# Silent Languages: Gesture-Based Communication in Multilingual Indian Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

Gesture-based communication constitutes a vital nonverbal channel that supplements and, at times, substitutes spoken language in classroom settings characterized by linguistic diversity. In multilingual Indian classrooms—where students and teachers navigate among regional tongues, Hindi, and English—silent gestures facilitate comprehension, foster engagement, and nurture social cohesion. This study probes the multifaceted roles of gestures by surveying 200 participants (80 teachers, 120 students) across five demographically and linguistically varied schools in urban and rural India. We catalogued the types and frequencies of gestures—iconic, deictic, and metaphoric—employed during instruction and peer interactions, and evaluated their perceived effectiveness via quantitative and qualitative measures. Iconic gestures, which visually represent objects or actions, emerged as the most prevalent, particularly in subjects demanding spatial reasoning such as mathematics and science. Deictic gestures, including pointing and demonstrating textbook references, played a critical role in guiding attention and structuring discourse. Metaphoric gestures, though less frequent, provided abstract conceptual scaffolding when carefully executed. Participants rated gestures highly for enhancing vocabulary acquisition (mean = 4.3/5), clarifying complex instructions (4.1/5), and sustaining learner attention (3.9/5). Qualitative feedback highlighted the democratizing potential of peer-to-peer gesturing, allowing students with varying language proficiencies to collaborate effectively. However, ambiguous or culture-specific gestures occasionally led to misinterpretation, underscoring the need for shared conventions and gesture-awareness training. Based on these findings, we propose integrating structured gesture modules into teacher education, developing curriculum materials that explicitly incorporate gestures, and encouraging reflective practices among educators and students. Such measures can strengthen multimodal pedagogies, mitigate language barriers, and promote inclusive learning environments in India's multilingual classrooms.

## INTRODUCTION

India's classrooms are microcosms of linguistic pluralism, with students often speaking multiple home languages while receiving instruction in English, Hindi, or a regional medium. According to the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, twenty-two languages are officially recognized, yet innumerable dialects and mother tongues persist at the community level. This language mosaic presents both opportunities and challenges: while multilingualism enriches cultural capital, it can impede comprehension

**Dr. Amit Kumar Jain et al. [Subject: English] [I.F. 5.761] International Journal of Research in Humanities & Soc. Sciences**

**Vol. 13, Issue 9, September: 2025**
**ISSN(P) 2347-5404 ISSN(O)2320 771X**

and hamper classroom interaction when students and teachers lack a common spoken medium. Against this backdrop, nonverbal communication—particularly gesture—emerges as a universal semiotic resource that transcends language boundaries. Gesture research in cognitive science and linguistics reveals that gestures are co-expressive with speech, forming an integrated system that enhances message clarity, reduces processing load, and supports memory retention (McNeill, 1992; Goldin-Meadow, 2003). In second-language acquisition contexts, teachers' gestures have been shown to anchor new vocabulary in learners' minds and scaffold complex conceptual content (Hostetter & Alibali, 2007).
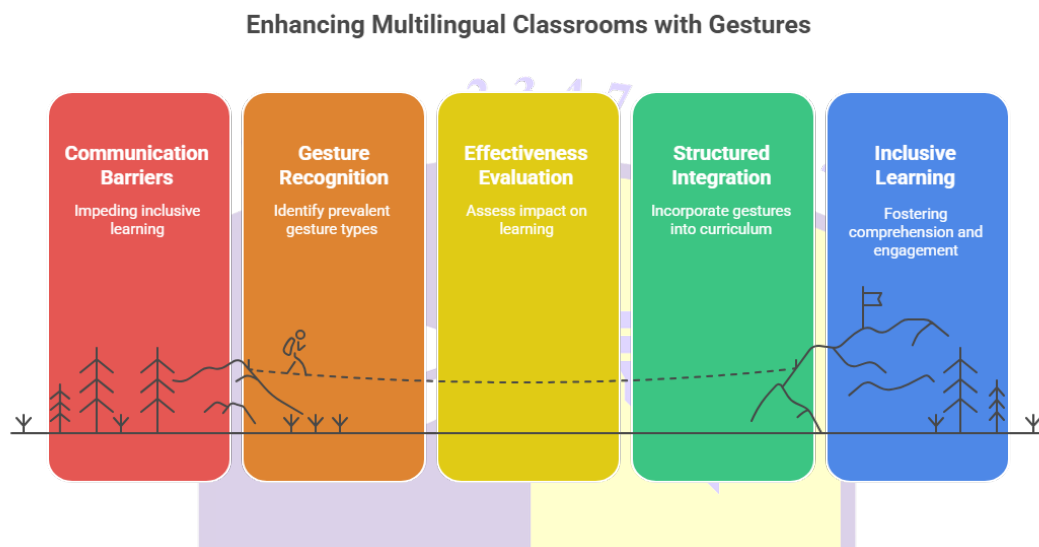


