

An Analysis Students Habit of using Body Language (Gesture) to Replace Unmastered English Vocabulary in Class Eleventh Six at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar

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This study investigates the habit of students using body language (gestures) to replace unmastered English vocabulary during classroom communication. Vocabulary mastery is a key component in English learning, yet many students struggle to express themselves verbally, resulting in a reliance on gestures as compensatory tools. Although previous research has shown the effectiveness of gestures in enhancing comprehension and engagement, limited studies focus on students' natural gesture use in Indonesian EFL classroom contexts. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar utilize gestures to substitute for English vocabulary they have not yet mastered. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected students. The findings revealed that students frequently employed iconic, deictic, and emblematic gestures, primarily to clarify meaning and maintain communication flow when vocabulary gaps occurred. These gestures were found to facilitate comprehension, support memory retention, and sustain classroom interaction, aligning with the embodied cognition theory that emphasizes the integration of body movement in language processing. However, overdependence on gestures may hinder verbal vocabulary growth. The study concludes that gestures serve as effective nonverbal strategies in English learning, yet should be integrated with explicit vocabulary instruction to promote balanced communicative competence.

Keywords: Gestures; Vocabulary Mastery; Nonverbal Communication; English As A Foreign Language (EFL)

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1. Introduction

In the process of learning English, mastery of vocabulary is one of the most important and fundamental aspects. However, many students still experience difficulties in optimally mastering English vocabulary. This condition causes students to sometimes face obstacles when communicating verbally due to the limitations of the vocabulary they have mastered. In the context of classroom learning, this condition is not only an individual problem but also a challenge for teachers in creating effective interactions and smooth communication between teachers and students as well as among fellow students. One interesting phenomenon that emerges is the habit of students using body language or gestures as a substitute for unmastered vocabulary. Gestures or body movements become a nonverbal communication tool that helps students express their intentions and messages even though limitations in vocabulary mastery still exist. Communication through gestures is considered an effective compensatory strategy to facilitate the process of conveying messages and interactions in teaching and learning activities.

Speaking as a form of verbal communication is the most important aspect in language learning because it functions as the primary medium for conveying messages and social interactions. However, limitations in

vocabulary mastery often become a barrier in speaking. Therefore, the use of body language as a complement to communication becomes very important to support the smoothness of that verbal communication. In the context of students in class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar, this phenomenon is often seen during speaking activities, where students use hand movements, facial expressions, or body postures to depict objects or concepts that they cannot express verbally. If not addressed, this habit can hinder students' progress in achieving balanced speaking competence, where vocabulary and gestures support each other.

The importance of this topic for research lies in its potential to provide in-depth insights into the dynamics of language learning at the secondary school level, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia. By understanding students' habits of using gestures as a substitute for vocabulary, this research can contribute to the development of more holistic teaching methods that integrate nonverbal aspects into the English curriculum. Moreover, this research is relevant because gestures are not just a temporary aid, but also an integral part of the cognitive process in language learning, which can enhance retention and student understanding. In the era of globalization, where cross-cultural communication skills are crucial, studying this habit can help educators design more effective interventions to address vocabulary gaps.

Previous research shows the relevance of using gestures in English language learning as a strategy to overcome vocabulary limitations. The study by Diu et al. (2020) states that gestures can increase student engagement and understanding of learning materials. Another study by Sato (2022) emphasizes that teachers' hand gestures function as visual cues that help clarify learning materials and improve student understanding. In addition, Novack & Meadow (2015) also found that students who use gestures when communicating show higher readiness to learn and are more effective in conveying ideas despite vocabulary limitations. These studies support that gestures are an important method used by students as a communication aid when they have not fully mastered English vocabulary.

Nevertheless, although many studies highlight the use of gestures in the context of English language learning, there is still a gap or void in research that specifically examines the habits of students in class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar in using gestures as a substitute for unmastered vocabulary. Focusing on the local context and the characteristics of students at the high school level is important to research, in order to gain a deeper understanding of students' alternative communication strategies and how they support the effective process of English language learning.

Thus, this research aims to analyze the habits of students in class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar in using body language as a substitute for English vocabulary that they have not yet mastered, so that it can provide meaningful contributions to the development of more effective and communicative English language learning strategies. Through a qualitative approach, this research is expected to produce findings that not only describe the phenomenon but also provide practical recommendations to improve more integrative English teaching. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of language education in Indonesia, especially in utilizing gestures as an effective learning support tool.

2. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach. According to Moleong (2005:4), the descriptive qualitative approach is a research approach that collects data in the form of words, images, rather than numbers, obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation. This approach aims to describe and understand phenomena that occur in a broad and deep social context, providing a clear and detailed picture of the research object.

