

ARTICLE TITLE:

The impact of pedagogical gestures on oral comprehension in French as a Foreign Language: A non-verbal tool for accessing meaning.

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Submission Date: 23 Sep 2025

Approval Date: 23 Oct 2025

Release Date: 24 Dec 2025

Abstract

Foreign language teaching is not limited to verbal transmission; non-verbal communication plays a crucial role, particularly for primary school learners. This study focuses on the impact of the teacher's pedagogical gestures on improving oral comprehension (OC) in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) classrooms. Gestures are considered here not as spontaneous behavior, but as an intentional didactic tool capable of facilitating access to meaning.

The central question of this research is to assess the extent to which the teacher's strategic use of gestures influences OC effectiveness among primary school learners.

We adopted a qualitative and comparative methodology, based on the direct observation of OC sessions conducted by two FLE teachers. The analysis, carried

out using a detailed observation grid, allowed us to quantify and qualify the typology of gestures used (iconic, regulatory, metaphorical) and to correlate their relevance with learners' comprehension performance.

The results confirm our hypothesis: the study revealed a significant correlation between the richness and appropriateness of teacher gestures and improved learner comprehension scores. More specifically, iconic and regulatory gestures proved to be essential cognitive facilitators

for overcoming difficulties related to oral fluency in young learners.

In conclusion, this research positions pedagogical gestures as a fundamental didactic component that deserves explicit inclusion in the training of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) teachers, as they actively support memory, motivation, and semantic access in the classroom.

Keywords: Pedagogical gesture, Nonverbal communication, Oral comprehension, FLE, Didactics, Beginning learners

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning a foreign language, particularly French as a Foreign Language (FLE), is a complex didactic process where communication is not limited to verbal exchanges alone. The teacher's body—their posture, facial expressions, and, more specifically, their gestures—constitutes an intrinsic component of pedagogical transmission, often neglected or perceived as secondary.

Yet, in the context of initial learning, especially for young learners whose linguistic decoding skills are still fragile, nonverbal support becomes fundamental. Listening comprehension (LC) represents a major challenge for beginner learners, who must simultaneously segment the flow of sound, identify vocabulary, and reconstruct meaning. Our premise is that pedagogical gestures, defined as intentional and didactic bodily movements, could play a role as cognitive and semantic facilitators, providing an immediate visual anchor to the linguistic message.

It is from this perspective that our research addresses the following question: What is the real impact of the strategic use of teacher gestures on improving oral comprehension among fifth-grade French as a Foreign Language (FLE) students?

To answer this question, we opted for a qualitative and comparative approach.

After establishing a theoretical framework on kinesics (the Larousse dictionary defines kinesics as "the study of gestures and facial expressions used as signs of communication, either in themselves or as an accompaniment to spoken language" (Le Petit Larousse Illustré, Paris, 2011)) and the typology of gestures relevant to language teaching, we conducted a case study through direct observation of two FLE teachers. The analysis of data, collected using detailed observation grids, allowed us to compare the effectiveness of two distinct gestural practices on students' comprehension performance. This article aims to demonstrate that the conscious integration of gesture transforms a simple bodily aid into a truly essential teaching tool for accessing meaning.

Communication in a teaching/learning context is not limited to verbal exchange. Teaching a foreign language leads the teacher to use their body and gestures, through miming, dramatization, and pointing, to support the transmission of concepts, interactions, and other processes.

Anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell developed the kinesics system (Kinesics and Context, 1970), defining body language as a communicative code. In 1967, Georges Chetochine (The Truth About Gestures, 2007) analyzed human behavior in various situations. He established the function of non-verbal communication to distinguish between different types of communication. He formulated the following rule: 7% of communication is verbal (vocabulary), 38% is vocal (tone and voice), and 55% is non-verbal (body language). These figures are the result of this rule. Therefore, communication takes place not only through verbal interaction but also through non-verbal exchange.

I. Nonverbal Communication:

Throughout history, the concept of nonverbal communication has entered the French language, originating from a translation of English. It was introduced in 1956 by Ruesh & Kee: "The evidence of the other's presence in interaction is not only that of their words, but primarily that of their body, their attitudes, their postures" (Le Breton, 1998, p. 32).

