

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**AMERICAN VERUS VIETNAMESE USES OF SINGLE
HAND GESTURES FOR EXPRESSING EMOTIONS:
A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY****DO THI HUYEN THANH* - HOANG THI THUY** -
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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the use of single hand gestures for expressing emotions by Americans and Vietnamese with an aim to examine how Americans and Vietnamese used these gestures with regard to frequency as well as implied meanings. The study employed a survey design with the participation of 50 American and 50 Vietnamese participants, and questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument. The results reveal both similarities and differences in terms of the frequency of using various single hand gestures by Americans and Vietnamese and the types of emotions expressed by those gestures. The findings bear implications regarding the role of intercultural awareness in reducing cross-cultural communication breakdowns.

KEY WORDS: single hand gestures; frequency; emotions; cross-cultural communication; nonverbal communication.

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1. Introduction

As human beings, we mostly communicate and interact with one another through language. However, in some types of communication, people express more nonverbally than verbally, specifically in expressing human emotions and attitudes. Nonverbal communication, which includes gestures, postures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc., plays an extremely important role in our daily life, especially in intercultural settings where communication breakdowns often stem from language and cultural differences. Of these, gestures are found *fascinating things, at once wholly expressive and curiously mysterious. The flick of the wrist, the wave of a finger, or simply the movement of an eyelid can say more than a speech, and sometimes a subtle gesture can express a feeling more gracefully than words.* [Armstrong & Wagner, 2003, p.1]. Single hand gestures (SHGs) used for expressing emotions can translate a lot of information that verbal language cannot. However, little research has been done regarding how people communicate emotion through single hand gestures.

Furthermore, Vietnam-USA relationship has become better and better since political normalization. The two countries have broadened their economic and political exchanges through regular and regional security. Although we are living in the era of globalization with ever increasing international communication, there exist communication breakdowns in “*the moments of interculturality*” (Hartog, 2006) normally due to cultural conflicts. All of those inspired the present study with the aim to investigate the differences and similarities between American and Vietnamese people in the use of single hand gestures for expressing emotions. It is hoped that this preliminary study will raise intercultural awareness to avoid misunderstandings and culture shocks between the two cultures by featuring out the most commonly used single hand gestures.

2. Literature Review**2.1. Gestures and their importance in communication**

Although gestures can be differently defined by different researchers and scholars, they can be generally seen as movements of some parts of the body such as: head, hands, arms, legs, face so as to replace words in communicating the messages. Nguyen (2008:163) provides a full definition of gestures as follows: “*Gestures can be understood as the movements of arms, legs, and body which*

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are used independently or with word in communication in order to emphasize or replace words, to control, display one's feelings and attitudes, and to express one's thought". According to Mc. Neill (2008), a gesture is a movement that communicates information whether it is intentionally or not.

Researchers argue that gesturing is actually an intrinsic part of the communicative process. When making a conversation, human beings often combine body movements even if we are not conscious of the gestures we produce. In a specific situation, every gesture has a certain meaning. Therefore, using gestures appropriately will contribute to our success in communication. Besides, it is found that gestures are often true and less deceitful than words, and that different gestures are normally associated with different emotional states, such as interest and disagreement (Bull, 1987).

2.2. Single hand gestures for expressing emotions

SHG is a very important part of the body language gestures that we communicate with others and convey our feelings. SHG is a movement that they tend to use a hand to explain their needs, thoughts, and feelings. These gestures are most helpful when someone is speaking to others with no language in common. The meanings of single hand gestures in different cultures may be translated into different things. Therefore, it is very important to understand the meanings of gestures, especially single hand gestures before you travel to different countries. Those considered as a good gesture in one country may be termed as an offensive gesture in other countries.

Emotion is a complex psycho physiological experience of an individual whose state of mind interacts with biochemical (internal) and environmental (external) influences. In humans, emotion fundamentally involves "physiological arousal, expressive behaviors, and conscious experience" (Myers, 2004, p.500).

Paul Ekman (1972) defined six basic universal emotions recognized around the world after doing research on many different cultures: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise. Later, Ekman (1992) added to this list, but stated that not all of these can be encoded via facial expressions: amusement, contempt, contentment, embarrassment, excitement, guilt, pride in achievement, relief, satisfaction, sensory pleasure, shame.