The research was conducted in class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar, focusing on students' habits of using body language (gesture) as a substitute for English vocabulary that they have not mastered. Data were collected through non-participant observation over 5 learning sessions (each lasting 90 minutes) and semi-structured interviews with 10 selected students to gain in-depth information about the nonverbal communication patterns they used. The preparation of the research included designing instruments such as interview guides and observation formats, as well as obtaining ethical approval from the school.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994), to reveal patterns of gesture use in students' communication in class. Validity was strengthened through data source triangulation and member checking. This approach provides substantial understanding of the context and meaning behind the use of body language as a compensatory strategy in English communication.

This descriptive qualitative method facilitates the researcher in providing a detailed description of social realities and student behaviors, in accordance with explanations provided by Sugiyono (2017) and Setiyadi (2018), who emphasize that descriptive qualitative research aims to describe phenomena as they are based on natural and comprehensive data.

With this method, the study is expected to contribute significantly to the development of adaptive and communicative English learning strategies, especially in facilitating students who have not yet mastered vocabulary well.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This design was chosen because it can provide a systematic, factual, and detailed description of the social phenomenon, namely students' habits of using body language (gesture) as a substitute for English vocabulary they have not mastered (Sugiyono, 2019; Nazir, 2014). The qualitative approach was selected because this study aims to understand the phenomenon in depth and contextually, not through numerical measurement, with intensive exploration of a specific case, such as the students of class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. The descriptive case study design is appropriate for understanding and describing behavior and social interactions in natural conditions without variable manipulation or focus on causal relationships, thus providing a holistic insight into the phenomenon.

This design emphasizes data collection in the form of words, images, and behaviors through observation and interviews, which are then inductively analyzed to identify patterns of students' nonverbal communication in the classroom. The study does not focus on hypothesis testing, but rather describes the actual conditions occurring in the field.

The variables in this study are more thematic than numerical, with a focus on social phenomena. The main variable is the use of body language (gesture) by students as a strategy to substitute for English vocabulary they have not mastered, including aspects like frequency of gesture use, types of gestures (e.g., iconic, deictic, or emblematic), context of use (during discussions or presentations), reasons for use, and its impact on verbal communication and the learning process. Supporting variables include contextual factors such as students' vocabulary mastery level and classroom learning environment. This description helps in identifying patterns and meanings behind the phenomenon, so the study can provide substantial insights for developing English teaching methods.

Research Participants or Population and Sample

The subjects of this study are students of class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematang Siantar, totaling approximately 30 students. The subject selection technique used purposive sampling, in which subjects

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were chosen based on specific parameters, namely students who actively participate in English speaking activities in class and demonstrate a habit of using gestures as a substitute for vocabulary they have not mastered. The selection of participants was done selectively to ensure that the collected data reflects the phenomenon of using body language as a substitute for English vocabulary not yet mastered. From the total subjects, 10 students were selected as key informants for in-depth interviews, based on variations in the frequency and types of gestures observed during the observation. After the selection process, the researcher approached and provided explanations about the research objectives and procedures to the prospective participants. In addition, the researcher also obtained written consent as a form of willingness for the participants to be involved in the study. Through these steps, the researcher ensured that research ethics were fulfilled and that participants understood their rights and responsibilities during the research process.

Instruments

The main instrument used in this study is a Samsung A32 smartphone (manufactured by Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd., South Korea) to visually record classroom activities, operated by the researcher during participant observation. The same smartphone was used to record audio during interview sessions, activated by the researcher. Documentation sheets such as field notes and interview transcripts were manually prepared by the researcher to record and organize the data. All these instruments were validated by the research supervisor to ensure accuracy, and data were collected ethically with participants' consent. These instruments enabled the collection of in-depth and contextual data regarding nonverbal phenomena occurring in the classroom.

Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis method based on the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, consisting of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This analysis process is dynamic and iterative, where the researcher continuously verifies and validates data through the technique of source triangulation to ensure the accuracy of research results and minimize bias. With this approach, the study can produce profound and contextual findings regarding the phenomenon of gesture use in English language learning.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

Research Findings

Based on data analysis using the Miles and Huberman model (1994), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, this study found that students in class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematang Siantar often use gestures as a substitute for English vocabulary that they have not mastered. These findings were obtained through participant observation during 3 learning sessions totaling 135 minutes with 10 selected students.

