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A Narrative Inquiry of College Students' Gestures in Performing Public Speaking in ESP Class

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how college students use gestures while performing public speaking activities in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class. The study focuses on students' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their body movements during English speech performances. To address this aim, the research employs a narrative inquiry approach, which is suitable for examining personal experiences and subjective interpretations of nonverbal behavior in speaking contexts. Data were collected through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with selected ESP students who had delivered presentations or speeches in English. Classroom observations were conducted to identify patterns of gestures used during speaking, while interviews allowed students to reflect on their feelings, intentions, and awareness of their body movements. The collected narratives were analyzed thematically to explore the relationship between gestures, emotional expression, communication strategies, and speaking confidence. The findings indicate that gestures play an important role in students' public speaking performances. Gestures were used to emphasize ideas, clarify messages, and support verbal explanations. At the same time, gestures also reflected students' psychological states. Anxious gestures, such as fidgeting, repetitive hand movements, or self-touching, were commonly associated with nervousness and lack of confidence. In contrast, open and controlled gestures were linked to higher levels of confidence, engagement, and audience connection. Overall, this study highlights the importance of nonverbal communication awareness in ESP classrooms and suggests that integrating instruction on gestures and body language into public speaking practice may enhance students' confidence and communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Gestures, Public Speaking, ESP Class

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has developed in response to the increasing demand for graduates who are capable of communicating effectively in academic and professional settings. As English functions as a global language across disciplines, higher education institutions are expected to prepare students with communicative competencies that are relevant to their future careers. Consequently, ESP instruction prioritizes functional language use, communicative effectiveness, and contextual appropriateness rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy.

Oral communication is a central component of ESP pedagogy, as students are frequently required to participate in professional speaking activities that simulate real-world communication [1]. In such contexts, effective communication is not limited to verbal language but also involves nonverbal elements that support meaning, delivery, and audience engagement. Understanding how students experience and manage these components is essential for improving ESP teaching and learning practices.

Within ESP instruction, oral communication plays a central role, particularly through activities such as presentations, simulations, and professional discourse practices. These speaking tasks are designed to prepare students for real-world communication where clarity, confidence, and audience engagement are essential. Furthermore, just like in writing, what is spoken when speaking cannot be modified or edited. Their language has been successful when learners can confidently communicate with the target language. Therefore, students are expected to practice speaking more actively, both inside and outside of the classroom. However, when the speaker speaks in a foreign language, the fear also increases [1]. Some students have negative expectations about their ability to succeed in English, which causes them to put up less effort and avoid opportunities to practice their

communication abilities. ESP learners, especially those in EFL contexts, often face challenges in oral performance due to limited proficiency, anxiety, and insufficient exposure to authentic communicative situations [2].

There is one simply way of speaking in front of the general public who are very demanding of fluency in speaking, emotional control, choice of words, and tone of voice namely Public Speaking [3]. Practicing public speaking is important for someone, it is recognized that professionals are expected to continue to practice to improve their communication skills. In realizing an interactive, fun and enjoyable learning process, public speaking skills are important in realizing an interactive, fun and enjoyable learning process. Without a communication strategy with good public speaking techniques, learning can be boring. Both face-to-face learning and online learning.

Students are required to communicate ideas effectively in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and having a good public speaking ability as a fundamental component in professional settings. ESP learners are not only expected to demonstrate linguistic accuracy and fluency but also to employ appropriate non-verbal communication skills that align with professional discourse practices. Among various non-verbal elements, gestures play a significant role in supporting speech, emphasizing meaning, and managing speakers' emotions. In EFL and ESP contexts, students frequently experience speaking anxiety and linguistic limitations, which often lead them to rely on gestures as compensatory strategies. While numerous studies have examined public speaking anxiety and oral performance in EFL classrooms, research focusing on students' gestures as lived and narrated experiences remains limited. Most existing studies approach gestures from experimental or discourse-analytic perspectives, leaving a gap in understanding how learners themselves perceive and make sense of their gestural practices.

Public Speaking in ESP Contexts

Public speaking is a key activity in ESP classes, particularly through presentations and professional simulations designed to prepare students for real-world communication. [4]. These tasks aim to prepare students for workplace communication where clarity, confidence, and persuasive delivery are essential. However, many ESP learners experience challenges in public speaking, including limited language proficiency, fear of making mistakes, and speaking anxiety. These difficulties often affect students' overall performance and confidence when using English in front of an audience [4,5].