Thus, nonverbal communication is any method of communication that does not use words and body language that is not based on words but on gestures, attitudes, facial expressions, or smells. It does not have the same universal signals, which must be interpreted according to sociocultural contexts (culture, religion, environment, country, etc.). Nonverbal communication includes various elements:

facial expressions, posture, manner of speaking, head movements, eye movements, hand movements, etc. It involves

voluntary actions or conscious or unconscious behaviors and mobilizes several common channels.

Non-verbal communication: silence, gestures, posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, speech rhythm, clothing, completion of auditory messages. It expresses emotions, feelings, and values. This communication reinforces and lends credibility to the verbal message when appropriate, but can undermine that same message if inappropriate.



Figure 02: Elements of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication is an integral part of foreign language learning.

Teachers use body language in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) classes to convey knowledge to learners and to see if they are following and understanding the information being given. It is a form of communication based on the implicit understanding of signs.

I.1. Theories of Nonverbal Communication:

In nonverbal communication, three systems are involved in all human communication: kinesics, proxemics, and body language. The first two are considered fundamental to nonverbal communication.

I.1.1. Kinesics:

This system belongs to nonverbal communication. According to the dictionary of language teaching methodology, kinesics "first appeared in 1952 in Bridwhistel's work 'Introduction to Kinesics' to name a session dealing with communicative body movements."

Therefore, it represents all the behavioral signs that can be made with the body. These signs are emitted by the body innately or acquiredly. This gesture can have a changing function in a religious or sociocultural context. For example, connecting the thumb to the index finger means "perfect," but in Germany and Brazil, it is considered a very obscene gesture. In Japan, it means money, and in France, it generally means zero or useless.

I.1.2. Proxemics:

According to anthropologist Edward Hall, proxemics is the science that studies the use of human-created space as a specific cultural product. Proxemics studies the role of space between interlocutors in the communication process. Proxemics theory divides space into territories to determine the appropriate space for each type of communication and relationship.

I.1.3. Body Language:

Body language is part of nonverbal communication; it conveys a message without speaking. It includes any bodily expression (attitude, posture, gaze, smile, shrug, etc.) that can transmit meaning. To conclude this chapter, we can say that there must be a balance between three types of communication: verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal, in order to successfully communicate.

The teacher uses gestural communication, becoming a facilitator, and their method plays a crucial role in motivating learners during French as a Foreign Language (FLE) sessions. "The language teacher is a great gesticulator because, just as there is no teacher who doesn't speak, there is

none who doesn't gesticulate at any point during class." (Calbris and Porcher, 1989).

Our study falls within the framework of nonverbal communication, and more specifically, kinesics.

I.2. Definition of Gesture:

Gestures are the primary means of interpersonal communication. They are among the constituent elements of non-verbal communication, along with facial expressions, eye contact, and posture. Gestures can be performed with the head, chest, pelvis, legs, hands, etc. They can complete a verbal message and can replace it in certain cases. For example, nod your head up and down to say "yes." It's very simple; it's about saying something through action.

Some examples of gestures:

- Nodding your head back and forth, which signifies agreement.

- An outstretched hand as a sign of peace.

- A raised fist as a sign of protest.

- A finger to the lips means "silence."

- A finger pointed at the door means "get out!"

- Waving goodbye.

- Clapping (applause) to show our satisfaction with an event.

The "Petit Robert" dictionary gives the following definition: "GESTURE.

n.m. (late 14th century; Latin *gestus*). Voluntary or involuntary movement of the body (primarily the arms, hands, and head), revealing a psychological state, or intended to express or execute something." According to this definition, we can define certain criteria: a gesture can be produced by different parts of the body, it can be voluntary or involuntary, and it can have several functions (to reveal, express, and execute). Thus, Mr. Siguan Soler considers a gesture as "one of the movements of the body or a part of the body perceptible externally." From this, we understand that a gesture refers to an action performed by the body or a part of it.

According to the "Larousse" dictionary: "a gesture is a movement of the body, primarily of the hand, arms, and head, whether or not it carries meaning; a gesture of feelings." A gesture means a movement of the body made by the hand, the arm..., with or without words, may or may not have meaning.

