

## Proxemics in the ESL Classroom

by [Ivannia Jimenez Arias](#)

Proxemics is the study of one's perception and use of space. People handle space differently the way they do is largely determined by the culture in which they are immersed. Therefore, one's use of space conveys meaning. North Americans and Latin Americans, for example, have fundamentally different proxemic systems. While North Americans usually remain at a distance from one another, Latin Americans stay very close to each other. This simple fact can tell much about these people's different concepts of privacy. While most North Americans value privacy, Latin Americans seldom consider it an important aspect of life.

The relevance of proxemics in foreign language teaching is enormous. Mastering the verbal system of a foreign language does not guarantee effective communication because mastering the non-verbal systems of that foreign language is also essential. These verbal and nonverbal systems are connected, and the use of one without the other might cause a disequilibrium.

Proxemics is one of the most important aspects of non-verbal communication. For those students whose own culture's proxemic patterns are very different from the target culture's, it is essential to know these differences. For instance, an Arab ESL student in the United States who ignores the difference between the United State's and his own country's proxemic behaviors might have serious problems: She/he could be rejected, considered homosexual, promiscuous, physically abused, and so on.

Teachers can help students avoid such misunderstandings by teaching the different aspects of proxemics. Knowing and using these cues, students can

increase their comprehension and expression, hold their listener's attention, and be more successful in the communication process.

---

## **Fundamentals**

There are three fundamental areas related to proxemics: space, distance, and territory. In this paper, I will examine each of these areas among different cultures before suggesting some alternatives for the teaching of proxemics.

---

## **Space**

Personal space has been defined as "an area with invisible boundaries surrounding a person's body into which intruders may not come" (Sommer 1979:26). There are differences in the distance that people from different cultures maintain from one another. For example, the British keep further apart than the French. Though Sommer sees individual distance and personal space as closely related, he says that "individual distance may be outside the area of personal space" (1979:27). He establishes the difference with this image: When a person is alone, his/her individual distance is infinite; but personal space is always carried, although it disappears in certain situations such as crowding. When personal space is violated, people react with defensive gestures, shifts in posture, attempts to move away, and actually moving away.

Three types of space have been identified by Hall (1959): fixed-feature, semi-fixed feature, and informal space. *Fixed-feature* space is one of the ways in which people organize activities. Houses, buildings, cities, rooms, etc. are organized spatially. Objects and activities are related to these spatial arrangements; and if objects or activities are moved, people react. In the ESL class, the use of classroom space could either make the students comfortable or uncomfortable, feel motivated or not, feel free to talk, or repressed, etc.

*Semifixed-feature* space is of primary importance in interpersonal communication, because it can be used in many different ways to convey meaning. Hall mentions two types of semi-fixed feature space: Socio-petal spaces are those which bring people together and stimulate involvement, while socio-fugal spaces keep people apart and promote withdrawal (Hall 1959). Sommer affirms that socio-fugal space transmits connotative meanings such as *large, cold, impersonal*, and so on, while socio-petal arrangements usually connote the opposite. This type of space should be considered in class, for it can bring people together or keep them apart. A teacher may not even notice the atmosphere that the space arrangement creates in the class. Knowing this fact, teachers take advantage of it to create a nice atmosphere and stimulate communication among the students.

*Informal space* is significant because it includes the distances people unconsciously maintain when they interact. According to Hall, "informal spatial patterns have distinct bounds and such deep, if unvoiced, significance that they form an essential part of culture. To misunderstand this significance may invite disaster" (1959:112).

---

## **Distance**

Leather defines distance as a "relational concept, typically measured in terms of how far one individual is from the other" (Leather 1978:87). People have certain patterns for delimiting the distance when they interact, and this distance varies according to the nature of the social interaction. In an attempt to identify and classify the distance people use, Hall identifies four types of distances: *intimate, personal, social, and public*. These distances can vary according to "personality and environmental factors," since an abnormal situation could bring people closer than they usually are (Hall 1959:116).

*Intimate distance* ranges from body contact to approximately eighteen inches (just less than half a meter). According to Hall, the close phase (up to six inches) includes intimate activities which require extensive contact of the bodies while the far phase (from six to 18 inches) does not allow for much, if any, body contact.

People from different cultures use this intimate space differently. For instance, North Americans may feel physical discomfort when someone does not keep the proper distance from them; and this feeling may be aggravated considerably if the person they feel is "too close" is of the opposite sex. Hall also mentions that some English expressions such as "get your face out of mine" and "he shook his fist in my face" show how important body boundaries are for Americans. By contrast, the Costa Rican expression, "I don't bite" shows the discomfort people from this culture feel when others are too far from them. Hall affirms that the use of intimate distance is not proper in public places in the United States. However, this distance is common among members of other cultures (e.g. Latin Americans and Arabs).

*Personal distance* ranges from 1.5 to four feet between people. Hall identifies a close and a far phase. The close phase (1.5 to 2.5 feet) permits one person to touch another, while the far phase of personal distance (2.5 to four feet) "an arm's length" does not permit this. As Hall points out "nobody touches or expects to touch another person unless there is a special effort" (1959:120).