Research in ESP has largely emphasized the importance of developing communicative competence aligned with learners' academic and professional needs. While such studies highlight the value of practical language use, they often focus primarily on verbal aspects of speaking, such as vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure. As a result, other important dimensions of public speaking, particularly nonverbal communication, have received relatively little attention. This gap suggests a need to explore how students experience public speaking as a holistic communicative act that involves both verbal and nonverbal resources.

Students' Gestures in Public Speaking

Gestures are a fundamental aspect of nonverbal communication in public speaking, as they function alongside speech to support meaning construction [6]. Gestures help speakers emphasize ideas, clarify messages, and regulate speech flow, thereby enhancing audience engagement [6,7]. For students learning English as a foreign language, gestures may also serve as compensatory strategies when verbal expression becomes difficult or when anxiety arises during oral performance. As such, gestures are closely linked to both communication strategies and emotional expression.

Despite their importance, students' gestures in ESP classrooms remain underexplored, particularly from the learners' perspectives. Existing studies on gestures in language learning often adopt experimental or discourse-analytic approaches, focusing on gesture functions rather than students lived experiences. There is limited research that examines how ESP students perceive their own gestures, how these gestures reflect psychological states such as anxiety or self-assurance, and how students attach meaning to their body movements during public speaking activities.

To address this gap, the present study employs a narrative inquiry approach to explore college students' experiences of using gestures while performing public speaking tasks in an English for Specific Purposes class. Through students' narratives, this study seeks to understand how gestures function as tools for emphasizing meaning, expressing emotions, and managing speaking confidence. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question:

How do students narrate their experiences of using gestures during public speaking activities in an English for Specific Purposes class?

By highlighting students lived experiences, this study contributes to ESP research by foregrounding nonverbal communication, particularly gestures, as an essential component of effective public speaking and meaningful English communication.

2. Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore students lived experiences of using gestures during public speaking activities in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class. The primary focus of this design was to capture how students experienced, interpreted, and reflected on their bodily movements while speaking English in an academic setting. Rather than measuring gestures as isolated observable behaviors, this study sought to understand gestures as meaningful aspects of students' communicative experiences that are closely connected to emotion, cognition, and confidence during public speaking.

Narrative inquiry was chosen because it enables researchers to examine how learners construct meaning through personal stories of their learning experiences, including embodied, emotional, and contextual dimensions of communication [8,9]. Through narratives, participants are able to articulate how past learning experiences, classroom interactions, and emotional responses influence their present communicative practices. This methodological approach allows for a holistic understanding of gesture use, positioning it not merely as a physical action but as an integral component of students' identity and experience as English language learners.

This approach is particularly suitable for investigating gestures as part of multimodal communication in ESP public speaking contexts, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how spoken language and bodily action operate as an integrated communicative system. As Kendon [10] argues, gesture and speech are not separate or sequential modalities but develop and function together in meaning-making processes. In ESP public speaking activities, where verbal delivery is closely intertwined with body movement, eye contact, and posture, narrative inquiry provides an appropriate framework for capturing learners lived experiences of how these modalities co-emerge and are strategically employed while responding to communicative and emotional demands.

2.1 Research Participant

The study was conducted in an undergraduate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kupang. The course was designed to develop students' professional communication skills, with a particular emphasis on oral presentations and public speaking tasks related to students' disciplinary fields. Throughout the course, students were required to engage in various speaking activities that simulated academic and professional communication contexts, providing a suitable setting for observing and exploring gesture use during English oral performance.

From a class of 20 students, two participants were purposively selected and assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The selection was carried out through purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the focus of the study. These criteria included (1) active participation in public speaking activities during the course, (2) prior experience delivering presentations or speeches in English, and (3) willingness to reflect on and articulate their experiences of using gestures during oral performance. Selecting participants who met these criteria ensured that the data collected would be information-rich and directly related to the research objectives.