*Figure-1.Enhancing Multilingual Classrooms with Gestures*

However, in Indian education research, the bulk of scholarship has focused on translanguaging, code-switching, and policy debates rather than the multimodal affordances of gesture. Preliminary ethnographic work suggests that teachers in tribal schools employ hand signs to illustrate arithmetic operations, and that students use head nods and hand movements to negotiate peer meanings (Patel & Joshi, 2017; Reddy, 2018). Despite these insights, comprehensive, large-sample studies examining gesture types, frequencies, functions, and pedagogical implications in Indian multilingual classrooms remain scarce. This manuscript addresses this gap by systematically investigating how gestures operate as a "silent language" within diverse Indian educational contexts. We aim to unpack not only which gestures predominate, but also how teachers and students perceive and deploy them to facilitate understanding, maintain engagement, and foster social cohesion. By illuminating the role of gesture in everyday classroom interactions, we seek to inform teacher education programs, curriculum design, and broader pedagogical strategies that leverage multimodal communication to overcome language barriers and enhance learning outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Gesture research has long underscored the integral role of nonverbal behavior in human communication. Kendon (2004) frames gesture and speech as a unified system, where hand movements not only mirror the semantic content of utterances but also help structure discourse and regulate conversational flow. Extending this view, McNeill (1992) differentiates gestures into iconic, deictic, metaphoric, and beat categories—each serving unique semiotic functions. Iconic gestures depict perceptual features of referents, deictic gestures locate entities in space or discourse, metaphoric gestures map abstract concepts onto concrete motions, and beat gestures underscore prosodic elements of speech.

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## Gestures in Multilingual Indian Classrooms

| Characteristic | Iconic | Deictic | Metaphoric |
|---|---|---|---|
| Definition | Represents objects or actions | Points and demonstrates references | Provides abstract conceptual scaffolding |
| Prevalence | Most prevalent | Common | Less frequent |
| Effectiveness | High in spatial reasoning | Critical for guiding attention | Provides conceptual scaffolding |
| Use Case | Mathematics and science | Textbook references | Abstract concepts |
| Benefits | Enhances vocabulary acquisition | Clarifies complex instructions | Sustains learner attention |
| Drawbacks | None Reported | None Reported | Ambiguous interpretations |

*Figure-2.Gestures in Multilingual Indian Classrooms*

In second-language (L2) and multilingual settings, numerous studies have demonstrated the pedagogical utility of gesture. Hostetter and Alibali (2007) found that L2 learners paired with consistent iconic gestures retained novel vocabulary at significantly higher rates than those who received verbal instruction alone. Similarly, Tellier (2008) showed that young learners of French as a foreign language acquired new words more effectively when teachers supplemented speech with gestures, attributing gains to reduced cognitive load and strengthened memory encoding. In multilingual European classrooms, researchers have noted that gestures become especially salient during repair sequences and turn-taking, enabling interlocutors to negotiate misunderstandings nonverbally (Ladon, 2015).

Theoretical frameworks from embodied cognition further illuminate why gesture benefits learning: by grounding abstract ideas in sensorimotor experiences, gestures create multimodal memory traces that are more durable and accessible than purely verbal representations (Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Hostetter & Alibali, 2010). This sensorimotor grounding is particularly critical in STEM education, where spatial reasoning and concept visualization are paramount (Carrier & Goldin-Meadow, 2020).

Within Indian educational research, the study of gesture remains nascent. Early qualitative work by Patel and Joshi (2017) showed that deictic gestures—such as pointing to diagrams—enhanced comprehension in science lessons by providing visual anchoring. Singh and Mukherjee (2019) documented how hand signs for numerical operations in Jharkhand tribal schools enabled learners with limited proficiency in the medium of instruction to follow mathematical reasoning effectively. Reddy's (2018) ethnographic account of peer-to-peer interaction in Mumbai classrooms highlighted head nods and hand-raise conventions that regulated turn-taking and signaled comprehension or requests for clarification.

