PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

A

Non-verbal behaviour is frequently described as a “universal language,” an idea that sounds plausible because all humans possess broadly similar bodies and nervous systems. Yet this universalist intuition quickly collides with cross-cultural experience: the same smile, silence, or physical distance can be read as warmth in one setting and as evasiveness or disrespect in another. The deeper tension is theoretical as well as practical. Universalism, associated with biological accounts of emotion, proposes that at least some expressive patterns are species-typical and therefore widely recognisable; cultural relativism argues that meaning is learned through local norms and that apparent universals are often too coarse to guide interpretation in real interactions. In practice, misunderstanding usually arises not from a lack of non-verbal competence, but from the misapplication of local interpretive rules to unfamiliar contexts, producing confident yet inaccurate judgements about intention, sincerity, or status.

B

A useful way to reconcile these positions is to separate signals from rules. Humans may share the capacity for facial movement, vocal modulation, and gesture, but cultures impose “display rules” that regulate when, to whom, and with what intensity those signals should be shown. A smile may index pleasure, politeness, embarrassment, or deference, depending on the social moment; similarly, sadness or anger may be privately felt yet publicly masked. Display rules are learned early, often through subtle correction rather than explicit instruction, and they shape the outward management of affect without guaranteeing any difference in inner emotion. This perspective helps explain why observers can be misled by surface style: a restrained face may be interpreted as coldness or deceit, while a highly expressive face may be interpreted as transparency. In fact, both may represent culturally appropriate self-presentation rather than a direct window into truthfulness.

C

The study of body movement, or kinesics, extends this insight beyond facial expression. Many gestures are not mere “illustrations” but function as emblems—movements with relatively fixed meanings that operate like words. Because they are learned as part of an embodied repertoire, emblems can create the non-verbal equivalent of false friends: a gesture that seems self-evident to insiders may carry a different meaning, or a different level of offensiveness, elsewhere. Pointing, beckoning, or signalling approval can therefore

generate friction precisely because the actor is often unaware of “speaking” in a dialect the listener does not share. Moreover, gesture interacts with speech rhythm: hand movements frequently align with emphasis and turn-taking, meaning that misread gestures can disrupt not only meaning but also the perceived flow of conversation.

D

Eye behaviour illustrates how non-verbal norms are embedded in social structure rather than in personality alone. In some low-context communication environments—where meaning is expected to be explicit—direct gaze may be treated as evidence of attention and honesty. In higher-context cultures—where meaning is inferred from relationships and situational cues—prolonged eye contact may be interpreted as undue intimacy, confrontation, or a challenge to authority. Crucially, gaze rules commonly shift with hierarchy: what is acceptable between peers may be inappropriate with elders, teachers, or senior managers. This makes universal prescriptions such as “look at me when I’m speaking” culturally loaded, because they encode assumptions about respect and status. A person who averts gaze may not be evasive; they may be performing deference. Conversely, a person who maintains strong eye contact may not be confident; they may be unintentionally threatening.

E

Proxemics—the management of interpersonal distance—adds a spatial dimension to the same problem. Some societies tolerate smaller personal bubbles and use touch as a signal of warmth, while others maintain larger boundaries, particularly with strangers. Yet simple national stereotypes are unreliable because distance norms are shaped by multiple situational variables. Climate and crowding influence everyday spacing; professional settings impose their own conventions; and gender norms can modify what is considered appropriate closeness. Even within a single city, distance that is “normal” on a commuter train may be unacceptable in a job interview. In cross-cultural interactions, people often interpret distance as personality—friendliness, aggressiveness, or arrogance—when it may reflect proxemic expectations that are invisible to the participants themselves.

F

These systems do not operate as isolated channels; they are coordinated through interactional synchrony, the timing and rhythm by which participants align pauses, overlaps, nods, and changes in posture. Synchrony is often taken as a sign of rapport, while mismatch is read as tension. However, different cultures organise turn-taking differently: the length of “acceptable” silence, the degree of overlap tolerated, and the speed with which speakers respond can vary. When two systems meet, the same timing pattern may be interpreted as impatience on one side and as enthusiasm on the other. Misinterpretation can then become self-reinforcing: a perceived slight changes posture and tone, which the other party reads as confirmation of disrespect, producing escalating

discomfort without any deliberate hostility.

