An EFL Teacher Using Gestures to Teach English at a Vocational High School in Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
    	This study addresses a research gap, as there is limited research specifically exploring the use of gestures in vocational high schools in Indonesia settings, even though Vocational High schools have distinct needs, learning styles, and challenges compared to those in general education. Moreover, real classroom practices of EFL teachers using gestures remain under-documented, despite their importance for teacher development and training. Gestures play crucial roles in language learning, particularly in EFL contexts where students' proficiency in understanding classroom instructions varies. The subject of the research is a 43-year-old vocational high school English teacher. Data was collected from a video segment of 53 minutes. The research was conducted, and gestures were identified and analyzed following Sato's gesture categorization and using a qualitative research design. Findings indicate that the teacher participant employed Emblems, Deictic, Iconic, Metaphoric, Head Movement, Beats, and Affect Display. The gestures help teachers deliver the learning materials and communication messages, emphasize meanings and intention, and represent abstract objects. The implications of this study suggest the need to raise awareness and integrate gesture use into EFL teaching practices, because many teachers still have yet to use nonverbal behavior in teaching and lack the perception that gestures are vital when communicating, especially in teaching.

Introduction

English Foreign Language Teachers are teaching language how to communicate with teaching students in English. Goldin Meadow said gestures are such a crucial component of a conversation that no culture has ever been recognized in which the speaker does not move his hands while speaking, including blind people who were never noticed. According to Hoetjes and Maastricht (2020), human communication is multimodal. When individuals interact in person, they employ nonverbal communicative signals such as facial expressions, hand gestures, and spoken language. In this research, researchers look at one of these forms

of nonverbal communication, co-speech gestures of hands, in the setting of foreign language learning.

As stated by Robert L. Saitz (2015), a language instructor who teaches Italian with his hands folded on the desk is as impossible to fathom as Danny Kaye impersonating a Frenchman without puckering his lips and raising one eyebrow. A growing number of teachers are trying to incorporate gestures from speakers of the target language and linguistic patterns into their teaching, perhaps because of research on kinesics and the increasing use of "natural" contexts as dialogues, for example, when it comes to learning languages. For example, the teacher would find it more engaging for the students and more pedagogically effective if they could demonstrate appropriate handshakes, shaking hands, arm swings, etc., to students learning the greeting "How are you?" researchers believe. The culture of the mother tongue being taught usually includes such as greetings. In contrast to the Indonesian culture, for example, the Sundanese culture tends to use the thumb to point nonverbally, especially to older people, to show politeness and respect (Ananda et al., 2020).

This research gap on the use of gesture in English language teaching has been widely conducted, especially abroad or in public school contexts such as junior or senior high schools. However, research that particularly examines how EFL teachers use gesture in vocational high school settings in Indonesia is still very limited. Vocational high school students have different characteristics and learning needs, so teaching strategies such as gestures have the potential to have a significant impact. Therefore, this study tries to fill the gap by analyzing the use of gestures by an English teacher through classroom observation videos. The previous studies in another country from (Cavicchio & Busà, 2023) have shown that manual gestures can facilitate vocabulary learning and word retrieval in second language (L2) speakers. However, they have rarely examined whether the synchronization between speech and gesture plays a role in helping listeners process aural information in L2. This gap highlights the need to further investigate how gesture-speech timing affects comprehension, especially among L2 listeners compared to native speakers (L1). Prior studies have extensively discussed the use of nonverbal communication in the context of English language teaching in junior high schools in Indonesia. For example, this study highlights the types of nonverbal communication such as kinesics, vocalics, and proxemics used by teachers in delivering materials and building interactions with students (Ananda et al., 2020). Hence, the current study examined the use of gesture teaching by EFL teachers to Vocational High School students in Indonesia using another language. This section provides background information on the study, including an introduction to gestures, their importance in teaching and their use by EFL teachers, and a description of previous research concerning gesture usage. The formulated research inquiries are as follows: What are the gestures used by teachers in EFL classrooms at Vocational High School? In this paper, the researcher focuses on gestures embodied as actions used by foreign language teachers when interacting with second language (L2) students at the vocational level. This study will discuss a case observed in a corpus of videotaped and English as a L2 lessons, with adolescent students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Literature review

