

Body Language in Freediving Education

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Introduction

It's common knowledge that our body language makes up a large majority of the message that we're trying to communicate. Some studies say even up to to 93% if you include vocal tone and pitch along with the visual gestures and eye contact. Most people could very easily infer what is happening in a given situation by viewing a simple snapshot of it, even hearing none of what is being said. Body language is also a very useful tool to use more consciously as well. It can help get your meaning across in the classroom, business meeting or, how I've learned to use it, when traveling in foreign countries where people don't speak your language.

The research on using body language in the classroom generally discusses techniques to help control students and directing their attention appropriately. There is very little information about teaching students *through* the use of body language, which is what I was primarily interested in. There is however a method of language teaching called Total Physical Response which does teach through body language, but this would not be as useful when teaching a physical skill such as freediving.

My research then took me to where I feel was the most useful for our specific purposes, which was with teaching deaf students. There is quite a bit of information regarding teaching deaf students swimming or yoga, which are somewhat connected with diving, so can be useful for us.

I will first discuss general use of body language in the classroom to give an introduction into the main body of research in this field. Then I will discuss how we might be able to use the information on teaching deaf students to teaching diving to other language speakers. From there we will look at how to use other nonverbal communication to aid in our teaching. And finally we'll look at what we can learn from scuba divers in terms of communication and creating signs which can be useful for us.

Body Language in Teaching

As stated above, communication research shows that only about 7% communication is purely verbal (meaning only the specific words that are spoken). Approximately 55% is physical (gestures, posture, eye contact), and the other approximate 40% is vocal (pitch, speed, volume, tone). Additionally use of body language greatly increases recall of a topic. According to an article on indianmba.com, recall within three days increases over 300% when the students are told *and* demonstrate (or are shown) the lesson.

Chris Caswell at teachfind.com looked at different teachers' teaching styles and analyzed their body language. He gave a number of tips for classroom management. Starting with how to begin a class, he explained that the teacher should be between their desk and the students (not behind the desk) in order to create immediacy. Teachers should also use the whole area of the class to keep the distance between the students similar, and to better engage them. Also by physically demonstrating what you want. For example to tap your head when saying 'think about it'. This, as well as doing things like gesturing toward a student, and keeping your hand held out will help to reinforce the idea that you were discussing. Almost as if you are holding the idea out for the students to see.

One of the main ideas discussed was simply how the teacher should be able to control the class by acting as a high status person would. Large body language, controlling gestures, and proper vocal inflection are some of the key elements. Up to the final moments when the teacher is letting the students go, they should non-verbally be in control of the class.

The one big difference here, in terms of how we can use this, is that freediving classes are much smaller (generally) than a normal public school classroom in terms of the number of students. While these tips certainly can, and should be utilized, our classes are much less formal, so require slightly less formal body language. Though with more difficult students, demonstrating a solid lead of the class is clearly still useful; as are facial expressions showing interest and a willingness to learn or listen to what our students have to say.

We've briefly looked at some of the ways in which body language can be used to enhance teaching. Let's move on to actually teaching *with* body language.

Teaching with Body Language

As a language teacher I've become familiar with a teaching style called Total Physical Response (TPR). TPR is a language teaching method created by James Asher in the late 1970s. The general idea behind it is to teach through the coordination of language and physical input. This simulates the way that people learn language naturally, as when people are very young babies they are hearing the language, and learning how to respond to it, though unable to actually create meaning of their own.

The first step is to demonstrate a word while saying it. For example, the teacher would say 'sit' while sitting, and then 'stand' while standing. The students would follow along with the teacher. The teacher would eventually stop acting and just directing the students. While this is a very useful method for basic language teaching, it wouldn't be as applicable to freediving past the very initial classes if we were working to get the students to understand our basic language.

Another common area of research for teaching with body language is through the methods used to teach deaf students. Deaf students obviously are not able to communicate as well with someone who cannot communicate in sign language (which is different around the world). Though some of these are seemingly common sense I'd like to give some of the more important.

From a swimming.org resource packet for deaf students I found that one key is to have a set of signs that you can use with your students; this is something that I'll come back to later as well. Along with specific signs the instructor should demonstrate the skill for the student. In order to demonstrate it's very important for the instructor to be in a position which can be easily seen by all students. While demonstrating is good, the Deaf Yoga Foundation also suggests specifically pointing to the area of the body you want the student to focus on. Touch is fine, though always be gentle and appropriate.

Finally the Deaf Yoga Foundation explained that you don't need to know sign language to teach deaf students, as many gestures are becoming more universal. But still be careful. In the diving context, the 'ok' sign will probably always mean 'ok,' but in other contexts (at least in Asia) the same sign often can mean 'money.'