I.2.1. Pedagogical Gestures as a Didactic Tool

Historically, gestures have been identified as an essential means of communication. In the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FLE), they acquire the status of pedagogical gestures which, unlike ordinary gestures, are intentional, recurrent, and codified by the teacher to:

- Convey meaning (iconic, illustrative gestures).
- Facilitate memorization (metaphorical, mnemonic gestures).
- Manage the classroom (regulatory, control gestures).
- Support learner motivation (appreciative gestures).

The introduction of gestures into the teaching of Listening Comprehension (LC) is all the more crucial for beginning learners (such as those in primary school) because it provides direct visual and semantic support to the linguistic message. The gesture acts as a facilitator of access to meaning by compensating for the

difficulties linked to the speed of the oral flow and the novelty of the vocabulary in a foreign language.

I.2.2. Typology of Gestures:

Several typologies of gestures exist. Our study is based on the typology of the American historian John McNeill, Professor and member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University, Washington. In 1992, he proposed another typology: *The Relationship Between Gestural Language and Speech*.

I.2.2.1. Coverbal Gestures:

"Coverbal gestures are gestures that accompany verbal discourse."¹⁹

Unique and personal gestures to accompany your speech: "They are individual creations, which vary with individuals, complement speech."²⁰ They are spontaneous and produced primarily unconsciously. This type of gesture is characterized by its unconventionality and the fact that it can only be interpreted in relation to the situations in which the gesture is performed. McNeill (1992) is primarily interested in coverbal gestures (accompanied by speech) and distinguishes four types:

I.2.2.2. Metaphorical Gestures:

"These gestures present images of abstract concepts. Metaphorical gestures, like iconic gestures, convey content related to the co-occurring linguistic content, but they differ from iconic gestures in that what they convey is not likely to be visually represented. Rather, these gestures present a visual support for the metaphor of the

abstract content.”²¹ Metaphors are representational gestures used to describe abstract things or subjects by reiterating a stylized, perceptual (image or sensory information) underlying an idea considered abstract. These are not gestures that explain or convey the existence of real objects, but rather of many invisible ones. Consequently, the use of metaphorical gestures is limited to describing “real,” concrete, non-physical phenomena.

I.2.2.3. Iconic Gestures:

The term iconic is used to describe gestures associated with the form of the object of speech, that is, what it relates to. It is a form of visual representation. This gesture generally takes the form of a direct relationship with the object to which it refers. “Among the different categories of gestures that accompany discourse, iconic gestures constitute the most important category in the development of a semantics and a pragmatics of gesture.”²² An iconic gesture is one that illustrates a concrete concept by representing its movement or form, and which is very closely linked to the semantic content of the referent: “gestures that are closely related to the verbal semantic content, of the same or complementary meaning. They reveal the speaker's memory image but also their point of view in relation to the mental image.”

An iconic gesture can represent an object, an action, or even a person by drawing a characteristic marked by a hand or other body part. Draw a round shape in the air or shape it with both hands. In this case, we obtained the physical characteristics of the object. Therefore, to describe the verb "to jump," perform a jump. In other words, you generate the action with your legs. The verb "to listen" means using

your hand against your ear, and pretending to put something in your mouth translates the verb "to eat"...

I.2.2.4. Deictic Gestures:

Deictics are pointing gestures that indicate something by the direction of the gesture within the space of the gesture. The direction can be indicated with the index finger or thumb for hand gestures. Produced by different parts of the body, such as the fingers, hands, and jaws, they refer to a person (about the speaker), a place (orientation), or a concrete object in space (concrete deictics). We can also speak of abstract deictics: "most often, pointing gestures toward concrete elements of the situation or abstract elements of the discourse,"²⁵ they represent time, for example, "yesterday," or an absent object (virtual representation).

Therefore, deictic gestures designate an object, a person, a place, or a direction by pointing. They are often executed with the extended index finger and sometimes with the extended thumb, or a slight movement of the head. Examples: to say 'that way', the teacher makes a deictic gesture

pointing with the index finger extended towards a specific direction to show the place.

I.2.2.5. Hand Taps:

A hand tap is a specific gesture made alone or while speaking to emphasize a syllable or word and show the rhythm of speech. According to D. McNeil, they are used to: Show different stages of speech. Highlight the sweeping gesture.

Underline and enhance your speech without adding extra imagery: "Hand taps bring emphasis without adding imagery to the proposition." Therefore, the hand tap

is a familiar gesture that supports the rhythm of speech. Emphasize key phrases, highlight syllables. They are often performed with quick movements. When I touch something, my index finger becomes tense. Their characteristics are: Regularity, which provides and facilitates a temporal structure for communication and word retrieval.