*Social distance* (four to 12 feet) is the casual interaction-distance between acquaintances and strangers. It is common in business meetings, classrooms, and impersonal social affairs. Its close phase (four to seven feet) is the characteristic of informal interaction, while more formal interaction requires the far phase (seven to 12 feet). Some physical barriers such as desks, tables, and counters, usually make people keep this distance. Hall mentions that this type of proxemic behavior is culturally conditioned and arbitrary. To illustrate, Nydel (1987) mentions that for Arabs it is normal to stay close to and touch strangers; the distance they keep in ordinary social conversations is the same as what Westerners use in intimate conversations. People from other cultures such as North Americans and British normally offer an excuse if they touch a stranger.

*Public distance* ranges from 12 to 25 feet or more. Its close phase (12 to 15 feet) provides the amount of space generally desired among strangers, while its far phase (15 to 25 feet) is necessary for large audiences. In this case, speech must be projected or amplified to be heard.

Researchers (e.g., Hall 1959; Vargas 1986) identify high-contact cultures such as Arabs, Latin Americans, Greeks, Turks, French, and Italians, who usually keep small distances among themselves; and low-contact cultures who "stand further apart," like the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Germans,

Dutch, and North Americans (Vargas 1986:106).

These differences that may seem quite unimportant to the ESL teachers, are key factors for students to be successful in their communication in the target culture. Both the teacher and the students need to be sensitive to these differences.

---

## **Territory**

This aspect of proxemics has important implications for communication. It refers to any area controlled and defended by an individual or group of individuals with emphasis on physical possession. There are *public territories* or places anybody can enter, like restaurants; *home territories* in which entrance is restricted to members, such as fraternities or sororities; *interaction territories* or areas where people meet informally such as a lounge or the local gym; and *bodyterritories* or the space used by ourselves (Leather 1978). As Vargas points out, people as well as animals claim territories to protect themselves from invasion. For example, in class, students usually choose a place and keep it for the rest of the year; and if another student sits there, a problem may arise. The father usually has a place at the table, and other family members do not sit there (Vargas 1986).

---

## **Alternatives for teaching proxemics**

There are a variety of ways to teach proxemics. One alternative for the teaching of proxemics is through readings. Several books and articles about proxemic behavior are available. Books by Sommer, Hall, Vargas, and articles by Pennycook and others can be used for this purpose. Students can read and discuss them in class comparing the different proxemic norms among the cultures.

A second possibility is found in interviews. Students might interview

people from different cultures about acceptable proxemic behaviors in different situations and with different people, such as friends and strangers. Consider the following questions: "At what distance does a good friend get too close?" "Do you have a favorite seat at the table?" "What do you do when you do not want to be disturbed?" After students have surveyed many people about these issues, they can share their findings with the rest of the class.

Observations offer a very powerful tool for teaching proxemics. Students can observe people, videos, pictures, and television. Then they might compare these people's proxemic behavior in relation to the situation, culture, sex of participants, etc. It is very important for students to observe without judging; they need to understand that these behaviors are just different, not better or worse.

Roleplay is another possible activity to teach proxemics. This is important because students can experience what a person feels when someone stands too far from or too close to them.

Experiments can help students see the reactions of inappropriate proxemic behaviors. Students can be asked to stand closer than normal to a person they do not know, sit in the place their father usually sits at the table, go into a secretary's desk, get closer or farther away while talking to a friend, change the place of some objects in the house, or sit at a table in a restaurant with strangers. After seeing the reactions of the people, students can discuss the results of these experiments with their classmates, or write them in a journal, or both. These are just some of the alternatives to incorporate proxemics into the ESL class. There are many other possibilities to explore for teachers who like to be creative.

---

**Ivannia Jimenez Arias** works at the Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica.

[Return](#)

---

## References

- Buller, D. 1987. Communication apprehension and reactions to proxemic violations. *Journal of Non-verbal Communication*, 11, 1, pp. 13-25.
- Hall, E. T. 1959. *The Silent Language*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- ----- . 1976. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Leather, D. 1978. *Nonverbal communication systems*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Mancillas, W. and M. Nadler. 1983. Americans in Mexico: Learning the language is not learning the culture. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association, Dallas, Texas. [ED 232-476].
- Morain, G. 1986. Kinesics and cross-cultural understanding. In *Culture Bound*, ed. J. Valdes. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nydell, M. 1987. *Understanding Arabs*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press Inc.
- Pennycook, S. 1985. Actions speak louder than words: Paralanguage, communication, and education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 2, pp. 259-82.
- Sommer, R. 1979. *Personal space*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Vargas, M. 1986. *Louder than words*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Weatherford, H. 1986. Nonverbal communication and the foreign language teacher. Paper presented at a meeting of the Foreign Language Association of Georgia. [ED 280-275].

[Back to Top](#)