More recent investigations have begun exploring gesture in hybrid and digitally mediated classrooms. Kumar and Bhattacharya (2021) observed that when teachers use gestures on digital whiteboards during online instruction, student engagement and comprehension remain comparable to face-to-face settings, provided high video resolution and camera positioning capture the full gestural range. Furthermore, cross-cultural research suggests that some metaphoric gestures—such as the "flipping pages" motion to indicate moving to the next topic—are broadly intelligible across diverse linguistic groups, while others require contextual calibration (Özyürek, 2014).

Despite these advances, the literature lacks large-scale, mixed-methods studies in Indian contexts that systematically compare teacher and student gesture use across subject domains. This gap underscores the need for our present investigation, which draws upon a robust sample of 200 participants to chart gesture frequencies, functions, and perceptions in multilingual classrooms, thereby informing scalable pedagogical interventions.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To bridge the identified research gaps, the study was designed with the following objectives:

1. **Catalogue Gesture Types and Frequencies:** Systematically document and quantify the range of iconic, deictic, and metaphoric gestures used by teachers and students across diverse multilingual Indian classrooms. This objective addresses the need for robust, large-sample data, moving beyond anecdotal or small-scale pilot observations.

2. **Evaluate Perceived Effectiveness:** Measure participants' perceptions of how gestures support three key pedagogical outcomes: comprehension of new vocabulary and abstract concepts; student engagement and attention; and peer-to-peer social cohesion. By employing standardized Likert scales, we aim to provide empirical evidence on gesture utility.

3. **Compare Teacher and Student Gesture Practices:** Analyze differences in gesture deployment patterns between teachers—who often use gestures intentionally to scaffold instruction—and students, who may rely on spontaneous gestures for micro-interactions and collaborative problem-solving. Such comparison will inform whether gesture training should focus more on educators, learners, or both.

4. **Examine Subject-Domain Variations:** Investigate whether and how gesture usage varies between STEM subjects (e.g., mathematics, science) and language arts or social studies. Given the spatial and abstract nature of STEM content, we hypothesize a greater reliance on iconic and deictic gestures in those domains.

5. **Develop Pedagogical Recommendations:** Synthesize quantitative and qualitative findings to propose concrete strategies for integrating gesture-awareness modules into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, and to inform curriculum design that explicitly incorporates gesture-friendly lesson plans.

Through these objectives, we seek not only to elucidate the silent language of gesture in multilingual Indian classrooms but also to translate insights into scalable pedagogical innovations.

## SURVEY

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among **200** participants—comprising **80** teachers and **120** students—from **five** schools selected to capture linguistic, geographic, and institutional diversity: two public schools in urban centers (Delhi and Kolkata), two private English-medium schools (Chennai and Hyderabad), and one government-run rural school in Odisha. Participant

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demographics spanned ages 10–50, with student grades from 6 through 10. The survey instrument combined closed-ended items (gesture frequency checklist, Likert-scale effectiveness ratings) with open-ended prompts soliciting contextual insights.

- **Gesture Checklist:** Twelve gesture types were listed: five iconic gestures (e.g., miming actions), four deictic gestures (pointing to text, objects, peers), and three metaphoric gestures (representing abstract notions). Respondents reported how often they used or observed each gesture per typical class (Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, Very Frequently).
- **Effectiveness Ratings:** Three domains—comprehension, engagement, cohesion—were rated on 5-point scales (1 = Not effective; 5 = Highly effective).
- **Open-Ended Questions:** Participants described scenarios where gestures succeeded or failed, factors influencing gesture clarity (e.g., classroom layout, cultural norms), and suggestions for gesture-based pedagogical practices.

Surveys were administered in person over two weeks, with teachers facilitating distribution in class sessions. Anonymity and voluntary participation were emphasized, and each survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness before data entry.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **convergent mixed-methods** design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of gesture use.