The Role and Use of Gestures in Teaching at Vocational High School

Teaching English at vocational high schools in Indonesia poses unique challenges, as students often prioritize technical or practical skills over academic language learning. In such EFL contexts, nonverbal communication, particularly gestures, plays a vital role in supporting students' understanding and engagement. Studies estimate that nonverbal cues contribute up to 70% of communication (Raymond, 2016), and gestures can help clarify meaning, manage classrooms, and motivate learners (Antes, 1996; Isnani, 2021; Huang, 2017; Sutiyatno, 2018). Several researchers have identified key gesture functions such as clarifying information, emphasizing points, and sustaining attention (Rahmat, 2018; Lay, 2019). Sato's (2020) comprehensive classification includes emblems, deictic, iconic, metaphoric, beats, head movements, and affect display, each serving different communicative purposes. For example, deictic gestures are used to point or direct, while iconic gestures visually represent actions or objects. These categories are especially relevant in EFL settings where learners may rely heavily on visual cues to comprehend instruction. Empirical studies support the pedagogical value of gestures. Wang & Loewen (2016) found that ESL teachers often use iconic and deictic gestures to reinforce corrective feedback, leading to improved learner comprehension. Similarly, Smotrova & Lantolf (2013) observed that students tend to mimic teachers' gestures, suggesting that gesture alignment enhances mutual understanding and learner engagement. Opazo et al. (2024) also found that gestures foster interaction and indicate active participation in English-medium settings. In the Italian context, from (Diadori, 2024) educators ought to cultivate multimodal awareness throughout their training and professional practice by analyzing video-recorded lessons encompassing verbal and embodied actions. Several empirical studies support the instructional benefits of gestures.

Gestures are deeply shaped by cultural norms, and educators must be aware of cross-cultural interpretations to avoid miscommunication. For instance, certain gestures may convey vastly different meanings across countries (Ananda et al., 2020). This cultural sensitivity is crucial in diverse EFL classrooms. In classroom practice, gestures are often used to regulate discourse, guide behavior, and replace or complement verbal messages. Teachers may demonstrate reading by miming the action or signal listening by raising a hand to the ear (Ranta & Harmawanti, 2017). Nonverbal interactions like nodding, pointing, or expressive facial cues further enrich classroom communication (Isnani, 2021; Negi, 2009). McNeill's (1992) concept of a 'dialectic' between gesture and language emphasizes that gestures offer a holistic image of meaning, complementing the linear nature of spoken language. This idea reinforces the view that gestures are not merely supplementary but are central to meaning-making in language instruction. While existing research has explored gesture functions and classifications, there remains limited attention to how EFL teachers in vocational high schools specifically employ gestures as pedagogical tools. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the types and instructional roles of gestures used by EFL teachers in Indonesian vocational school contexts.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to analyze the gestures of a female English teacher, Miss Laura, during EFL instruction at a vocational high school in Yogyakarta. Miss Laura, aged 43, has 19 years of teaching experience and is known for her openness, high motivation, and receptiveness to feedback. In line with Creswell's (2014) approach to qualitative research, which emphasizes using multiple data sources, this study focused on audiovisual data to interpret and categorize relevant gestures into thematic findings. The research relied on observational methods, particularly classroom video recordings, to capture her teaching practices throughout a full lesson. The video was carefully reviewed and analyzed, then the results are presented in descriptive form.

As mentioned earlier, this study used a qualitative approach to analyze and describe the variety of gestures exhibited by an English teacher in the context of an EFL classroom. According to Mylsidayu (2019) steps as follows: 1) Transcribing: this study collected data through video-recorded observations of a teacher-student interaction in an EFL classroom. The observation process was carried out by transcribing the video recording. The researcher watched and listened to the video. Then, captured images from the video that have been watched. 2) Identifying: In this section, the researcher identified various types of gestures demonstrated by the teacher. Based on the gesture classification framework taken from Sato (2020). 3) Classifying: This part focuses on visual aspects relevant to the research focus, such as identifying and categorizing the types of gestures the teacher has used in teaching the students. 4) Analyzing: The researchers analyzed the types of signs and their meanings used by English teachers in EFL classrooms. Sato's (2020) gesture classification framework categorizes gestures into iconic gestures, deictic gestures, emblems gestures, beat gestures, metaphoric gestures, affect display gestures, and head movements gestures. 5) Describing: In more detail, the researcher discusses and describes the findings. The discussion refers to the research focus, which is divided into two main areas: identification and description of the gestures exhibited by English language teachers in the context of EFL classrooms.

