1992).
2.	Metaphoric	Like iconic, however, metaphoric presented the images of abstract concept (McNeill, 1992).
3.	Deictic	Deictic gestures were identified when the speaker move the finger or other body parts to point object either concrete or abstract entities (McNeill, 1992).
4.	Beats	Beats gestures were when the speaker moved the hand(s) up and down or back and forth along with the rhythm of the speech (McNeill, 1992).
5.	Head movements	Head movements were considered as an extension of hand gestures (McNeill, 2005), however, Wang and Loewen (2016) considered nodding, shaking the head, or tilting the head to one side were involved.
6.	Affect display	Affect displays were defined as nonverbal movements showing emotions through facial expressions (e.g., happiness, fear, sadness, distrust, etc.) (Allen, 2000).

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7.	Kinetographs	Kinetographs were identified when the speaker used the entire body to mime the various acts that people performed (Allen, 2000).
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8.	Emblems	Emblems were defined as the movements that were conventionalized and culture specific (Gullberg, 2006).
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Various types of gestures proposed by previous researchers have been conducted in the EFL countries, however, in the context of Indonesia, it has not been extensively explored. Thus, this study aimed to give insight from Indonesian context about the gestures used by senior high school EFL teacher while teaching in the classroom. This study aims to answer this question:

How does a senior high school EFL teacher use gestures while teaching in the classroom?

## **Method**

### **1. Participant**

To be a model for students' communication skills also to provide high quality instructions for students' language learning, teachers are recommended to use English in the language learning process (Fajriah, 2020). Winnie, an EFL high school teacher with 5-year teaching experiences, became the participant. She taught in an elementary school, senior high school, and private courses. Besides, she had taken TOEFL Test and IELTS equivalent as English proficiency test, and some professional training, such as multimedia training and English four skills training.

### **2. Procedure**

It was required that the teacher produced English as language of instruction at least 70% of the utterances (Sato, 2020). Thus, this study was conducted in an XI grade of Bilingual which consisted of 26 female students. The researchers explained all requirements and consequences about this study to Winnie through WhatsApp private chat after sending the informed consent and other approval letter as an official permission for the institution.

This study used an observational study involving direct observation of individuals in their natural setting (Carlson & Morrison, 2009). The lessons were video and audio recorded aiming to capture the gestures made by the teacher and the interaction between the teacher and the students in the English classroom. The teacher-students interaction recording was transcribed, and the teacher's individual utterances were classified as L1 (Indonesian Language) and L2 (English). A single utterance was defined as an individual sentence (Nakatsukasa & Loewen, 2015), however, statements only containing one-word were also accepted as utterances. Then, the teacher utterances were analysed by using Analysis of Speech Unit (AS-Unit) level one. The AS-unit was defined as speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause, or sub-clausal unit, together with any subordinate clauses associated with either of them (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000). The gestures would be categorized based on the types of gestures proposed by Wang and Loewen (2016) adapted from Allen's (2000) types of gestures including hand gestures, head movements, affect displays, kinetograph, and Emblem, yet hand gestures were sub-organized by McNeill's (1992) into iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat gesture.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

The observations were conducted two times because at the first lesson the teacher was barely speaking yet focused on the students' speaking performance (only give simple instructions and demonstrations). The second observation done in the next week resulted in a better data in which the teacher gave an additional material and a brief explanation before instructing the students to perform their speaking skills.

Based on both data, it was revealed that the teacher mainly used English, and the frequency of teacher's utterances was 97% in English as shown in the table 3.1. The teacher used 1% of the utterances for translating unfamiliar phrases into L1 (Indonesia) and 2% for mixing both languages when the teacher attempted to use Indonesian interjections in English utterances.

*Excerpt 1* (mixed languages)

W: |Najwa, loudly yaa Najwa, loudly.|

*Excerpt 3* (L1)

W: |*Santai saja pada ku.*|

*Excerpt 2* (mixed languages)

W: |Olin, you have a nice voice loh.|

Table 2

*Frequency of L1 and L2 use in the lessons*

	Ms. Winnie	
	Frequency	Percent
L1 (Indonesian)	2	1%
L2 (English)	206	97%
L1 and L2 mixed	4	2%
Total	212	100%

By seeing the frequencies of the teachers' use of gestures in the table 3.2, the teacher produced 75 gestures among her 212 English utterances. Besides, the teacher used all types of gestures proposed by Wang and Loewen (2016). It was indicated that head movement (37%), affect display (21%), and kinetograph (13%) as the top three gestures frequently used by the teacher with emblems (3%) as the lowest.

Table 3

*Categories of gestures*

NAME: MS. WINNIE			
NO.	GESTURE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
1.	Iconic	3	4%
2.	Metaphoric	4	5%
3.	Deictic	9	12%
4.	Beats	3	4%
5.	Head movements	28	37%
6.	Affect display	16	21%

7.	Kinetographs	10	13%
8.	Emblems	2	3%
	Total	75	100%

After analyzing the data based on the definition of each gesture displayed in table 1, it is acknowledged that the teacher used all types of gestures proposed by Wang and Loewen (2016). Each gesture was specific and showed how the senior high school EFL teacher used gestures while teaching in the classroom.

a. Iconics

In example 1, the teacher moved her both hands to make a square movement demonstrating a shape of tablet as accompanying her verbal utterance “move the tab”.