There are some common single hand gestures for expressing emotions as follows:

The thumbs up is a common single hand gesture achieved by a closed fist held with the thumb extended upward in approval respectively. The most common interpretation of this sign is as a sign of approval or encouragement, it means 'great' or 'awesome' 'ok', 'good', 'great', 'well done', 'congratulations', 'perfect' or whatever but stronger than an OK sign in US. Therefore, someone makes OK sign to others to express satisfaction and pride in achievement. However, there are some countries where it may be an insult or where it will not be understood such as: Iraq, Iran, Thailand, etc.



***Figure 1.** The thumbs up sign (<https://thetrustambassador.com/2019/11/29/body-language-56-thumbs-up/>)

The OK sign is one of the most common single hand gestures done by connecting the thumb and forefinger into a circle (the O), and holding the other fingers straight or relaxed in the air. It is positive in some countries. In certain parts of middle and southern European the gesture is considered offensive as in you are a zero or you are nothing. In some Mediterranean countries, as well as in Brazil, it represents vulgar expressions: either an insult. However, it merges as a positive meaning to express satisfaction and pride in achievement such as ok, all right, good, well done.



***Figure 2.** The OK sign

The thumbs down is “a sign of disapproval” achieved by a closed fist held and the thumb extended downward in disapproval means. Thumbs down signified “swords down,” which meant the loser, it is often presented to express dissatisfaction.



***Figure 3. The thumbs down sign**

The facepalm (also face-palm or face palm) is the physical gesture of placing one's hand flat across one's face or lowering one's face into one's hand. The gesture is found in many cultures as a display of frustration, embarrassment, shock, or surprise.



***Figure 4. The facepalm** (<https://www.pngegg.com/en/search?q=facepalm>)

The pointing finger is done by balling into a fist with the index finger extended. This gesture is seen as accusatory for some Americans and for Middle or Far East cultures. Someone makes it to express anger with a scowl on his/her face. In which case the finger and wink are directed at the person concerned that can be a signal of positive appreciation, as if to say, "You got it," or "You understand it, well done". In Vietnam, pointing finger is not used to point at people senior in age or status because it seems offensive to them



***Figure 5. The pointing finger**

The hand covering mouth: The mouth is involved in the expression of many different emotions, from happiness to sadness, from fear to disgust. In polite society, exposing the inside of your mouth may be considered rude, so the hand is used to politely cover a yawn. The hand is also used to conceal the mouth when it will betray emotions that may be undesirable. Thus, we put our hands over impolite giggles. Covering mouth is a single hand gesture done by raising one hand to opened mouth of surprise, fear



***Figure 6. The hand covering mouth** (<https://www.istockphoto.com/vi/hands-covering-mouth>)

The hand on chest is done by placing one hand on someone's chest. It is almost an instinctive single hand gesture done after someone's surprise and fear.

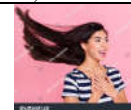


***Figure 7. The hand on chest**

The fist pump is a celebratory gesture in which a fist is raised before the torso and subsequently drawn down and nearer to the body in a vigorous, swift motion to denote enthusiasm, exuberance, or success and may be accompanied by a similarly energetic exclamation or vociferation. Though they are notably conspicuous in sporting activities (especially upon the attainment of a goal or score), fist pumps are present in a wide range of other activities. Therefore, it is usually used to express excitement and pride in achievement.



***Figure 8. The fist pump** (<https://www.nicepng.com/maxp/u2w7t4i1a9r5t4w7/>)

The loser is a hand gesture made by extending the thumb and index fingers, leaving the other fingers closed to create the letter L, interpreted as "loser", and generally given as a demeaning sign.



***Figure 9.** *The loser* (https://stock.adobe.com/search?k=loser+sign&asset_id=436821422)

The throat slash is another unmistakable angry gesture. This gesture, in which a finger is pulled through the air in front of the throat, is intended to communicate anger and aggression.

