
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Body language online



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam. When Neil and I record 6 Minute English face-to-face in the BBC Learning English studio which, I am happy to say, we are doing right now, we look at each other as we speak. We smile and use hand gestures and facial expressions in a type of communication called **body language**.

Neil

But during the Covid pandemic, everyday meetings with work colleagues, teachers and friends, and 6 Minute English recording - all moved online.

Sam

Video meetings using software like Zoom and Skype became the normal way to communicate with family and friends. And whatever happens with Covid in the future, it seems they're here to stay.

Neil

In this programme, we'll be asking: how has body language changed in the world of online video meetings?

Sam

We'll meet the person who wrote the rulebook for clear communication in the digital age – Erica Dhawan, author of a new book, 'Digital Body Language'.

Neil

But before that, I have a question for you, Sam, and it's about Erica Dhawan. She may be a communications expert now, but growing up in Pennsylvania she was a shy and quiet schoolgirl. So how did Erica beat her shyness and become the confident communicator she is today? Did she:

- a) attend public speaking classes?,

- b) copy the body language of the cool kids at school? or,
- c) raised her hand to answer the teacher's questions, even if she didn't know the answer?

Sam

I'll guess that c – she raised her hand to answer the teacher's questions.

Neil

OK, Sam. We'll reveal the correct answer later in the programme.

Sam

In face-to-face meetings, we immediately see someone's reaction to what we've said through **eye contact**, where two people look into each other's eyes as they talk.

Neil

Unfortunately, using a web camera to make eye contact is almost impossible in online meetings and this often creates a kind of 'distancing' effect.

Sam

Erica Dhawan makes several suggestions to help with this. See if you can hear the final suggestion she makes to Michael Rosen as part of BBC Radio 4's Word of Mouth.

Erica Dhawan

And last but not least, slow down. Remember when it was completely normal to have a one-minute pause in a room with one another because we knew when we're thinking and **brainstorming**. If we don't hear someone speak on video, we ask them if they're on mute. Practise what I call the five-second rule – wait five seconds before speaking to make sure that individuals have time to **process** the ideas, especially if there may be technology or accessibility issues.

Sam

Did you hear Erica's last piece of advice, Neil?

Neil

Yes, she recommends slowing down, something we do naturally face-to-face when we're thinking or **brainstorming** – that's discussing suggestions with a group of people to come up with new ideas or to solve problems.

Sam

Slowing down gives us time to **process** new information – to understand it by thinking carefully and reflecting on it.

Neil

Erica compares online body language to learning a new language - it takes practice, especially when it comes to smiling and laughing, something Michael Rosen finds hard to do in video meetings.

Sam

Listen to him discussing this problem with Erica Dhawan for BBC Radio 4's, Word of Mouth.

Michael Rosen

Do you think it's killing off people laughing and smiling in the way we do when we're altogether in the live situation?

Erica Dhawan

I would say that it is much less likely that we laugh and smile on camera for a few reasons. Number one, laughing is often done **in unison** where we can quickly pick up the energy of someone smiling or laughing and feed off of that and laugh ourselves. When it comes to screen delays, the fact that it's not natural to see our own camera – being distracted by that – we are much less likely to laugh and smile. One of the ways we can overcome this is by creating intentional moments in our meetings for the **water cooler effect**.

Sam

Erica points out that laughing often happens **in unison** – together and at the same time.

Neil

Yes, if someone starts laughing it makes me laugh too.

Sam

She also thinks it's important to make time for employees to chat informally about things unrelated to work – their weekend plans or last night's TV show.

Neil

And she uses the expression, the **water cooler effect** which comes from the United States where office workers sometimes meet at the water fountain to chat.

Sam

So, the **water cooler effect** refers to informal conversations that people have in their office or workplace, maybe in the lift, the office kitchen or, if there is one, by an actual water cooler.

Neil

Erica Dhawan seems very comfortable communicating online, but she's had lots of time to practice since her schooldays.

Sam

Ah yes, Neil, in your quiz question you asked how Erica conquered her shyness at school. I guessed that she raised her hand to answer the teacher's questions.

Neil

It was a good guess, Sam, but the correct answer is b – she copied the body language of her cool teenage classmates, so probably lots of rolled eyes and slouching!

Sam

OK, let's recap the vocabulary from this programme about online **body language** – non-verbal ways of communicating using the body.

Neil

Eye contact is when two people look at each other's eyes at the same time.

Sam

Brainstorming involves a group discussion to generate new ideas or solutions.

Neil

When we **process** information, we think about it carefully in order to understand it.

Sam

In unison means happening together and at the same time.

Neil

And finally, the **water cooler effect** is an American expression to describe informal conversations between people at work.

Sam

Neil is looking at his watch, which is body language that tells me our six minutes are up!

Neil

Goodbye for now!

Sam

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

body language

communication through the movements and gestures of your body, rather than with words

eye contact

two people look at each other's eyes at the same time

brainstorming

discussing suggestions with a group of people to come up with new ideas or solve problems

to process

to understand information by thinking about it and reflecting on it carefully

in unison

happening together and at the same time

water cooler effect

informal conversations and chats between people in their office or workplace (US)