- 1) W: |Elsa, move the tab to your other friend|  
((moving both pointing fingers making a square shape in the front of her chest while saying “move the tab”) [iconic]



Fig. 1 Iconic Gesture

b. Metaphorics

In example 2, the teacher illustrated the word “vertical” move the horizontal phone on her both hands to the vertical direction while saying “like this”.

- 2) W: |Mumtaz, can you help miss again to record your friend |  
|vertical like this|  
((demonstrating the movement of vertical while saying “like this”))  
[metaphoric]



Fig. 2 Metaphoric Gesture

c. Deictics

In example 3, the teacher moved her left opened palm facing the ceiling to point the students that was presenting on the front of the class. In example 4, the teacher outstretching her both hands open towards the tablet while saying “take your tab here” to point the tablet.

- 3) W: [Listen to your friend]  
((moving the left opened palm facing the ceiling to point the students)) [deictic]
- 4) W: [Maybe you have to take your tab here |  
((pointing by outstretching both hands open towards the tablet)) [deictic]



Fig. 3 Deictic Gesture

d. Beats

In the example 5, the teacher made her left hand moved up and down repeatedly along with the rhythm with saying “don’t forget to sign your story telling link to my email”.

- 5) W: [Don’t forget to sign your story telling link to my email. |  
((Moving left hand with a pen to move it up and down along with the rhythm))  
[beats]





Fig. 4 Beat Gesture

e. Head movements

In the example 6, the teacher called a student with tilting her head up from facing the laptop screen to the student. In example 7, the teacher nodded as confirming and echoing the students' correct answer when she elicited about last material from the students.

- 6) W: |today we're going to continue our storytelling class, so now I will call one of you  
hmmm Nida Farida.|  
((tilting the head up from facing the laptop screen when calling the student)) [head movement]
- 7) W: |What our :: what our last material? |  
Ss: |Story telling|  
W: |Story telling|  
((nodding to confirm the students answer)) [head movement]



Fig. 5 Head Movement

f. Affect displays

In example 8, the teacher confirmed students said with raising an eyebrow while saying "are you sure?"

- 8) W: |Are you sure? |



((raising eyebrow)) [affect display]



Fig. 6 Affect Display

g. Kinetographs

In example 9, the teacher made multiple movements which categorized as kinetograph by straightening the back, putting both elbows on the table with the intertwined fingers, and nodding while saying “you know right?”.

- 9) W: |I always amazed the way how Adinda pronounce every word|  
|pretty good|  
|you know right|  
((straightening back, both elbows on the table with the intertwined fingers, and nodding)) [Kinetograph]



Fig. 7 Kinetograph Gesture

h. Emblems

General example came from Western cultures as putting the thumb and the index finger into a circle means ‘ok’ or ‘good’. In example 10, the teacher showed the right opened palm to the students with the tips of the fingers facing the ceiling aiming to stress the word “wait”.

- 10) W: |now we are continue our presentation about storytelling|  
|but wait a minute.|  
((Showing the right opened palm to the students with the tips of the fingers facing the ceiling while saying “wait”))



Fig.8 Emblem Gesture

## Discussion

In the recent study, all category of Wang and Loewen's (2016) gestures are identified. Head movements are the most frequently used by the teachers since the teachers often give small responses during the classroom interaction by giving nods and headshakes repetitively to confirm or disconfirm as a prompt for the students to correct an error (Sato, 2018) and tilting the head to one side to imply the confusion to the students' statements (Sato, 2020). This finding is comparable to Wang and Loewen (2016), but it is distinct with Sato (2020) that the most prominent gestures is metaphoric.

Besides head movements, affect displays is also frequently used by the teacher since the teacher creates emotional state through facial expressions during the interaction. The teacher often smiles along with a slight nod when several students hesitate to pronounce unknown words during the speaking performance. It can be interpreted that her smile is a sign of positive emotion (Meeten, Ivak, Dash, Knowles, Duka, Scott, Kaiser, & Davey, 2015) towards the students' speaking, so it makes the students more comfortable (Sato, 2020) to continue the presentation. The teacher also raises one of her eyebrows or frowns when she notices the students produce errors during the speaking activity or when the teacher attempts to understand the students' sentences. It can be interpreted that the teacher shows a negative emotion (Meeten et al., 2015) to disapprove the students' pronunciations or statements.

The last of most prominent gestures produced by the teacher, in this study, is emblem. The total emblem production is two gestures, and it occurs when the teacher translates the word 'wait' with opened right palm facing the students and when the teacher emphasizes the word 'so' by slightly punching the left palm. The teacher produces that gesture assumed that the students comprehend it since they are from the same culture (Sato, 2020). Sato's (2020) findings also revealed that Emblem is the least implemented gesture during the English

language teaching. The teacher is expected to produce gestures since the students' language proficiency level is still categorized as beginner level even though the class was classified as bilingual. Thus, the teacher's word choice is based on the students' current level. In the teaching process, the teacher prefers to use common phrases in instructing, explaining, and responding with the way L1 manners should, which is expected that many emblems will be produce since emblem gestures have a direct translation function from verbal to nonverbal utterances. Gregersen, Olivares-Cuhat, and Storm (2009) assumes that the lower-level speakers (beginner level) likely to produce emblem gestures than the higher-level speakers (intermediate and advanced). The assumption occurs that the lack of emblems production is because of the teacher is not the one who speaking more than the students as it was a speaking activity where the students are the focus.

