

# Erasmus+

Beyond barriers and borders

## ***The importance of teaching body language to blind and partially sighted people***

*The Course Program was updated in the framework of the “Beyond barriers & borders” Erasmus plus project carried out by Polish Association of the Blind, Austrian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted and VIEWS International*

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### **Introduction**

Communication skills are important in all fields of life and especially so in the business world. When giving a presentation, meeting clients or interviewing for a job, apart from excellent verbal communication skills, body language is extremely important for a favourable first impression as well as during every following interaction. Since non-verbal communication can be very difficult for blind and partially sighted people, we provided the most important aspects of it in this short document.

### **Explanation of Key Terms**

Communication consists of verbal and non-verbal communication. **Verbal communication** simply means what is being said, while **non-verbal communication** includes a variety of aspects. Those are **mimic** (facial expressions), **gestures** (hand or head movements), **posture** (the way we hold our body while standing or sitting), **movements** (the way we walk or move our tools) and of course our whole **outward appearance** (the way we dress, etc.). When we talk about non-verbal communication in the following document, we will also use the term **body language**.

### **The importance of body language**

It is possible to communicate solely non-verbally, for example through a certain look or by winking. But body language is also of great importance when the main part of the conversation consists of people talking to each other. It helps us to get a better picture of what is going on in another person, of how this person might really feel and how he or she might react. Non-verbal communication is much harder to control, which can make its signs more insightful than what is actually being said.

The importance of body language is scientifically proven and much bigger than we are usually aware of. Non-verbal communication is responsible for more than half of our perception of a message. The figures are as follows:



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7 % - Content, facts

38 % - Voice, language, tone of voice, emphasis, articulation

55 % - Body language, appearance, movement, mimic, gestures

### Why is it important to teach body language to visually impaired people?

As we have seen above, the way we act with our body has a big influence on the way our communication is perceived. A large part of communication between people is done through eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and other aspects of body language. But these aspects can be very challenging to someone with a visual disability. If someone is blind, they cannot see the body language of others and so they miss out on a part of interpersonal communication. For someone who is visually impaired it depends from person to person how much of the body language of others they can perceive.

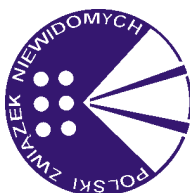
Teaching body language skills to the visually impaired is important because in some situations their body language can be lacking. This causes others to perceive them as less capable, nice or social even though in reality they are not. This can especially be a problem for people who have been blind since birth. As children we learn to use body language by observing adults and recreating their behaviour. For someone who has always been blind this has been impossible. It is especially important to teach these people how to use their body language.

### What body language aspects should visually impaired people be taught?

The first important part of good nonverbal communication is **keeping eye contact**. By looking at people we indicate that we have noticed them or are listening to them. Of course this is often very hard or impossible for someone with a visual disability. Luckily they can simulate eye contact to a very believable level. They can do this by turning and tilting their head to where they hear the other person's voice coming from. People who are not used to dealing with someone with a visual disability will greatly appreciate this, because it gives them the illusion that they really have eye contact.

Another important basic part of good nonverbal communication is **body posture**. A slouched position shows laziness or low self-esteem, while an upright position shows confidence and competence. This is true for sitting as well as standing.

A third important part of body language is **mirroring**. Mirroring is basically the recreation of the body language of those you are in contact with. For instance, when two people are talking it is normal for them to recreate each other's body language.



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If one person is standing, the other will almost automatically also stand up and vice versa. It can be very uncomfortable for one person to be sitting and one person to be standing while having a conversation.

A final important part of body language that is important especially during a job interview is the **handshake**. When meeting and saying goodbye to the interviewers you shake their hand. If you are blind or visually impaired this can be a little hard to do because you cannot see their hand. The best thing to do is to take the initiative and hold your hand out toward them when meeting them. They will automatically grab your hand. During the handshake it is important to have some tension in your hand. If you keep your hand too weak, you will come off as having low self-confidence. If you use too much force, you risk coming off too strong and dominant. It is important to find the right balance of strength. Here you can also use the technique of mirroring; if someone is giving you a strong handshake return with strength and vice versa.

### Exercises

When training visually impaired people in body language, it is important that you give them enough time to practice with sighted counterparts and to work in their feedback. The following five aspects can be trained during role plays of short presentations:

**Posture:** keep a straight posture, frontal to the audience, open, both feet on the floor, head up but not too high

**Gestures:** arms and hands should hang on the side of the body or rest in front of the belly, no fast movements along with the speech but slow, calm movements where necessary

**Mimic:** keep eye contact, move the head in the direction of the speaker, relaxed face muscles, friendly countenance

**Movements:** determined and calm movements through the room or with aids and tools, active, dynamic and conscious, no hectic movements

**Voice:** loud, clear, slow, pause where needed, especially during movements

By training those aspects repeatedly in different situations, blind and partially sighted participants will become much more aware of their own body language and more comfortable to use it as an effective tool in their private or business lives.

