What do we call this?” asks Ms. Brittany, raising her eyebrows and pointing at a puzzle. “It’s a puzzle,” says Clifton.

“Yes,” says Ms. Brittany, smiling and nodding her head. “Como se dice en español?”

A perplexed look comes over the 4-year-olds, except for one.

“Rompecabezas,” says Graciela, in a low whisper.

Ms. Brittany opens her eyes wide and claps her hands. “Yes, Graciela. Can you say it louder?”

“Rompecabezas,” the child says, beaming at her classmates.

Teachers and students in any given classroom, like those in the example above, constantly send and receive both verbal and nonverbal communication. Teachers’ nonverbal communication—such as head nods, smiles, and hand claps—can create a fluctuating range of children’s engagement or disengagement (Hansen 2010; Hyson 2008).

Nonverbal communication is particularly important in early childhood environments because young children’s thinking and behavior are easily shaped by their emotional states (Hyson 2008). If our goal is to increase children’s engagement—the observable behaviors that indicate children’s involvement in instruction (Hyson 2008)—then it is important to direct our attention to the role of nonverbal communication. When teachers are conscious of their nonverbal behaviors, they increase their opportunities to engage children. Thus the role of nonverbal communication in instruction is just as critical as that of verbal communication.

This article describes how a preschool teacher engages children using nonverbal communication as an instructional tool. It seeks to clarify the role of nonverbal communication as it reveals teachers’ potential to strengthen children’s learning engagement and multiply their positive learning experiences.

Nonverbal communication in instruction
Definitions of nonverbal communication vary. According to one definition (Guerrero et al. 2008), nonverbal communication consists of “messages other than words that are used in our interactions with others. Such messages are typically sent with intent and are typically interpreted by receivers as meaningful.” The authors underscore how tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language play roles in such communication. By this definition, nonverbal communication is a way for teachers to communicate emotional messages. Of course, the messages need to be congruent with age- and culture-appropriate nonverbal behaviors (Carlson 2006; Hansen 2010).
Teachers and children consciously and unconsciously communicate their feelings more through nonverbal communication than verbal communication (Hansen 2010). When teachers’ verbal and nonverbal communications are inconsistent, children tend to believe the nonverbal messages, seeing them as more authentic (Noller 1984). Teachers’ deliberate use of nonverbal communication would then seem to enhance their trustworthiness.

**Nonverbal communication as an instructional tool**

By understanding the role of nonverbal communication, teachers support children’s emotions that influence their engagement with instruction. Drawing on my own research, I present the nonverbal communication strategies of Ms. Smith, a teacher with 18 years of teaching experience.

At the time of the study, Ms. Smith was teaching preschool English Language Learners (ELL) at a Texas public elementary school. She used three nonverbal communication strategies for children’s engagement: a calm voice, body language in demonstration teaching, and appropriate touch. Such concrete examples have important implications for understanding how nonverbal communication can affect children’s engagement.

**Calmness as a foundation for non-judgmental responses**

Ms. Smith found it helpful to project an image of calmness using a tone of voice to enhance her students’ learning engagement and create a safe classroom environment. She said she hoped they felt “safe and there [was] a feeling of trust. If they can trust me, then they know that I’m going to help them.” She used calmness as a conscious choice, based upon her appraisal of how this self-presentation affected her students’ learning experiences.

Ms. Smith, reading a storybook and seated on the carpet, is surrounded by her students. The climate is quiet and attentive. While reading, she looks around and checks children’s responses. Noticing a child who isn’t looking at the book, Ms. Smith calls the child’s name in a calm tone of voice.

“Janet, can you see these pictures? Look, I don’t know if you can see very well, but the mother is blowing kisses. That’s the mommy blowing kisses” (pretending). Janet nods her head and says, “I can see.”

Pointing at the illustration, Ms. Smith says, “You can see them. The mommy is blowing kisses and the kisses look like little hearts.” The child smiles at her and says, “That’s beautiful!”
To refocus Janet’s attention on the story, Ms. Smith modulated her tone of voice, which, she believed, would avoid any negative feeling on Janet’s part or on the part of the other children. This sort of non-confrontational interaction promoted Janet’s engagement with the story. Ms. Smith said that non-judgmental language (“Can you see? I don’t know if you can see very well”) maintained children’s own sense of calm, as well as freed them to choose to re-engage.

Also, she avoided the interruption to her instruction that a negative teacher-child interaction would cause. In this manner she tried to increase the child’s self-regulation: “I didn’t want to embarrass them by saying, ‘Janet, you’re not looking. Look at the book.’ It would be very negative. But asking ‘Can you see?’ allowed Janet some responsibility for her behavior and helped her self-regulate her own behavior.”

