

## **Saying It With Your Hands**

There is a logical next topic after the preceding chapter. How does one evaluate more lengthy discourses than what our students give in a class discussion? The answer to that question is coming in the next chapter but, after my recent obsession with numbers and a barrage of spreadsheet images, let's take a bit of a mental break for a bit and talk about gesturing and kinesthetic representations of structure (KRS).

During the summer of 1972, having hosted a Swedish exchange student in my family's home during the previous year, while a senior in high school, I went to Sweden to visit his family and to travel with him and another friend up and down the coast of western Europe. To cut costs, we camped out most nights during our three week trip from Sweden to Spain and back.

One evening, somewhere in southwestern France, we were setting up our tent for the night when two cars and a truck pulling a trailer piled high with camping gear entered the campground. Bedlam broke loose shortly thereafter as, what was probably only about 10 people, but what seemed like dozens, came spilling out of the vehicles and set to work erecting what appeared to be a small circus tent. It was a group of Italian young men who took to their task with a vigor and a racket that left all the other campers gawking and slack-jawed. It appeared that this was a tent set-up routine they had gone through many times, yet which still required considerable communication in order for it to be done correctly. Along with the din of their unintelligible shouts of exhortation and instruction to one another, I couldn't help but notice that their free hands never stopped gesturing. In fact, so expressive were they with their whole body that I believe, had one of them been deaf, he would scarcely have been at a disadvantage when it came to receiving or giving orders.

Though as a teacher I lacked the impressive Italian flair for body language, with my facial expressions, shoulders, arms, legs and hands, I wanted my students to actually see what it was that I was saying until such was no longer necessary to aid them in comprehension. You may remember that conveying meaning visually was one of the foundational principles on which I settled during that transformational period in 1980.

With that imperative in mind, I developed a system of gestures to correspond to the most commonly used words. At first, my thought was primarily that I would use gestures to make clear the meaning of my words and thus avoid the trap of translation. Soon, however, I discovered that gesturing had two other benefits.

After having my students imitate my gestures while repeating the word in question, I observed something very important. The students who were the most actively engaged in performing the gestures were far more likely to remember the words than the passive ones who resisted imitation. It became clear that performing a motor activity while

simultaneously saying the word was a key to retention. Secondly, performing the gesture itself reinforced its meaning without very visually and with no need to resort to English. Next, there were many times when students were "stuck" in the middle of one of their comments in class. I knew what they wanted to say, and was tempted to simply provide them with the word, but realized that this would be taking the initiative of oral expression "out of their mouth". Not wanting to be their "answer man", and desiring that the initiative of self-expression remain fully theirs, I found that I could often prompt the recall of a word, unblocking their tongue, simply by doing the corresponding gesture.

*Benefits of gesturing = comprehension, retention and prompting*



*Above you see four of the nearly 100 verb gestures in the ULAT program. By clicking on one of them, you will be taken to a video testing students on the 60 most commonly used verbs. While the screen is blank in the video, the students hear a word and must perform its gesture, after which the gesture flashes briefly on the screen to confirm their response.*

Gestures became a great tool for helping students comprehend and retain new vocabulary, but I discovered another benefit to communicating with more than just my mouth. I found that I could also use my hands, in particular, to help students picture and interiorize elements of the language's syntax. When students committed an error in the structure of one of their remarks, rather than digressing into a grammatical explanation, or demeaning the validity of the message they had conveyed, I found that I could use my hands to help them see how their words needed to be modified or rearranged in order to be expressing themselves correctly. Without drawing undue attention to their error, running the risk of lapsing into English in order to explain sentence structure or, again, taking the initiative of self-expression away from the student, without a word I could guide them to a proper restatement of the sentence.

Better still, by dictating challenging sentence structures to my students, and requiring them to wordlessly sign my statement back to me, I found that the repeated sequences of gestures that the students performed laid within their minds a deep understanding of sentence structure which was not dependent upon the recitation of grammatical principles. It is possibly better to say that the students, rather than possessing a deep "understanding", became imbued with a deeply ingrained habit of speech that produced structurally accurate remarks without the need for conscious thought.