Purposive sampling was employed to allow for in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences rather than broad generalization. This sampling strategy is particularly appropriate for qualitative narrative inquiry, as it enables researchers to identify participants who can provide detailed and meaningful narratives about the phenomenon under investigation [11]. By focusing on a small number of participants, the study was able to capture nuanced insights into how gestures are experienced and interpreted within ESP public speaking contexts.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using Bahasa Indonesia to ensure full understanding of the research purpose regarding the student gesture in delivering public speaking. It was also collected using multiple qualitative instruments to capture students' gestural experiences comprehensively. First, classroom observations and video recordings were conducted during students' public speaking performances to document gesture use in authentic ESP contexts. Second, narrative frames were used to elicit students' written reflections on how and why they used gestures while speaking English [8,12]. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore students' perceptions, intentions, and emotional response related to their gestural practices. The interview lasted two 40-50 minutes and were conducted in a relaxed and conversational way.

All interview data were transcribed and take noted to repeatedly through close, selective, and analytical listening to comprehensively capture the message or meanings presented in the interview texts. For the data

analysis in this study, the data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. Following Creswell, 2013, and Barkhuizen et al., 2014, the analysis involved organizing the data, repeatedly reading narratives and transcripts, identifying recurring themes related to gesture use, and interpreting how students constructed meaning from their public speaking experiences [8,13]. The analysis focused on gestures as communicative resources, emotional regulators, and indicators of emerging professional identity within the ESP context.

3. Result and Discussion

VS Gestures as Emotional Expressions in Public Speaking

VS narrative shows that gestures played an important role in expressing emotions during public speaking in the ESP class. The student initially described having high enthusiasm for learning English during earlier schooling; however, this motivation gradually declined over time, which later affected confidence when speaking in front of the class. As the participant entered the ESP class, these past experiences resurfaced during public speaking activities. The student perceived speaking English in front of the class as a cognitively and emotionally demanding task, which was reflected in their bodily behavior. In public speaking activities, VS experienced anxiety, especially when forgetting what to say. This anxiety was reflected through visible gestures such as avoiding eye contact, shifting gaze away from the audience, slightly turning the body, and moving one foot repeatedly. These gestures appeared as spontaneous bodily responses to nervousness rather than intentional communicative strategies.

The student also described how gestures functioned as a way to cope with speaking anxiety. In this way, gestures became part of the student's negotiation between fear and determination. Rather than preventing communication entirely, gestural behaviors allowed the student to remain engaged in public speaking activities, contributing to gradual confidence-building within the ESP classroom. Avoiding eye contact helped reduce nervousness, while leg shaking and slight body movements assisted the student in releasing tension and continuing the speech. Peer reactions, particularly laughter, intensified anxiety and influenced the student's gestural behavior. Nevertheless, the participant believed that with sufficient preparation and personal effort, confidence in speaking English could improve.

This narrative indicates that gestures should not be interpreted solely as signs of poor performance or lack of speaking ability. Instead, they represent adaptive strategies that enable students to cope with emotional pressure while maintaining participation in communicative tasks. In VS's case, bodily movements such as gaze avoidance and repetitive leg movement functioned as self-regulation mechanisms that helped manage anxiety and sustain speech delivery. This finding suggests that gestures may play a supportive role in the development of speaking confidence, particularly for learners who experience high levels of anxiety. Within ESP classrooms, recognizing such embodied coping strategies is important, as it allows educators to better understand students' struggles and provide supportive learning environments that encourage gradual confidence development rather than penalizing nervous behavior.

The following excerpt illustrates the student's experience of using gestures during public speaking:

"When I speak in front of the class and suddenly forget what I want to say, I avoid looking at the audience. I shift my gaze away, turn my body a little, and move my foot. When my friends laugh, I feel more nervous, but I try to calm myself and continue speaking." (Interview, VS).

The excerpt above illustrates how VS's gestures emerged as immediate and embodied responses to moments of cognitive difficulty and emotional pressure during public speaking. Forgetting what to say triggered a chain of bodily reactions that reflected the student's internal struggle to manage anxiety while remaining engaged in the speaking task. The avoidance of eye contact and slight turning of the body suggest an attempt to momentarily withdraw from the audience's gaze, which can intensify feelings of nervousness in public speaking situations. Meanwhile, repetitive foot movement and subtle bodily shifts functioned as physical outlets for releasing tension, allowing the student to regain composure and continue speaking. These gestures were not consciously planned but occurred naturally as part of the student's emotional regulation process.