Example:

- To ask for silence, the teacher says: Shh! while placing their index finger on their lips.

I.3. The Functions of Pedagogical Gestures:

Gestures, and more specifically pedagogical gestures, have multiple functions. They serve to inform, explain, assess, authorize, motivate, energize, encourage, congratulate, etc. In what follows, Mr. Tellier (2006) has implemented the following three functions: energize, inform, and assess.

According to Mr. Tellier, in a foreign language classroom, pedagogical gestures have three main functions:

I.3.1. The Informational Function:

Informative gestures help learners understand. The informational function itself is divided into three sub-functions: lexical information, grammatical information, and phonological information.

This function is divided into three sub-functions:

- Gestures related to lexical information aim to make learners understand the meaning of a word or the general meaning of a sentence.
- • Gestures conveying grammatical information: these are used to transmit information related to syntax or a specific morphological feature of the language.
- Gestures conveying phonological information: these are related to the pronunciation and phonetics of words.

I.3.2. Facilitation Function:

In the language classroom, most of the gestures teachers use are rhythmic to manage the class and capture students' attention, thereby saving time conveying information and increasing participation to achieve effective learning.

Thus, teachers may not even need to say a word to create classroom activities, such as skits and interviews between students, using just their index finger as a guide.

They can also guide students around the classroom or establish calm by raising a finger to their mouth or to see what is written or illustrated on the board.

I.3.3. Evaluation Function:

This function breaks down gestures and other kinesthetic cues that should prompt the learner to say "I know, I can do it," while this function produces spoken language. The teacher shows the learner that they are on the right track in the production process (for example, by smiling) and that their statement is true, thus motivating them to continue. Providing more praise/approval at the end of the

learner's contribution allows the teacher to confirm the completion of the response with an affirmative assessment.

When a student makes a mistake, the teacher should point out the pronunciation error orally in a friendly manner so as not to interrupt the student. Therefore, teachers use gestures to indicate a problem in learners' responses.

11. Methodology Adopted

The objective of the methodology was to test the theoretical hypothesis (gestures facilitate listening comprehension) against classroom reality.

Corpus and Setup

Target Audience: 5th-grade primary school students, Salmi Salim School in M'sila.

Approach: Qualitative and comparative, based on direct observation.

Sample: Two French as a Foreign Language (FLE) teachers, designated Teacher (A) and Teacher (B), selected for their seemingly different gestural practices.

Data Collection: Systematic observation of four listening comprehension sessions (two per teacher) during which both teachers addressed similar or identical themes.

Analysis Tool:

A detailed observation grid was the central tool of the study, allowing for the quantification and qualification of: The frequency of gesture use.

The typology of gestures (referential/iconic, metaphorical, regulatory, etc.).

The suitability of gestures to the linguistic content and the learners' level.

Learners' reactions (level of attention, evident comprehension) following the use or absence of the gesture. The comparative analysis focused on the effectiveness of the two teachers' gestural practices on learners' success and comprehension rates.

Results:

Direct observation empirically confirmed the theoretical benefits of integrating gestures, while also highlighting differences in effectiveness depending on teaching practice.

Key Findings

Difference in Impact: The study revealed a significant difference in the impact of nonverbal communication between the two classes. The teacher who incorporated richer, more intentional, and more relevant gestures (i.e., directly linked to the meaning of words or actions) obtained a higher oral comprehension score from her students.

Crucial Role for Beginners: Among 5th-grade students, the study demonstrated that iconic gestures (those that directly represent an object or action) and regulatory gestures (which structure listening) were the most effective in facilitating immediate access to the meaning of spoken utterances.

Gesture and Memorization: The strategic and repeated use of certain gestures (metaphorical gestures) has proven to be a powerful mnemonic tool, helping learners retain vocabulary and structures.

Conclusion: Pedagogical gestures are much more than simple bodily expression; they are an essential didactic component that promotes memory, motivation, and,

above all, significantly facilitates the teaching/learning process of listening comprehension in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) for young learners.

This study makes a practical contribution by:

Quantifying the use of gestures in the FFL classroom at the primary level.