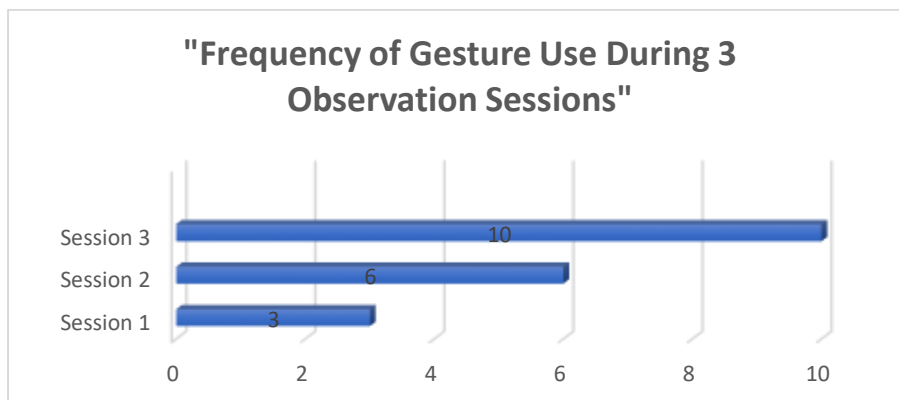
The observation results show that during the first to third sessions, the frequency of gesture use increased from 3 incidents per session to 10 incidents per session, with the dominant type of gesture being hand movements to depict objects such as "car" with steering motions. Table 1 below displays a summary of gesture frequency based on type and context of use.

Table 1. Use of Gestures

No	Students Initials	Type of Gesture (Example)	Context of Use
1.	AP	holding stomach to show hunger	Group discussion

No	Students Initials	Type of Gesture (Example)	Context of Use
2.	KH	pointing to book during presentation	Presentation
3.	NH	raising shoulders to show uncertainty	Q&A session
4.	LL	shaking head to indicate refusal	Q&A session
5.	CR	swinging hand to show size of an object	Presentation
6.	MG	hand motion mimicking steering a car	Group Discussion
7.	JS	pointing to whiteboard	Presentation
8.	SP	wide hand opening gesture	Group discussion
9.	JJ	holding stomach to show hunger	Group Discussion
10.	NP	Raising a thumbs up shows agreement or appreciation for a friend's answer.	Presentation

Furthermore, the interview results reveal the main reasons for students' use of gestures, namely vocabulary limitations experienced by 80% of respondents and the need to clarify communication felt by 60% of respondents. One student stated, "I often use my hands to draw pictures when I forget the English word, so my friends understand." This statement is reinforced by interview transcripts showing similar patterns of gesture use in all observed sessions.



Discussion

This study's findings clearly address the main question raised in the introduction concerning how the students of class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematang Siantar use gestures as substitutes for English vocabulary they have not mastered. The gestures employed by the students, especially iconic, deictic, and emblematic types, function as an effective nonverbal compensatory strategy that supports communication in English as a English Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

These findings align with the theory of embodied cognition, which emphasizes that cognitive processes are not only performed in the brain but also involve bodily experiences and movements as integral parts of understanding and memory retention (Macedonia & Klimesch, 2020). In English language learning, the gestures performed by students are not merely verbal complements, but key cognitive tools that reinforce the meaning of words that students have yet to master, a notion supported by Goldin-Meadow's (2021) findings. Gestures expand cognitive capacity, enabling students to convey clearer meanings and improve comprehension in communication.

While gestures provide many benefits, this study also found a risk of excessive reliance on gestures, which may hinder the verbal vocabulary development of students. This differs from previous studies that primarily

focus on teachers' use of gestures to facilitate learning (Sato, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to integrate gesture use with structured vocabulary instruction to ensure students develop their verbal skills optimally alongside nonverbal communication.

Furthermore, this study offers practical insights for developing EFL teaching strategies in Indonesia, especially at the secondary school level. Integrating gestures into curriculum and teaching methods can enhance the effectiveness of student communication, especially when vocabulary limitations pose a significant barrier. Unlike Novack & Meadow's (2015) research, which highlights gesture as a general enhancer of learning readiness, this study emphasizes that in the local context, students use gestures as an emergency substitute and strategic aid.

Thus, a holistic teaching approach is necessary, one that not only explicitly teaches vocabulary but also trains adaptive gesture use as an integral communication skill. This study opens avenues for further research exploring the long-term impact and effective instructional integration of gestures in English language acquisition.

4. Conclusion

This study result that students in class XI-6 at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar commonly use gestures as an effective nonverbal compensatory strategy to overcome their limited mastery of English vocabulary. The frequent use of iconic, deictic, and emblematic gestures facilitates clearer communication and supports vocabulary retention during English learning activities. The findings emphasize the integral role of gestures within the embodied cognition framework, highlighting that bodily movements are essential cognitive tools that enhance language comprehension and memory. However, reliance solely on gestures may inhibit the development of verbal vocabulary, suggesting that gesture use should be balanced with explicit vocabulary instruction. Overall, incorporating gestures into English language teaching strategies can enrich students' communicative competence, especially in EFL contexts where vocabulary gaps are common. The study underscores the need for a holistic approach that integrates nonverbal communication skills with verbal language learning to foster balanced language proficiency.

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