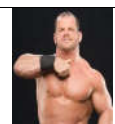


***Figure 10.** *The throat slash* (<https://howlingwam.wordpress.com/2011/10/12/gestures/>)

The middle finger: The most famous of all angry gestures is likely a raised middle finger. It is performed by showing the back of a closed fist that has only the middle finger extended upwards. It is a symbol of contempt and an offensive meaning in some cultures.



***Figure 11.** *The middle finger* (https://www.123rf.com/photo_131844770_finger-symbols-concept-middle-finger-sign-in-a-gesture-meaning-you-or-off.html)

In brief, SHGs for expressing emotions are movements of one hand used to show one's psychological experience. They carry themselves a lot of meanings. The present study was conducted to examine the frequency Americans and Vietnamese use these gestures as well as the meanings conveyed by those given SHGs.

3. Research questions

To achieve the aim of finding out similarities and differences in using single hand gestures for expressing emotions between Americans and Vietnamese, the study dealt with the following research questions: 1) How often do Americans/ Vietnamese use single hand gestures to express emotions?; 2) Which emotions are commonly expressed through single hand gestures by Americans/ Vietnamese?

4. Research methods

- Participants:

The study involved the participation of two groups of participants. The first group (n=50) was Vietnamese people living in Vietnam. The second group (n=50) was Americans living in the USA. 67 of the participants were female and 33 were male. Their age ranged from 20 to 46.

- Data collection:

The present study employed a survey design with questionnaire being used as the main data collection instrument. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part 1 was designed to get personal information of the participants such as their nationality, age, gender, place they were living, and occupation. Part 2 included two sub-questions regarding the use of single hand gestures. Question 1 investigated the frequency of using those common single hand gestures to express emotions by American and Vietnamese people. Question 2 was to get information about their use of multi-meaning single hand gestures to express emotions. The questionnaire for Vietnamese participants was translated into Vietnamese to ensure that the participants understood correctly and avoided misunderstanding.

First, the participants from both groups were provided with the study information sheet and were requested to give consent. They were assured that they would not be identified in any discussion of the data. The purposes of collecting data were also clearly explained to all participants before they answered the questions in the questionnaires. After being piloted by 10 respondents, the

questionnaires were then administered to all participants via Google Forms. The data collection was undertaken within two weeks with all 100 participants completing the questionnaires.

- Data analysis:

After being collected, the data was coded, synthesized and statistically analyzed. The findings were mainly based on frequency distribution, similarities and differences in expressing emotions by those SHGs.

5. Results

5.1. Frequency of using single hand gestures to express emotions by Americans and Vietnamese (RQ1)

5.1.1. Frequency of using SHGs to express emotions by Americans

As illustrated in Figure 12 below, the thumbs up, facepalm, the pointing finger, the hand on chest and the middle finger are the mostly used single hand gestures by American participants, accounting for between 94% and 96%. These are followed by from 80% to 90% of the participants using the OK sign, the thumbs down, the hand covering mouth, and the fist pump. The SHGs that are used the least are the loser (48%) and the throat slash (50%).

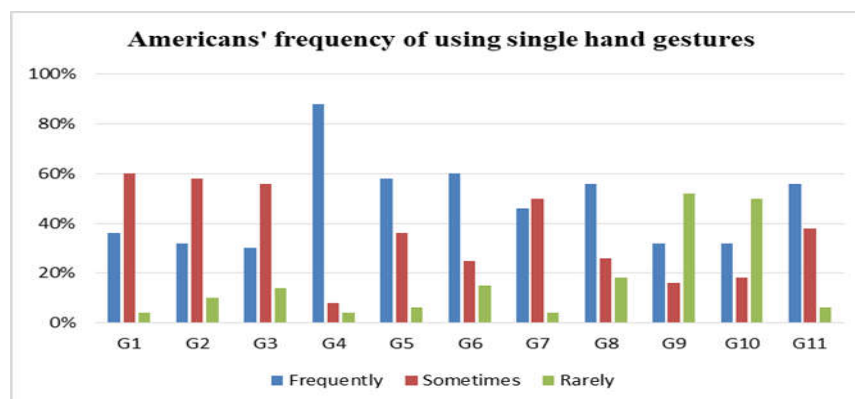


Figure 12. Frequency of using SHGs by Americans

(G1= the thumbs up, G2 = the OK sign, G3 = the thumbs down, G4 = the facepalm, G5 = the pointing finger, G6 = the hand covering mouth, G7 = the hand on chest, G8 = the fist pump, G9 = the loser, G10 = the throat slash, G11 = the middle finger)