Findings

The researcher examined video recordings of classroom teaching and discovered that the teacher made frequent use of gestures and switched code language in L1, L2, and mixed in the EFL lessons. The study focused on a senior English teacher at a Vocational High School in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. These gestures served various purposes, including substituting words and enhancing verbal messages. In observation, it was found that teachers used the target language quite often because the students still sometimes did not understand what had been explained, but the teacher still explained English with the help of gestures to make it easier to deliver the lesson. In teaching and learning activities in the classroom, the teacher used English and then switched and mixed it with Indonesian, and the results of the types of gestures the teacher used. The researcher has compiled the findings in the Table 1.

Table 1: Explanation and examples of L1 and EFL utterances by category.

Language code	Example
Primary L1	The teacher's speech is entirely in Indonesian. Example: T: Of these, out of five offers of help, some are sometimes accepted.
Primary EFL	The whole utterance is completely in English or mainly in English. Example: Do you need any help?
Equal L1 and EFL	The entire speech includes the same amount of English and Indonesian. Example: Approximately from one two three four five six seven, I memorized this one more.

Based on the video recording observation, it was found that the teacher used L1, L2, and both forms of language. On the other hand, teachers tend to use their first language. Liu et al., (2022) expanded on the classification of cues in classroom instruction by organizing them into distinct categories based on their varied representations. Research indicates that gestures and spoken language interact during second language (L2) comprehension. In the study conducted by Sueyoshi and Hardison, it was found that access to gestures improved language understanding among low-proficiency L2 learners, although this effect was not observed in advanced L2 speakers (Arbona et al., 2024). In the research, the teacher directly used language switching in teaching students who were still not fully able to use the L2, so code-switching was often done. Cavicchio & Busà, (2023) defined there is disruptions in synchronicity may have a greater impact on second language (L2) speech processing compared to first language (L1) processing, as the working memory of L2 speakers is already burdened by their reduced language proficiency. Furthermore, the extent to which L2 speakers utilize gestures as a compensatory strategy appears to be influenced by their language proficiency; thus, listeners with lower levels of L2 fluency may experience more significant effects from synchronicity disruptions than those with higher fluency. This transition may occur when students struggle to comprehend the foreign language. Sali (2014) conclude that teachers often revert to the first language (L1) for classroom management when they are dissatisfied with students' performance or behavior, as

admonishments delivered in L1 are perceived to be more impactful and authoritative (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022).

Seven types of gestures accompanied the teacher's classroom utterances, each categorized and displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Seven types of gestures accompanied the teacher's classroom utterances

Types of gestures	Frequency/total
Deictic	19
Metaphoric	17
Head Movements	3
Emblems	2
Iconic	2
Beats	1
Affect Display	1

The results of observing the teaching video of a teacher at a Vocational High School with a duration of 53 minutes show that the teacher widely uses Deictic gestures with 19 frequently. Deictic is a gesture in which the speaker moves a finger or points to something, someone, or other body parts with their fingers or palms to point to concrete and abstract objects. In the video, the teacher wrote a lot on the blackboard, displaying the material in the PPT. Deictic gestures are made to ensure that students understand the object that the teacher is pointing at. However, since the English spoken by the teacher is not too complicated and the pauses are short, the primary purpose of NVB is to provide input that the students can understand. Although some of the expressions were ones that the students had not learned or that did not appear in their textbooks, the students understood the meaning with the help of the cues. Thus, regular pointing backward with the right thumb can help students understand past-tense expressions. In the educational setting, instructors' hand movements can be categorized into three types: symbolic gestures that signify actions such as standing or remaining silent, depictive gestures that illustrate the dimensions of an object's form, and emotional gestures that convey approval or express joy regarding a particular matter (Peng et al., 2022).