Scuba diving has a full set of different signs. Freediving doesn't need them quite as much, as we're often on the surface, though specific gestures for things like 'straight legs', 'straight back', 'mouth fill', etc. These signs could be useful underwater when attempting to communicate with a student mid dive. The idea that I propose is to have a standard set of signs that could be used globally by different freediving instructors. These signs should also be easy to read and understand even without specifically teaching them. I've found that when I describe freediving to non-native speakers, who've never heard of it, I often will turn my hand upside down, with my pointer and middle finger pointed up (as if they were legs) and scissor them back and forth simulating kicking (after taking a deep breath, to

demonstrate breathhold diving). This seems to be pretty universally understood. Perhaps showing the first two fingers bent, and then pointedly straightening them out would be a good sign to remind students to focus on straight legs. Another potential could be using one hand to reach up and use it to 'pull' your head back into streamline.

One final topic I'd like to move to is using body language to help you connect with your listener. In recent years a new focus in personal development sources is something called Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). One of the main ideas behind NLP is to non-verbally create rapport with your listeners. This can hopefully help them to be more comfortable with you.

One main idea behind NLP rapport is to match the person you're speaking with. Matching their body language, basic facial gestures, and even their breathing can help them feel more comfortable with you. You can also use your voice to match, which I think can be very useful with static dives. Obviously the diver is quite calm, so try to match this feeling with your voice. By making yourself seem as similar, or connected, to your students as possible, the more comfortable they will feel in your presence, which, when asking students to not breathe, could be useful.

Matching body language is something that we often do, at least to some basic extent, unconsciously, though can make focus to help create rapport. For example: if you see a student leaning far back into their seat, do the same. If you see a student who is clearly closed off (ie. crossing their arms, leaning back) it's possible to create physical rapport by matching their posture, breathing, vocal tone, etc., then by slowly shifting your posture to something more positive, you may find that they start to follow you, and open up themselves. The same could work if a student is unable to relax during a pool session. Meet the student in the middle of their more excited state, and then slowly lead them, through your own body language, towards relaxation.

Body Language in a Freediving Course

Body language is an important skill in all forms of communication; perhaps the most important skill. It is also something that all people do (to greater and lesser extents) naturally. Think back to your time as a student. I'm sure you can remember some teachers who had very distracting body language. Perhaps you can remember those who had good body language as well, though odds are those teachers were more natural, which made their body language less noticeable.

Through this paper we've seen a few ways in which body language can, and should be used in different teaching contexts. One thing freediving instructors already do quite well is to teach, demonstrate, and have the students show the skills. As I discussed in *Body Language in Teaching*, this will greatly increase the amount the students should be able to retain from our courses.

Teachers in all disciplines should also demonstrate high status in class, while still showing body language which help the students feel comfortable to ask questions and give feedback. In small class settings this is often much easier to do than in larger lecture settings, meaning it probably already happens quite easily and regularly in freediving classes. This is also where we can pull from NLP learning to help create rapport with our students, and therefore hopefully make them more comfortable. This is very important when we're asking them to do something that for some is very difficult and uncomfortable: not breathe.

The most potentially useful thing for teaching freediving to students with whom you do not share a language is the information about deaf teaching. From there we can learn that we need specific signs to help us communicate, which I discussed above. We were also shown how important it is to ensure that you're in control of the class so that each student is able to easily see you, and what you're doing. Also, while demonstrating, show as many of the specifics for the lesson as is possible to help ensure understanding. For example: if demonstrating fining with your arm and a fin point to the 'knee' (elbow), and how it should be straight, the 'hip' (shoulder), and how the power should come from there, as well as the 'ankle' (wrist), and how it should be pointed out. When teaching a student who may misunderstand you, it may be helpful to pretend they understand nothing of your spoken language, so that you will be more precise with your demonstrations.

Conclusion

As a public speaking instructor I had to teach students how to gesture in their speeches. And it always came back to one key. Be natural. As long as your gestures are natural the audience will probably not even notice, yet they will still aid your speech. When giving directions to a friend over the phone we naturally still gesture, though clearly cannot be seen. We gesture naturally both to help ourselves, as well as our listeners understand us.

Through all of my traveling I've found that I'm able to pretty clearly express what I need to with only basic body language. This same skill can be used to help demonstrate skills to students when our language skills aren't quite up to the task. Don't be afraid to act out, and show students what you want them to do; or even to physically help the student get into the pose/position that you want them in.

Body language can also be very instrumental in creating an atmosphere of comfort, as well as showing who is in charge in a classroom. Using basic body language techniques, combined with some general knowledge of NLP rapport building should allow instructors to help their students relax (both in class, and in the water) more easily with them, while also maintaining a distinct difference between teacher and student.

There is one major limitation of course, which is that without spoken language a student would never be able to understand 100% of the concepts of the course. We can help them dive, but would find it much more difficult to explain things like MDR, or the physics laws. For that language is key. So in the end body language alone will not be enough. But we can use what tools we have in our belts to help our students understand, and for a physical skill like freediving, body language is a tool we cannot work without.

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