Furthermore, the influence of peer reactions, particularly laughter, highlights the social dimension of anxiety in ESP classrooms. Such reactions amplified VS's nervousness and further shaped gestural behavior, demonstrating how public speaking is not only an individual cognitive activity but also a socially situated experience. Despite these challenges, the student's determination to continue speaking indicates that gestures supported persistence rather than avoidance. In this sense, gestures acted as mediating tools that helped the student negotiate fear, maintain participation, and gradually develop confidence. This finding underscores the importance of viewing nonverbal behavior as a meaningful aspect of learners' communicative experience. For ESP pedagogy, recognizing these embodied responses can help instructors foster more empathetic and supportive learning

environments, where anxious gestures are understood as part of the learning process rather than interpreted solely as weaknesses in speaking performance.

YN experiences' using gesture to overcome anxiety

The participant described a gradual development in learning English that unfolded across different stages of formal education, with early experiences playing a significant role in shaping attitudes toward the language. During junior high school, English learning was perceived as particularly challenging because classroom instruction was delivered almost entirely in English, with limited explanation or scaffolding in the students' first language. As a result, comprehension was often incomplete, making it difficult for the participant to follow lessons, participate actively, or fully understand learning materials.

At this stage, English was viewed primarily as a demanding academic subject rather than as a practical tool for communication. The emphasis on understanding instructions and completing tasks without sufficient support led to feelings of confusion and frustration. These learning conditions reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction and discouraged the participant from using English actively in class. Consequently, the lack of comprehension directly affected the participant's confidence, creating hesitation and self-doubt when required to speak or respond in English.

This early learning experience also influenced the participant's emotional relationship with the language. Repeated difficulty in understanding lessons contributed to anxiety and a sense of inadequacy, which further limited engagement. The participant became more focused on avoiding mistakes than on experimenting with language use, reinforcing the perception of English as an intimidating subject. These experiences during junior high school formed an important foundation that shaped subsequent learning trajectories, highlighting how instructional approaches at early stages can significantly impact learners' confidence and willingness to engage with English in later educational contexts.

Meaningful engagement with English began to emerge during senior high school when the teaching approach became more interactive and contextual. Lessons were no longer focused solely on textbook-based instruction but encouraged understanding through examples, discussions, and real-life contexts. This shift allowed the participant to participate more actively and gradually build confidence in learning English.

Outside formal instruction, personal interests played a crucial role in strengthening motivation to learn English. In particular, frequent exposure to English subtitles in K-pop-related media became an important informal learning source. While watching K-pop music videos, variety shows, and interviews, the participant relied on English subtitles to understand content, which unintentionally increased vocabulary exposure and reading comprehension. Because English was encountered through enjoyable K-pop content, learning the language felt less pressured and more engaging. This positive association helped foster sustained motivation and a more favorable attitude toward English. By the time the participant entered university, English was no longer viewed solely as an academic requirement but as a familiar and useful language connected to personal interests, which supported readiness to engage in ESP learning contexts.

Despite this growing interest in learning English, the student reported experiencing significant anxiety during public speaking activities, particularly during class presentations that required speaking in front of a large audience. While the student expressed confidence in understanding and organizing the presentation content, the act of performing publicly in English created emotional pressure that differed from individual or small-group learning situations. The awareness of being observed and evaluated by peers intensified feelings of nervousness, which affected both emotional stability and concentration during the presentation.

This anxiety was manifested through noticeable physical reactions, such as trembling and brief moments of losing focus while speaking. These reactions indicated the student's difficulty in simultaneously managing cognitive demands and emotional responses during public speaking tasks. Alongside these physical symptoms, emotional discomfort was closely accompanied by specific gestural behaviors. The student tended to shift gaze away from direct eye contact with the audience, pause movement momentarily, and remain still before continuing the presentation. Such gestures appeared to function as coping mechanisms that allowed the student to regain composure and refocus attention.

Rather than signaling communicative failure, these gestural behaviors reflected the student's attempt to regulate anxiety while maintaining participation in the speaking task. The combination of emotional tension, physical response, and gesture use highlights the complex interplay between confidence, anxiety, and nonverbal communication in ESP public speaking contexts.

YN illustrates her experience of gesture use during public speaking:

“When I speak in front of many people, I suddenly feel nervous and my body starts to tremble. I take a deep breath, avoid looking directly into their eyes, look above their heads, and then I continue speaking.” (Interview, YN)

The student described using specific gestures as self-regulation strategies to manage anxiety during public speaking. These included taking deep breaths, briefly pausing, redirecting gaze toward the audience’s upper head area, and then resuming speech. When anxiety occurred before presenting, the student engaged in preparatory gestures such as writing or interacting with a phone to regain composure before stepping forward.