Ms. Smith viewed children’s feelings as deserving of respect and used an inner sense of calm to respond respectfully. Non-judgmental reactions were insufficient to effectively deliver her authentic intention because they could threaten the child’s emotional engagement if she did not modulate her tone of voice. For this reason, she intentionally used a calm tone of voice. “It all depends on my body language and my voice tone and the way I phrase the question. If I said the same thing in a harsher tone, then I think they might feel guilty or uncomfortable . . . It’s also a way of redirecting their behavior without causing any kind of humiliation or bad feelings.”

Ms. Smith deliberately used calmness as a foundation for non-judgmental reactions. She found this strategy useful in helping engage unfocused children. She projected calm by modulating her tone of voice to constructively sustain children’s engagement.

**Body language in demonstration teaching**

In Ms. Smith’s experience, body language is effective at engaging children, particularly ELL students. Gestures, body movements, and facial expressions can sometimes stand in for spoken language to illustrate abstract words and concepts when ELL students show difficulty in understanding them. Body language is effective in demonstration teaching: “If they don’t know what *sigh* means, they can hear me sigh. And so when they hear the word *sigh* and see me sigh, they know what it means.”

In addition, ELL students interpreted Ms. Smith’s nonverbal communication with more sophistication than her verbal communication. She tried engaging the children with her authentic emotional responses—with words but more importantly with nonverbal communication. “The children are very smart and they’re very observant and very intuitive. They pay attention to everything. They are quick to understand if what you’re saying verbally is matching what you’re saying nonverbally.”

**BODY LANGUAGE IS EFFECTIVE AT ENGAGING CHILDREN.**

In the following example, Ms. Smith initiated interaction with ELL students by modeling her instructions with body movements to inform them of the lesson’s objective.

After lunch, the children are sitting on the carpet in a close semicircle to do a math activity. Ms. Smith sits on the carpet in front of them. She briefly reviews what they learned the day before.

*Ms. Smith: Do you remember what we did yesterday? OK, let me help you. Can you show me a vertical line with your arms? What does a vertical line look like?*

*Child: (Erecting a finger) I made one.*

*M. Smith: (Holding up her own finger) Yes, you made a vertical line with your finger, didn’t you? (Raising her arm above her head) A vertical line is up and down. Can you show me a horizontal line with your arm?*

*Sam: (Suddenly stands up) Hey, look.*

*M. Smith: (Tracing a vertical line with her finger) It’s your body. (Gently rubbing her arm) I’m asking for arms though, and you’re showing me vertical. What about a horizontal line with your arms? Not fingers. (Demonstrating the lines with her fingers) Vertical. Now this is vertical. (Laughing and looking at Sam, who looks confused.) Sorry, Sam.*

*Child: (Pointing at Sam’s demonstration) I like that.*

*M. Smith: He’s thinking, “What is Ms. Smith asking?” (Modeling the lines with her finger) Vertical
and horizontal. Yesterday, we passed out toothpicks. What did we do with the toothpicks?

Children: (Quiet and reflective)

Ms. Smith: We made shapes. What kind of lines did we need to make shapes? Does anybody remember what kind of lines we used?

Child: Horizontal

Ms. Smith: Horizontal. What else?

Ms. Smith continues to talk about vertical and horizontal lines. After gathering the needed materials, the children attentively work on designing pictures, using vertical and horizontal lines.

In this episode, Ms. Smith facilitated the ELL students’ ability to reach the lesson objective, using body language as an instructional tool to explain the concept of vertical and horizontal lines. She expanded on a previous activity about vertical and horizontal that had used body movement, applying the concepts to a real-life object (toothpicks) instead. When she reminded them of the prior lesson through body language by holding up her finger, Sam risked revealing his understanding of the concept of vertical by standing up, and other students also engaged in naming and describing the lines using their fingers and arms. Sam’s response was incorrect because Ms. Smith had asked the children to demonstrate horizontal, but she lightened the moment by using humor, then repeated the correct concept verbally and nonverbally through modeling with her fingers.

As shown in this example, Ms. Smith not only initiated the use of body language as a strategy but also reacted to the students’ body language, encouraging them to use nonverbal communication (movement of arms and fingers) to probe their understanding when they seemed to have difficulty expressing themselves verbally.

In addition, she used body language to open up ideas and memories of children’s previous learning experiences when children showed difficulty remembering shapes. Body language as an instructional strategy can scaffold children’s understanding of concepts and maintain their active involvement in the classroom.

Ms. Smith also attempted to make students constructors or active learners by refraining from giving her ideas. Instead, she invited students to demonstrate their ideas verbally and nonverbally. By asking the students to prove their knowledge with body language, she stimulated their active engagement and provided them a meaningful sense of accomplishment.