Based on the findings, this study reveals that the teacher's gestures have an important role in the language teaching. Hand gestures, involving iconics, metaphors, deictics, and beats, purposefully help the teacher to deliver messages while speaking. The teacher produces iconic and metaphoric gestures to illustrate the concrete and abstract entities during the discussion (Wang & Loewen, 2016). Deictic gestures efficiently help the teacher to ensure that the students comprehend the objects which is being discussed by pointing at the objects (McNeill, 1992). The teacher uses beat gestures to emphasize specific words by moving the hands up and down or back and forth along with the rhythm of the speech (Wang & Loewen, 2016). Beat gestures help the teacher in the English production or embodying the English linguistic structure (McCafferty, 1998).

The use of head movements in teacher's classroom utterances is also essential to confirm or disconfirm to the students' English production (Wang & Loewen, 2016). In this case, the teacher tilts the head up to focus on the students' presentation, nods her head to approve the students' English utterances, the teacher shakes her head when the students made noticeable errors in their speaking performance.

Besides, affect displays are beneficial for helping the students to recognize the teacher's facial expressions as the feedback. In this case, the teacher gives a small response by smiling when the students take a glance on the teacher to confirm that they hesitate to pronounce some difficult words (Karim & Sotoudehnama, 2017), so the students feel the support and encouragement (Sato, 2018). Hence, it can be used by the teacher to establish a good teacher-students relationship (Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990). Another facial expression is teacher's frown, which is used to make the students notice the errors made in the specific time. Wang and Loewen (2016) convince that this facial gesture is produced to confirm or disconfirm the students' English sentences production.

Kinetographs are identified when the teacher a movement involving multiple body parts, for example, the teacher straightens the back, moves the head and eyes to express a surprise act (Wang & Loewen, 2016). In this study, the teacher moves her back, both hands, and head to mime the assurance in her utterances.

The least gestures found in this study, which is emblem gestures, are valuable for illustrating the conventionalized and culture-specific gestures (Gulberg, 2006), especially for the beginner level of English speaker proficiency (Gregersen, Olivares-Cuhat, & Storm, 2009).

The teacher uses emblem gestures to translate the verbal utterances to nonverbal utterances, where the students already understand the meaning of the words. In this study, the teacher directs her opened palm with the fingers' tips facing the ceiling towards the students and expects that the students understand that the gestures are used to nonverbally translate the word 'wait' in the phrase 'wait a minute'.

All gestures produced by the teacher effectively promote the teacher in retrieving complex words in lexical memory and conveying the message in English language teaching.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights that teacher produces 212 English utterances measured by AS-Unit with 75 gestures from all types of gestures proposed by Wang and Loewen (2016), which are iconic, metaphoric, deictic, beat, head movement, affect display, kinetograph, and emblem. However, the most frequently produced by the teacher are head movements, affect displays, and kinetographs, and the least is emblems. Additionally, the findings disclose the clear sample of how the gestures take a part in the teacher's classroom utterances for speaker's internal and external functions. Hand gestures are indicated to assist the teacher deliver clear messages while speaking. Iconic and metaphoric gestures are utilized to help the teacher illustrate both concrete and abstract entities being aimed. Deictic gestures are produced to assurance that the students understand the pointed objects by the teacher. Beats are used by the teacher to stress the specific words by moving the hands up and down or back and forth along with the rhythm of the speech. Affect displays are effectively produced by the teacher to express the expression of confirming and disconfirming by smiling and frowning as the feedback to the students' accuracy and inaccuracy in their English-speaking performance, so they feel supported and encouraged during the performance. Also, the students do not feel any psychological distance from the teacher and other friends. Kinetographs are made when the teacher moves some of her body part during the speaking, such as back, hands, and head to mime the certitude in her utterances. Emblem gestures occur when the teacher aims to illustrate the conventionalized and culture-specific gestures by directing her opened palm with the fingers' tips facing the ceiling towards the students and expects that the students understand that the gestures are used to nonverbally translate the word 'wait' in the phrase 'wait a minute'.

Utilizing these gestures is fundamental to facilitate the teacher as the speaker in complex lexical retrieval (Krauss, 1998; Manchon, Murphy, & Roca de Larios, 2009) to provide a high-quality input for the students.

However, this study has its limitation, which should be pointed out. The study is conducted during the speaking activity weeks, which make the teacher has limited time to speak and focus to improve the students' speaking competence. Therefore, further research is suggested to study the relevant topic in the other English skills (i.e., reading, writing, and listening), instead of speaking skill so that the study results a rich data that can be used as an immaculate model in providing comprehensible instructions and establishing a better classroom interaction.

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