The excerpt highlights how YN’s gestural behavior functioned as a conscious and strategic response to public speaking anxiety rather than as a purely spontaneous reaction. Unlike uncontrolled nervous movements, the gestures described by the participant demonstrate a form of self-awareness and emotional regulation during moments of heightened pressure. Redirecting gaze above the audience’s heads allowed the student to maintain the appearance of engagement while reducing the intensity of direct eye contact, which is often associated with increased anxiety in public speaking contexts. Similarly, taking deep breaths and briefly pausing before continuing speech served as mechanisms to stabilize emotional states and restore cognitive focus. These behaviors suggest that gestures played an active role in helping the student manage nervousness while sustaining oral performance.

Furthermore, YN’s preparatory gestures prior to presenting, such as writing or interacting with a phone, reveal how anxiety management began even before the public speaking activity itself. These actions functioned as transitional strategies that helped the student mentally prepare and regain composure before stepping into a performance role. This indicates that gestural regulation in ESP public speaking extends beyond the moment of speech delivery and includes pre-performance behaviors that support emotional readiness. Overall, YN’s narrative demonstrates that gestures can operate as deliberate coping strategies that enable learners to navigate anxiety without withdrawing from communicative tasks. From an ESP pedagogical perspective, this finding emphasizes the importance of recognizing students’ nonverbal self-regulation strategies as part of their communicative competence. Rather than viewing such behaviors as signs of weakness, instructors may consider them as indicators of adaptive learning processes that contribute to confidence development and sustained participation in oral communication activities.

4. Conclusion

This study explored students’ experiences of using gestures during public speaking activities in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class through a narrative inquiry approach. By focusing on students’ personal stories and reflections, the study was able to capture how gesture use emerged as an integral part of their communicative experience rather than as an isolated physical behavior. The findings demonstrate that gestures are not merely supplementary elements of speech but play a central role in shaping how students’ express emotions, manage anxiety, and engage with audiences while speaking in a foreign language. Gestures were found to function as important resources for emotional expression, particularly in moments of nervousness, hesitation, or uncertainty during public speaking tasks. Students relied on bodily movements to release tension, regain focus, and maintain composure when facing cognitive challenges such as forgetting content or responding to audience reactions. In addition to supporting emotional regulation, gestures also contributed to communication strategies by helping students emphasize ideas, organize speech delivery, and sustain interaction with listeners. Furthermore, gesture use reflected students’ ongoing processes of self-regulation and confidence development in ESP contexts. Rather than hindering communication, many gestural behaviors enabled students to remain engaged in speaking activities despite experiencing anxiety. These findings suggest that gestures serve a functional and adaptive role in foreign language public speaking. Overall, the study highlights the importance of recognizing nonverbal communication as a meaningful component of ESP pedagogy, emphasizing that understanding students’ gestural experiences can provide valuable insights into their emotional and communicative development. Through VS and YN stories, it revealed that students’ gestures often emerged spontaneously in response to speaking anxiety, cognitive pressure, and social evaluation. Avoidance gestures, such as shifting gaze, turning the body, and repetitive leg movements, reflected students’ nervousness and fear of negative peer reactions. At the same time, these gestures functioned as coping mechanisms that allowed students to remain engaged in public speaking tasks rather than withdraw entirely. In this sense, gestures served both as indicators of emotional states and as tools for managing anxiety in ESP oral communication contexts. Furthermore, the study highlights that students consciously employed certain gestures, such as controlled breathing, brief pauses, and gaze redirection as self-regulation strategies to regain composure and continue speaking. These findings suggest that gestures contribute to students’ persistence and gradual confidence-building in public speaking, even when anxiety is present. Rather than hindering communication, embodied behaviors supported students’ efforts to convey meaning and sustain participation. By foregrounding students lived experiences, this study contributes to ESP research by emphasizing nonverbal communication,

particularly gestures, as an essential component of effective public speaking. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that ESP instructors should raise students' awareness of gesture use, integrate reflection on nonverbal communication into speaking activities, and create supportive classroom environments that acknowledge anxiety as part of the learning process. Future research may involve a larger number of participants or combine narrative inquiry with multimodal discourse analysis to further examine the role of gestures across diverse ESP contexts.

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