Discussion

Based on the findings, teachers often use hand gestures to point to something or give to someone because they often explain while using gestures by pointing to a transparent object. Compared to Anggraeni (2024) who found that many teachers used gestures intuitively without awareness of their instructional impact, the gestures used in the present study appeared to be more intentional and functional. This suggests that even in resource-limited settings, teachers can effectively utilize multimodal strategies when aware of their pedagogical value. Hand gestures are shown to help the teacher convey a clear message when speaking. Diadori (2024) suggested Italian native speakers utilize a significant number

of embodied actions during interactions, in contrast to individuals from Northern Europe, North America, or the Far East. Characteristics such as a higher vocal pitch, sustained eye contact, minimal physical distance between speakers, and a diverse array of gestures-including numerous emblems-contribute to the distinctive Italian communication style, which seamlessly integrates verbal and non-verbal elements, fostering a sense of closeness among participants, even in formal contexts. Here's the following discussion.

Deictic (nonverbal transcription symbols)
T: Which is the first expression?

According to the figure, it was found that the teacher is raising his hands in a pointing gesture to the whiteboard that displayed the PPT while saying in Bahasa. Meanwhile, in English, she said, "Which is the first expression, which one?" with her finger to check and emphasize his instructions for her students' understanding of the material. As an Indonesian speaker of English, I found the frequency of deictic gestures to be highest among the teachers, who were observed to maintain their English speech through repetitive hand or finger movements. According to McNeill, a deictic gesture refers to the commonly used pointing. Pointing serves the explicit purpose of indicating objects in the physical world, but it also serves a role even when there is no tangible object to point at. In educational settings, teachers employ deictics by pointing to physical objects or individuals within their classroom, such as a whiteboard or a student (Urbanski & Stam, 2022). In this section, it was found that the teacher used deictic gestures to explain the material. This extract describes the lesson in Indonesian. It can be seen from the example discussed, 'Offering help,' that the teacher asked the students a question, which was the first expression when they wanted to offer help to someone else. Deictic gestures are likely instrumental in steering students' focus towards essential components of language instruction, including vocabulary and grammatical structures, thus enhancing their understanding (Yang & Yang, 2024). In the example provided by Denizci & Azaoui (2020), the instructor directs her inquiry towards a specific student, Otman, by asking, 'What is a technician, do you know that Otman?' She emphasizes her expectation for a response from him by vocalizing his name and gesturing towards him with her finger, thereby signaling to both Otman and the rest of the class that she seeks an answer only from him.

Metaphoric (nonverbal transcription symbols)

T: "But by enjoying the learning process, at least the logic will be critical, creative, and follow the learning process."

On this gesture, the teacher swings their motion with open fingers while saying in Bahasa. In that video, the teacher explains or motivates her students with hand gestures expressing the idea that learning is something to enjoy, which she presupposes with his motivational words. Sahlender & ten Hagen, (2023) defined in their research that Metaphorical gestures refer to speakers' hand or arm movements to elucidate images associated with abstract concepts or ideas. For instance, a speaker may rotate their hands over one another with their index fingers directed toward each other in front of their body to indicate that a particular point should be reiterated and conversely, educators were more inclined to employ metaphorical gestures when interacting with students whom they believed possessed higher (as opposed to lower) levels of proficiency in the German language. Metaphorical gestures associated with time-such as a solitary finger moving forward once to signify 'tomorrow' or twice to indicate 'the day after tomorrow' or less 'emblematized' within specific communities (Gawne & Cooperrider, 2024). In Italian when native speaker teaches, the educator who consistently moves back and forth towards the leaners while elucidating a specific application of the subjunctive tense to convey uncertainty in Italian, gestures expansively to form a circular shape as native recalls their previous exploration of the notion of expressing doubt ('abbiamo lavorato intorno all" idea' di esprimere un dubbio'). By employing the phrase 'intorno all"idea' ('around the idea"), native visually represents an abstract concept through the metaphor of a circle, rather than depicting a tangible object, shape, or action (Diadori, 2024).