This strategy had an added benefit: “It’s also a way for me to assess [their learning] and for them to have a sense of competency and accomplishment when they’re able to explain what it is that they’re thinking.”

Ms. Smith believed that her ELL students felt more comfortable and engaged in learning through demonstration with body language because they tended to rely more often on nonverbal cues.

**Appropriate touch to create feeling of security**

When students showed non-constructive emotions, such as sadness and anger, and behaviors that could interrupt classmates’ engagement, Ms. Smith used appropriate touch to transform them into constructive emotions, such as secure and happy. “At this young age, it is very difficult for children to separate emotions and academic learning. Thus, checking children’s emotional states was the first and most important process in daily instruction.”

Students’ engagement can change when they get new siblings, when their grandparents visit their homes, when they anticipate a future return to their parents’ home countries, and when their parents get divorced. For example, Ms. Smith consistently gave appropriate touch to Florentina whose father worked at a job in another city. When she was upset, Florentina often sought physical comfort from Ms. Smith. Helping a child feel secure in the classroom could redirect the focus from negative emotional experiences. Thus, she made a conscious decision to be consistent with Florentina to give a sense of security.

Before starting with circle time, Ms. Smith sees Florentina crying while sitting in her usual spot on the carpet. Ms. Smith approaches her.

Florentina: I miss Dad.

Ms. Smith: You are missing your daddy. Will it help if you sit with me? Come up here and sit next to me.

Florentina: (Sniffling, stands up and moves to Ms. Smith’s lap)

Ms. Smith: (Hugging her) All my friends can sit down. Florentina is going to sit in my lap just a minute. You know what? Florentina has a lot of things going on right now. She is a little bit sad. When she is sitting
with me, she is going to be better. Because sometimes when you feel sad, a hug helps you feel better.

Florentina: (Murmurs something)

Ms. Smith: I know. I know. (Hugging her)

Remember yesterday we were talking about our new song. This is called “Hearts” and it sounds like the bingo song and we’re going to sing it. Yesterday we talked about hearts and blood and today we talked about love. And you can sing with me.

Florentina: (Stops crying and sings with the other children)

Ms. Smith: (Smiling at Florentina and the other children) Let’s try that again. That was beautiful. (They sing it again, loudly)

Florentina: One more time. (They sing the song again.)

In this episode Ms. Smith hugged Florentina to comfort her and dispel her sadness. Using touch, Ms. Smith communicated with Florentina, accepting and validating her feelings and serving as a secure base to manage her engagement to learn: “Holding her really helps. She’s feeling a great sadness in her life and it’s out of her control, so I’m trying to give her control in the classroom.”

Young children need physical contact to feel safe, loved, and comfortable, and Ms. Smith recognized that misinterpretation of physical contact might prevent many teachers from building emotional relationships with students. Even so, appropriate use of affectionate touch is an important teaching tool in early childhood education.

Students’ family issues can influence classroom behavior and learning engagement. To meet children’s emotional needs, Ms. Smith provided individualized attention in the whole-group setting by using appropriate touch. At the same time, she remained conscious of possible ethical dilemmas in emotionally scaffolding both individuals and the whole group simultaneously.

Enhancing learning potential

When it comes to supporting emotions useful for engagement, nonverbal communication appears to possess an efficacy that words do not (Hyson 2008). In the early childhood education context, communication makes a visible difference in students’ engagement in the classroom—and this is particularly true for ELL students. Conscious and deliberate use of nonverbal communication can enhance their learning potential. Teachers need to constantly observe children’s reactions to instruction to be more effective in their nonverbal communication skills through an alignment of content and right timing with the appropriate tone of voice, body language, and touch.

Teachers’ reactions to children’s emotions, through which engagement is maintained or lost, are closely related to their awareness of the role of nonverbal communication. This finding raises some questions. How can early childhood educators broaden and deepen their understanding of nonverbal communication for children’s engagement? How can they incorporate it into their daily teaching practices? Using nonverbal communication as an instructional strategy for children’s learning is especially critical in the preschool years, a period now seen as key to establishing excitement and engagement with learning—a critical component of school readiness (Copple and Bredekamp 2009; Hyson 2008).

Nonverbal communication may be incongruent across cultures, so teachers need to be careful in how they use nonverbal communication when interacting with children from diverse backgrounds. This can be done in concert with families to tailor teaching practices so they’re appropriate to all the children in our classrooms (Carlson 2006; Hansen 2010).

References


About the author
Mi-Hwa Park, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of early childhood and elementary education at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky. After teaching nursery school and kindergarten, she focused her research on emotional scaffolding and self-regulation. ■