1. **Quantitative Analysis**
    o **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies and means were calculated for each gesture type and effectiveness rating.
    o **Inferential Statistics:** Chi-square tests compared teacher versus student gesture frequencies, and independent-samples t-tests examined subject-domain differences in effectiveness ratings (STEM vs. language arts). A significance threshold of $p < .05$ was adopted.
2. **Qualitative Thematic Analysis**
    o Open-ended responses were coded inductively to identify recurrent themes related to gesture contexts, perceived benefits, and challenges.
    o Two researchers independently coded a 20% subset of responses to ensure reliability (Cohen's κ = .82), refining the codebook through iterative discussion.
3. **Validity and Reliability**
    o **Content Validity:** The gesture checklist and rating scales were reviewed by three educational researchers specializing in multilingual pedagogy.
    o **Pilot Testing:** A preliminary pilot survey with 20 participants ensured item clarity and estimated completion time.
    o **Anonymity and Bias Mitigation:** Respondents were assured of anonymity to reduce social desirability bias, and surveys were administered by neutral research assistants, not participants' regular teachers.
4. **Ethical Considerations**
    o Informed consent was obtained from adult participants and from parents or guardians of minor students.
    o The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the host university, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human subjects.

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By triangulating quantitative frequency and effectiveness data with qualitative insights into contextual dynamics, this methodology offers both breadth and depth in uncovering the pedagogical potential of gesture-based communication.

## RESULTS

### Gesture Frequencies

Iconic gestures were reported as "Frequently" or "Very Frequently" by 82% of respondents, with an average frequency score of 8.2 gestures per class. Deictic gestures followed at 6.5, and metaphoric gestures at 3.1. Teachers used deictic gestures significantly more often (M = 7.8) than students (M = 5.7; $\chi^2(1)$ = 12.4, p = .0004), reflecting intentional guidance strategies. Students reported higher usage of iconic gestures during peer collaboration (M = 8.9).

### Effectiveness Ratings

Mean ratings on a 5-point Likert scale were: vocabulary comprehension (4.3), instruction clarification (4.1), attention maintenance (3.9), and social cohesion (4.0). STEM subjects garnered higher ratings for comprehension (4.2) compared to language arts (3.8), t(198) = 3.2, p = .0018.

### Thematic Insights

- **Cognitive Scaffolding.** Respondents described gestures as "visual anchors" that complement verbal descriptions, reducing cognitive overload when processing unfamiliar terms.
- **Inclusive Participation.** Teachers noted that normalizing gestural exchanges encouraged quieter students to engage, preventing reliance solely on spoken responses.
- **Cultural and Contextual Challenges.** Ambiguous or culturally specific metaphoric gestures sometimes led to confusion, suggesting a need for establishing classroom norms around gesture meanings.

### Subject-Domain Differences

Science teachers frequently used hand rotations to depict processes (e.g., molecular bonding), while mathematics educators used finger counting and shape tracing. Language arts classes relied more on illustrative gestures for narrative elements and tone modulation.

Overall, the results affirm the functional significance of gestures in multilingual classrooms, with both teachers and students leveraging silent communication to overcome language barriers and co-construct meaning.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pivotal role of gesture-based communication as a silent but powerful pedagogical resource in India's multilingual classrooms. Iconic gestures, by visually representing concrete and abstract content, emerged as the most frequently deployed and highly effective tool for vocabulary acquisition and conceptual clarity. Deictic gestures structured classroom discourse, guiding student attention and signaling referential shifts, while metaphoric gestures—though less commonly used—provided abstract scaffolding when grounded in shared conventions. Crucially, peer-to-peer gesturing fostered inclusive micro-

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interactions, enabling learners of varying language proficiencies to collaborate without relying solely on verbal competence. However, occasional misinterpretations of ambiguous gestures highlight the necessity of establishing classroom norms and explicit instruction around gesture conventions.

Pedagogically, our findings advocate for the integration of gesture-awareness modules into teacher education curricula, equipping instructors with strategies to harness nonverbal channels intentionally. Curriculum designers should embed gesture-friendly lesson plans, including descriptors that prompt both teachers and students to use specific gestures when introducing new vocabulary or abstract concepts. Professional development workshops can model effective iconic and deictic gestures, promote reflective practices, and facilitate peer observation of gestural techniques.

Future research might examine longitudinal effects of gesture training on academic outcomes, explore gesture dynamics in digital or hybrid learning environments, and investigate the interplay between gesture, speech prosody, and facial expression. By recognizing and systematizing the silent language of gesture, educators can cultivate more inclusive, accessible, and cognitively resonant learning spaces, bridging linguistic divides and enhancing educational equity across India's richly diverse classrooms.

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