Head Movements (nonverbal transcription symbols)

> *T: "Life does not know. Please do not be too pessimistic; I cannot go abroad."*

In this gesture, the teacher moves a circular head toward the student. Through these head movements, the teacher explains and advises the students. Initially focusing only on the blackboard, the teacher uses head movements to convey statements or answers to students, such as "Yes." Research conducted by Ananda et al., (2020) indicates that students acknowledge the influence of head movements and the posture of the foreign English teacher on their motivation to learn the language. When the teacher nodded in affirmation of a correct answer, students experienced increased happiness and a heightened enthusiasm for further learning. Additionally, they perceived their learning capabilities positively. Speakers often tilt their heads during conversation to signal their lack of understanding or their request for further clarification to their interlocutors. The differentiation between gestures aimed at informing, evaluating, and managing the classroom may elucidate the tendency of educators to more frequently respond with head movements to students they consider possessing stronger linguistic abilities. It is plausible that teachers exhibit more frequent head nods in concurrence as students demonstrate greater grammatical accuracy in their spoken language, as noted by (Sahlender & ten Hagen, 2023). McClave examined the head movement patterns of native American English speakers and identified three distinct categories: semantic, narrative, and interactive functions. The semantic function is characterized by lateral head movements, either from right to left or vice versa, which convey meanings of inclusivity, intensification, and uncertainty. In contrast, the patterns

associated with narrative and interactive functions are more abstract and context-dependent (Ismail & Syahputri, 2022).

Emblems (nonverbal transcription symbols)

T: "If you find an English lesson, the key is…"

S: "Be brave"

T: "Be brave, that is right (hand gestures symbolizing the thumbs up)."

In the emblem gesture observed, the teacher uses a thumbs-up to praise students who answered questions correctly and confidently. This gesture, accompanied by repeating and emphasizing the student's answer, aims to motivate and validate their participation. The teacher's rising intonation also encouraged student responses, which were then met with positive reinforcement. According to Sahlender & ten Hagen (2023, in Gullberg, 2006), emblems are culturally specific gestures with fixed meanings, such as a thumbs-up or OK sign that function like words and are easily translatable into verbal language. While it may be simple to interpret a head nod as 'yes', determining the exact meaning conveyed by a wink or air quotes can be more challenging (Gawne & Cooperrider, 2024). Emblems are culturally specific symbols that have a standardized meaning independent of verbal communication and can serve as substitutes for it; for instance, the OK sign and the thumbs-up gesture in American English (Cavicchio & Busà, 2023).

Iconic (nonverbal transcription symbols)

T: There are many phrases to offer help in English; memorize one or two. Memorize one or two when I want to provide assistance in English that I can remember.

Based on the observation, the teacher moves her fingers that represent a symbol while saying in English. Previous studies suggest from Marieke Hoetjes* and Lieke van Maastricht (2020) that given the premise that the cognitive load associated with interpreting a pointing gesture is lower than that of interpreting an iconic gesture, we hypothesized that a pointing gesture could potentially be more advantageous than an iconic gesture in the context of phoneme acquisition. This is because a less cognitively demanding pointing gesture would free up additional cognitive resources for the perception and acquisition of the new phoneme, in contrast to the utilization of a more cognitively demanding iconic gesture. A recent investigation conducted by Dargue and Sweller (2020) revealed that the use of commonly produced iconic gestures significantly enhanced the understanding of a brief narrative compared to the use of less typical iconic gestures, such as the action of raising one hand while simultaneously pointing to the ceiling with the other to depict a character lifting a bucket, as noted by (Rohrer et al., 2020). Iconic gestures manifest when a speaker employs hand or arm movements to visually represent the present shape of an object or action, closely aligning with the semantic meaning of the spoken words. For instance, a teacher

might illustrate the term 'underline' by mimicking the action of holding a pencil and drawing a horizontal line in the air (Sahlender & ten Hagen, 2023). Gawne & Cooperrider (2024) suggest that iconic and metaphoric gestures, which are typically generated alongside speech and are unique in their form and significance, may appear distinct from emblems; however, they sometimes exhibit intriguing similarities.