5.1.2. Frequency of using SHGs to express emotions by Vietnamese

As can be seen from Figure 13, the facepalm, the hand covering mouth, and the hand on chest are by far more often used than the others. 94% of the Vietnamese participants frequently or sometimes use the facepalm; 96% use the hand covering mouth; and 90% use the hand on chest. Between 38% and 64% use the thumbs up, OK sign, thumbs down, pointing finger, and fist pump. Interestingly, nearly 100 % Vietnamese surveyed rarely use the loser, and around 96% hardly use the throat slash and the middle finger.

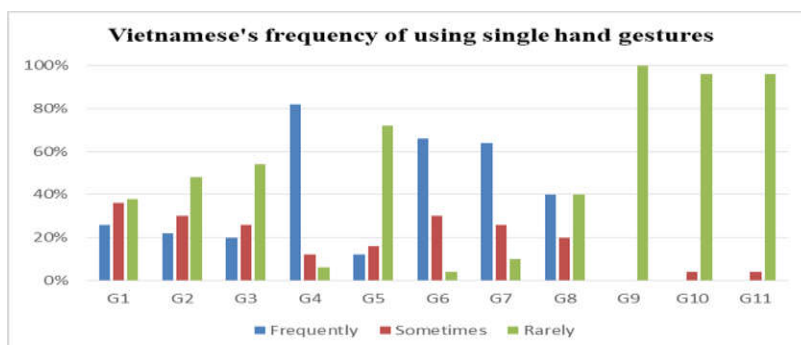


Figure 13. Frequency of using SHGs by Vietnamese

(G1= the thumbs up, G2 = the OK sign, G3 = the thumbs down, G4 = the facepalm, G5 = the pointing finger, G6 = the hand covering mouth, G7 = the hand on chest, G8 = the fist pump, G9 = the loser, G10 = the throat slash, G11 = the middle finger)

5.1.3. The comparative frequency of single hand gestures by Americans and Vietnamese

Table 1 presents the percentage of using each single hand gesture by American and Vietnamese participants. It can be seen that Americans generally use these gestures more frequently than Vietnamese people do. Interestingly, the gestures that are used the most by both Americans and Vietnamese are the facepalm, the hand on chest, followed by the hand covering mouth. The gesture that is used the least in both cultures is the loser, followed by the throat slash. While most of these gestures are used by Americans to express emotions, some of them are hardly used by the majority of Vietnamese people. Those include the loser, the throat slash, the middle finger and the pointing finger.

Table 1. American/ Vietnamese's frequency of using single hand gestures

Gesture	Americans' frequency			Vietnamese's frequency		
	<i>Frequently</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Frequently</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>
G1: the thumbs up	36%	60%	4%	28%	36%	36%
G2: the OK sign	32%	58%	10%	22%	30%	48%
G3: the thumbs down	30%	56%	14%	20%	26%	54%
G4: the facepalm	88%	8%	4%	82%	12%	6%
G5: the pointing finger	58%	36%	6%	12%	16%	72%
G6: the hand covering mouth	60%	25%	15%	66%	30%	4%
G7: the hand on chest	46%	50%	4%	64%	26%	10%
G8: the fist pump	56%	26%	18%	40%	20%	40%
G9: the loser	32%	16%	52%	0%	0%	100%
G10: the throat slash	32%	18%	50%	0%	4%	96%
G11: the middle finger	56%	38%	6%	0%	4%	96%

- The facepalm, the hand on chest, and the hand covering mouth:

As can be seen from Table 1, the facepalm, the hand on chest, and the hand covering mouth are the three mostly used single hand gestures in both cultures. Most of Americans frequently or sometimes use the facepalm (96%), the hand on chest (96%), and the hand covering mouth (85%). Similarly, 94%, 90%, and 96% of Vietnamese participants often use them respectively. Only between 4% and 15% of Americans and Vietnamese rarely perform these gestures. In short, the facepalm, the hand on chest, and the hand covering mouth are the most popular single hand gestures and the frequency of using these gestures by Americans and Vietnamese share a lot of similarities.