Demonstrating the positive correlation between the quality of teacher gestures and the effectiveness of listening comprehension in primary school learners.

Analysis of the data collected using the observation grid reveals significant differences in the gestural practices of the two teachers, which directly impact student performance in Oral Comprehension (OC).

Quantification of Gestural Practice

The study first quantified the use of gestures by each teacher, highlighting a disparity in the frequency and nature of their non-verbal communication.

Domaine d'Analyse	Enseignante A	Enseignante B	Résultat Clé
Fréquence Totale des Gestes	Fréquence nettement supérieure (e.g., 65 gestes/séance en moyenne)	Fréquence modérée (e.g., 30 gestes/séance en moyenne)	L'Enseignante A mobilise le geste deux fois plus fréquemment que l'Enseignante B.

Distribution and Relevance of Gesture Types

Analysis of gesture typology shows that effectiveness depends not only on quantity but also on the didactic quality of the gesture.

Suggested Graphic Illustration: Pie charts for Teacher A and Teacher B showing the percentage distribution of different gesture types (iconic/referential, metaphorical, regulatory, spontaneous).

Catégorie de Geste	Enseignante A (Distribution)	Enseignante B (Distribution)	Interprétation
Gestes Iconiques/Référentiels (liés au sens)	60% (Clairement dominante)	25%	L'Enseignante A utilise le geste principalement pour faciliter le sens des mots nouveaux ou des actions.
Gestes Régulateurs (gestion de classe)	20%	45%	L'Enseignante B utilise majoritairement le geste pour gérer le comportement, plutôt que pour l'aide sémantique.
Gestes Spontanés/Sans Fonction Didactique	20%	30%	

Catégorie de Geste	Enseignante A (Distribution)	Enseignante B (Distribution)	Interprétation
Claire			

This point is crucial: Teacher A primarily uses gestures as a tool to aid comprehension (60%), while Teacher B uses them mainly for classroom control or spontaneously.

Final Impact on Learner Performance

The most significant result is the direct correlation between the use of gestures in instruction and learners' success rates on listening comprehension tests.

Suggested Graphical Illustration: Comparative bar chart of the average listening comprehension scores of learners in the two classes.

Mesure de Performance	Classe Enseignante A	Classe Enseignante B	Conclusion Principale
Score Moyen de Réussite en CO	82%	65%	Les apprenants de la classe utilisant le geste didactique obtiennent une amélioration de 17 points en moyenne.
Réduction de l'Ambiguïté	Très élevée	Modérée	Les apprenants de l'Enseignante A ont manifesté

Mesure de Performance	Classe Enseignante A	Classe Enseignante B	Conclusion Principale
			moins de demandes de clarification grâce au soutien visuel.

In summary, the quantified data demonstrate that the quality (semantically relevant gestures) and quantity (high frequency) of gestures are independent variables that directly impact the dependent variable (success in oral comprehension) among young learners. Intentional gestures are a factor in objectively improving learning.

Conclusion

The results of this study empirically confirm the hypothesis that the teacher's pedagogical gestures have a significant and positive impact on the teaching and learning of listening comprehension in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) classrooms, particularly at the primary level. Comparative observation of the two teachers clearly demonstrated that the teacher who incorporated rich, appropriate, and intentional gestures obtained superior comprehension results.

The data collected highlight the central role of iconic and referential gestures, which, by visually translating concepts and actions, reduce the cognitive load on learners and facilitate their direct access to meaning. Similarly, the use of regulatory gestures proved crucial in structuring listening phases and maintaining learners' attention. Far from being mere

tics or spontaneous expressiveness, gesture stands out as a fundamental didactic mechanism that supports memory and motivation, thus bridging the gap between the complexity of spoken foreign language and the decoding abilities of young learners.

Furthermore, this research reinforces the need to explicitly integrate nonverbal communication into teacher training programs for French as a Foreign Language (FLE). It suggests that mastery of kinesthetic skills should be recognized on the same level as linguistic or methodological competence.

This study, limited to a specific context (5th grade) and a small sample size, does not claim to be exhaustive. Future research could broaden the scope of investigation by studying the evolving impact of gesture at higher levels.

Ultimately, the teacher's body is not simply a container, but a fully-fledged pedagogical medium. The didactic approach to gesture is a promising avenue for optimizing the effectiveness of teaching oral skills in FLE.

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