Beats (nonverbal transcription symbols)

> *T: We enjoy the learning process, whether it's difficult or easy, and we do not give up. It will be different because the process of patience will logically lead to better outcomes later.*

This gesture the teacher quickly moves their index finger while swinging up and down, synchronizing with the rhythm of their speech. These beats and gestures can help students emphasize the phrases and meanings conveyed by the teacher. The gestures reinforce the meaning; for example, the teacher repeatedly opens their hands to illustrate the concept of the learning process. This movement carries a positive behavioural value, reflecting the teacher's intent to motivate and energize their students, encouraging them not to become complacent in their learning. Beat gestures are employed to highlight specific portions of the spoken discourse, as well as pragmatic or recurrent gestures that convey the speaker's perspective on their statements and facilitate interaction (Gawne & Cooperrider, 2024). A beat gesture typically involves a quick flick of the hand or a movement of the fingers in an up-and-down or back-and-forth motion that corresponds with the stressed syllables in speech, such as during vocabulary clarification. Additionally, beat gestures are observed when speakers self-correct during their discourse (Sahlender & ten Hagen, 2023). Imitating the beat gestures of a model speaker while the teacher is speaking increases both perceptual and production prominence, thereby assisting the learner in replicating the prosody and rhythm of the target language (Yamane et al., 2019, as cited in Diadori, 2024). According to the GSA framework, beat gestures arise from the intricate coordination between the oral and manual motor systems, without requiring significant activation of action simulation. This indicates that beat gestures may not be directly tied to the semantic meaning of speech; instead, they function to highlight specific elements of speech, including rhythm, intonation, and stress (Tseng et al., 2025).

Affect Display (nonverbal transcription symbols)

> *T: Come on, come here, mas. Which one? We have already discussed.*

> *S: (gestures pointing to the whiteboard)*

> *T: Yes.*

The data show, the teacher uses this gesture to convey emotion and feeling. The English teacher's face is part of her facial expressions, which show happiness. During class, the teacher engages the students, encouraging them to answer questions, with an expression of help reflected in the excitement visible on Miss Laura's face. The teacher stood while explaining and reminding the students that the expression 'Offering Help' is one we should memorize. The teacher's interaction with the learners was very close. Miss Laura smiled

when another student was willing to come up and write the answer. Sahlender & ten Hagen (2023) posits that affect display gestures are that individuals express a range of emotions, including joy, fear, sorrow, anger, distraction, and curiosity, predominantly via their expressions. Facial expressions play a significant role in enhancing the learning experience, surpassing their impact on mere vocabulary retention. Students who learned from a teacher with expressive facial cues felt more engaged and self-assured. This aligns with the idea of teacher immediacy, which includes behaviours such as smiling and maintaining eye contact that express warmth and friendliness. A high level of immediacy is associated with increased student motivation and reduced anxiety (Rzayeva, 2025). Liu et al. (2022) pointed out two dimensions of the teacher's gestures: random and functional. In classroom teaching, functional gestures are mainly used to fulfill the teacher's teaching demands and accomplish various specific goals. Compared to previous studies, this study focused on how the teacher uses non-verbal behavior to deliver the material to gain students' understanding.

Conclusion

This research analyses how the teacher uses gestures in the classroom and provides students with an understanding through gestures, so that learners have a deeper view of the meaning that the teacher explains. From the observation examining the video recording of gestures, the teacher used various gestures during the learning. Seven gestures were used; the most prominent one was the Deictic gesture. English teachers in an EFL classroom can employ gestures to communicate. It is widely acknowledged that the gestures a teacher employs hold significant importance in facilitating effective communication. As such, gestures play a significant role in EFL teaching. Nonverbal behaviour can substantially affect students and influence their sensitivity to understanding what they learn in school. This study examines how a teacher uses gestures in teaching an English class. This research involved only one teacher in a Vocational High School. Data was collected from a 53-minute video segment. For further study, the investigation can involve more teachers and more schools. In addition, future research can be designed using a mixed-method approach with varied kinds of data.

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