- The loser and the throat slash:

The single hand gestures that are used the least by both American and Vietnamese participants include the loser and the throat slash. While around half of Americans frequently or sometimes still use these two gestures, 100% and 96% rarely use the loser and the throat slash respectively.

- The middle finger and the pointing finger:

As can be seen from Table 1, there is a big contrast in the frequency of using the pointing finger and the middle finger by Americans and Vietnamese. While 94% of Americans frequently or sometimes use these two gestures, 72% and 96% of Vietnamese participants rarely use the middle finger and the pointing finger respectively. In all, although these gestures are unpopular with Vietnamese people, they are quite common with Americans.

- The thumbs up, the OK sign, the thumbs down, and the fist pump:

The thumbs up, the OK sign, the thumbs down, and the fist pump are also quite popular gestures in America, but not as so in Vietnam. While 96%, 90%, 86% and 82% of the participants frequently or sometimes use the thumbs up, the OK sign, the thumbs down, and the fist pump respectively, the rates of using them by Vietnamese participants are lower, accounting for only 64%, 52%, 46% and 60% respectively. In a nutshell, Americans tend to use these four gestures more often than Vietnamese though these gestures seem not an unfamiliar one with Vietnamese.

To sum up, among the eleven given SHGs, Americans tend to use them to express emotions more often than Vietnamese do. The facepalm, the hand covering mouth, and the hand on chest are used the most while the loser and the throat slash are used the least in both cultures.

5.2. Specific emotions expressed by SHGs (RQ2)

Question 2 queries which emotions are commonly expressed through SHGs by Americans/Vietnamese. Table 2 below presents the results collected from survey regarding specific emotions of each single hand gesture.

Table 2. Specific emotions of SHGs by Americans and Vietnamese

No	SHG	Americans	Vietnamese
1	The thumbs up	Contentment; Pride in achievement	Contentment; Pride in achievement
2	The OK sign	Contentment; Pride in achievement	Contentment; Pride in achievement
3	The thumbs down	Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction; Contempt
4	The facepalm	Sadness; Disappointment	Sadness; Disappointed
5	The pointing finger	Anger; Contentment	Anger
6	The hand covering mouth	Scare; Surprise	Scare; Surprise; Shame
7	The hand on chest	Scare; Surprise	Scare; Surprise
8	The fist pump	Excitement; Pride in achievement	Excitement; Pride in achievement

9	The loser	Contempt	No expression
10	The throat slash	Anger	Anger
11	The middle finger	Contempt; Anger	Contempt

It can be seen from the table above, every SHG is performed to express similar emotions by both Americans and Vietnamese. The thumbs up and the OK sign are done to express the emotions of contentment and pride in achievement in both cultures. The thumbs down is an action of dissatisfaction. However, it is sometimes used for expressing contempt by Vietnamese. Both cultures also use the facepalm to express sadness and dissatisfaction. The pointing finger for anger is popular in both cultures. Moreover, Americans perform it to express contentment as well. The hand covering mouth and the hand on chest are used for both surprise and scare. Besides, Vietnamese people sometimes use the hand covering mouth to show shame. The fist pump is generally used for expressing excitement and to show pride in achievement as well. The loser is not used in Vietnam whereas it means contempt for Americans. Making the throat slash means anger in both cultures. The middle finger is a symbol of contempt. For Americans, using the middle finger also means anger.

6. Findings and discussions

This study investigated the use of single hand gestures for expressing emotions by Americans and Vietnamese people. Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, this section discusses the differences and similarities in using single hand gestures for expressing emotions by Vietnamese and Americans in terms of frequency and meanings expressed by those gestures.

On the one hand, the results of the participants' responses show that Americans and Vietnamese share a lot of similarities in using SHGs. Firstly, the facepalm, the hand covering mouth, and the hand on chest are the most frequently used whereas the loser and the throat slash are used the least in both cultures. Secondly, the SHGs express similar meanings in both cultures. Specifically, the thumbs up and the OK sign are used for contentment and pride in achievement; the thumbs down is a gesture of disappointment; the facepalm is used to express sadness and disappointment; the hand on chest and the hand covering mouth are used to express scare and surprise; and the fist pump is for emotions of excitement and pride in achievement.