I refer to these corporal expressions of syntactical principles as kinesthetic representations of structure (KRS). By clicking on the images that follow, you can see a number of KRS examples. Below each one, you can read about the language to which they correspond and the structural element they are representing.

### Present simple verb conjugation endings



SPANISH



FRENCH

*Having previously presented students with the sounds of regular verb conjugations in the present simple tense, I then associate a kinesthetic representation of structure (KRS) with each of the endings. I do this both to give student a picture of the structural changes that occur in the verb as well as to aid them in retention of that modification through the performance of a simultaneous motor activity. By clicking on the images above, you can see a video simulating drills performed in class to help students associate the gesture with the modification in the verb's sound, as well as to reinforce the association between the pronoun and the gesture.*

### Contractions



SPANISH/FRENCH

*One frequently hears beginning Spanish students saying the preposition “a” and the masculine definite article “el” as two distinct words, such as “Vamos a el mercado”. The same type of error is made by beginning French students, who would say “Nous allons à le marché.”*

### Use of the infinitive



SPANISH



FRENCH

*Once students get the hang of conjugating verbs, they tend to want to conjugate them at all times, even when they should be in the infinitive form. The hands being drawn apart are reminding students that the “entire” infinitive form is necessary. The KRS itself is not sufficient to reinforce proper structure, but merely to prompt students to rephrase their statement in the proper form. In order to reinforce the use of proper structure, notice how I require the students*

to “sign” dictated sentences with their own hands. The performance of the KRS by the students reinforces their retention of the structure.

### The formation of a main and a subordinate clause



SPANISH



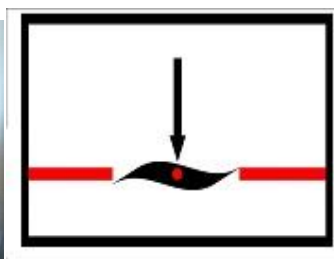
FRENCH

*Because the conjunction “that” can be dropped between a main and a subordinate clause in English, students of Spanish or French often fall into the trap of trying to do the same with “que” in these two languages. This amusing set of motions is intended to show the students the necessity of “que” in Spanish and French.*

### The present progressive tense



SPANISH



*The ULAT’s image representing the present progressive tense, seen above and on the right, has an arrow point directly down at the center point (present moment) on the timeline. In the video, the stamping of the foot and the downward thrusting hands, mimic the image’s arrow and serve to remind the students that they are to employ the auxiliary verb “estar” prior to the present participle, whose ending (-ando or –iendo) is represented in the video by the revolving hands. The fact that this KRS does not exist for French reminds us that there is nothing “sacred” and invariable about a KRS. It is only the teacher’s tool, created to fulfill a need that may or may not exist in a different language. Ignore those KRS of mine you feel you don’t need, change them to make them more effective and create one wherever you see that one could help your students.*

The purpose of the preceding examples of KRS was not to give you a thorough compendium of all of those I used in class. There are numerous other KRS that I employed while teaching and you will think of many helpful ones that never came to my mind. I showed these to you simply to give you an idea of how you could create your own KRS to accomplish the following goals:

1. to enable students to envision structural modifications without the need for you to lapse into English and give them yet another grammatical rule about which to think as they speak

2. to create a motor activity that can be quickly and easily drilled and thus lead them to use proper structure as a reflex and not as a reasoned outcome
3. to promote retention through the simultaneous performance of the KRS while articulating the corresponding structural element
4. and to serve as a prompt to guide students to correct their speech without obliging them merely to parrot back to you your correction of their erroneous statement.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Language Teachers' Topics for Reflection

1. What advantages to the use of gestures does the author mention?
2. What is a kinesthetic representation of structure (KRS)?
3. Gestures are used to symbolize the meaning of vocabulary. What is the purpose of a KRS?
4. Thinking of some challenging structural element of the language you teach, create a KRS that you could show your students or have them perform to help them envision the structure in a memorable way.

#### [NEXT CHAPTER](#)