G

Computer-mediated communication complicates matters further because it preserves some cues while distorting others. Video calls transmit facial expression and voice quality, yet they disrupt true eye contact, compress spatial information, and often exaggerate delays that make a speaker appear less responsive than intended. Camera angles can create impressions of dominance or disengagement, and slight lag can interfere with synchrony, increasing interruptions or awkward silence. Emojis and reaction buttons supply substitute signals, but these also carry group-specific conventions: the same icon may be affectionate, ironic, or even dismissive depending on community norms. As a result, digital environments do not remove non-verbal meaning; they reorganise it, sometimes making misreadings more likely because cues are partial and ambiguity is easier to overlook.

H

Given these complexities, training that offers fixed “do’s and don’ts” is often less effective than approaches that build adaptive competence. The most robust strategy is to treat non-verbal behaviour as meaningful yet context-dependent: notice patterns rather than single cues, check interpretations when stakes are high, and allow for the possibility that apparent signals of dishonesty or disrespect may be culturally appropriate performances of self-control or deference. This does not require abandoning universalist insights altogether; rather, it recognises that shared human capacities are filtered through local rules, high-context or low-context expectations, and the micro-timing of interactional synchrony. Cross-cultural communication becomes less fragile when non-verbal behaviour is treated not as instinctively obvious, but as learned, negotiable, and open to clarification.

Questions 27–31

Select the correct answer.

27 What is the main point of the first paragraph?

A Shared human physiology makes detailed non-verbal meanings reliable across cultures.
B Cross-cultural misunderstandings mainly occur because people cannot perceive unfamiliar signals.
C Common human capacities are interpreted through culturally learned rules, so familiar cues may be misread.
D Cultural explanations have completely replaced biological accounts of emotional expression.

28 What does the passage suggest about “display rules”?

A They regulate when, to whom, and how strongly emotions are expressed.
B They primarily determine which emotions people experience internally.
C They are normally learned through explicit instruction about acceptable behaviour.
D They remain consistent across different relationships within the same culture.

29 Why are emblems described as a source of cross-cultural friction?

A They accompany speech but do not carry relatively fixed meanings themselves.
B They function like culturally learned words whose meanings or offensiveness may differ between groups.
C They cause conflict because speakers deliberately use gestures that outsiders find insulting.
D Their differences concern conversational timing rather than the meanings of individual movements.

30 Why can eye-contact norms be difficult to generalise?

A Direct gaze is expected whenever communication occurs in a high-context culture.
B Gaze behaviour is determined mainly by individual confidence rather than social conventions.
C Averting one’s gaze generally indicates dishonesty when people of different status interact.
D Appropriate eye contact depends on both cultural expectations and the relationship between participants.

31 What does the passage say about digital communication?

A Video calls preserve facial expression while removing ambiguity from conversational timing.
B Digital substitute signals replace local conventions with meanings understood across communities.
C Digital communication preserves some cues while distorting others, including eye contact and timing.
D Camera angles and delays affect technical quality without influencing social interpretation.

Questions 32–36

Which paragraph contains the following information?

32 a reference to the debate about whether emotional expressions are biologically innate or socially constructed.

33 a description of how hierarchical status influences expectations regarding gaze.

34 an explanation of how environmental factors may shape spatial norms.

35 examples of specific body movements that function as direct verbal substitutes.

36 a warning about misinterpreting a lack of visible emotion as deception.

Questions 37–40

Choose **YES** if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer, choose **NO** if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this.

37 The passage suggests that cross-cultural misunderstanding is usually caused by deliberate rudeness.

38 The passage indicates that the “normal” conversational distance can change depending on the situation.

39 The writer argues that video calls preserve the timing and spatial cues of face-to-face interaction without distortion.

40 The writer states that adaptive competence training is more expensive than teaching fixed cultural rules.

Answer Key

27. C
28. A
29. B
30. D
31. C
32. A
33. D
34. E
35. C

36. B

37. NO

38. YES

39. NO

40. NOT GIVEN