On the other hand, there are a number of differences between American and Vietnamese's use of SHGs. Firstly, regarding the frequency of using SHGs, Americans use all SHGs more often than Vietnamese do, especially the middle finger and the pointing finger. Although they are quite common with Americans, they are rarely used by Vietnamese people. For Vietnamese people, SHGs such as the loser and the throat slash are also hardly used. The thumbs up, the OK sign and the thumbs down are better known and used but they are not very common. Secondly, there are some differences in terms of meanings expressed by those SHGs. Vietnamese people tend to use the hand covering mouth for scare and surprise. Besides, they sometimes use it for shame. Apart from using the pointing finger for anger, Americans perform it to express contentment as well. Moreover, they use the middle finger not only for contempt but also for anger. These differences between Vietnamese and American cultures may result in misinterpretations and misunderstandings that can lead to breakdowns in cross-cultural communication.

As a matter of fact, SHGs may be comfort or insult in this culture but it can be anger or popular in other ones. While some SHGs are popularly used in Western cultures, it is impolite to use them in Asian countries in general and in Vietnam in particular. For example, the pointing finger is an indecent gesture in Vietnam. Therefore, it should not be used with the elderly people or a person with a higher status. However, there are two meanings of the pointing hand gesture in US. It means anger when someone uses it with an scowl on his or her face. Contrariwise, pointing finger with a wink can be a signal of positive appreciation or satisfaction like 'well-done', 'great' or 'exactly'. That is the reason why it is necessary to have some understanding of the use of gestures in difference countries

and focus attention to facial expression of the opposite to guess their meaning. Besides, the loser, the throat and the middle finger should not be used in Vietnam because their unfamiliar meanings may confuse a lot of Vietnamese. Moreover, the middle finger is often considered as an insult in US. It is popularly used to express anger and contempt. Thus, it should not be used in a formal circumstance. The understanding of cultural differences may help interactants considerably avoid potential culture shocks in cross-cultural communication. Last but not least, when you are in Rome, do as the Romans do.

7. Conclusion and suggestions

In conclusion, the study examined the use of SHGs by Americans and Vietnamese. Questionnaire was used as the main instrument to collect data. Results showed similarities and differences in term of the frequency of using the eleven common SHGs and their implied meanings. Despite the small number of the participants, the study is significant in providing a preliminary insight into the use of SHGs for expressing emotions by Vietnamese and Americans. It is hoped that understanding of the similarities and differences between the two cultures will increase intercultural communicative competence, and help avoid misinterpretations, misunderstandings, or culture shocks. For further studies, it is recommended that using gestures in specific cultural contexts with reference to individual differences should be examined (Kipp and Martin, 2009). Using a larger number of participants would yield a wider range of emotional expressions using the same gestures. More valid and reliable data collection tools such as observations are also needed for more genuine emotional expressions and more comprehensive results in potential areas of cross-cultural miscommunication.

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So sánh cách dùng cử chỉ bằng một tay để biểu hiện cảm xúc của người Mỹ và người Việt

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu sự giống và khác nhau của người Mỹ và người Việt Nam trong tần suất sử dụng cử chỉ bằng một tay để thể hiện cảm xúc cũng như ý nghĩa nội hàm của các cử chỉ đó. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp điều tra với sự tham gia của 50 người Việt Nam và 50 người Mỹ. Bảng câu hỏi khảo sát là công cụ thu thập dữ liệu chính. Kết quả cho thấy những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt liên quan đến tần suất sử dụng các cử chỉ một tay của người Mỹ và người Việt Nam cũng như các loại cảm xúc được thể hiện qua các cử chỉ đó. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy vai trò của kiến thức liên văn hóa trong việc giảm thiểu những hiểu lầm trong giao tiếp giữa các nền văn hóa khác nhau.

Từ khóa: cử chỉ một tay; tần suất; cảm xúc; giao tiếp liên văn hóa; giao tiếp phi ngôn từ.