

Enhancing Language Acquisition

Gestures in the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM)

Project Tokyo Case Study 1

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During our visit to The British School in Tokyo, we observed the implementation of the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) for language acquisition. AIM, developed in the 1990s by Canadian educator Wendy Maxwell, is a deeply immersive and multimodal approach that combines gestures, drama, music, storytelling, and structured repetition to rapidly foster fluency.

Wendy Maxwell began her career in 1984 as a French teacher in British Columbia. Frustrated that her learners were not achieving proficiency through conventional instruction, she radically reorganised her curriculum. Maxwell created a "pared-down language" approach by identifying high-frequency words and structures, weaving them into plays, songs, and stories that promoted collaboration and early oral confidence. To reinforce this learning, she introduced simple, intentional gestures for each vocabulary item thereby launching the foundational principle of AIM's "gesture approach." Through this multisensory pedagogy (listening, seeing, speaking, writing, and physically doing the language) learners began achieving authentic proficiency from the very first lesson.



In 2004, Maxwell co-founded 'AIM Language Learning', expanding the methodology globally. Her work has received multiple prestigious awards: the Canadian Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence (1999), the H. H. Stern Award for Innovation in Second Languages (2004), and recognition for innovation from the North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce (2015). AIM has since been implemented worldwide and is supported by extensive teacher training and published resources; Maxwell herself has authored close to 100 instructional books.

Through AIM's pared-down language, gestural reinforcement, and Expressive Arts integrated pedagogy, Maxwell has transformed language learning into an active, inclusive, and effective experience well aligned with how learners naturally acquire languages and perfectly exemplified in the vibrant classrooms at the British School in Tokyo. This case study explores how gestures function within AIM and the benefits they offer, particularly in contrast to traditional language teaching practices in Wales.

Gestures as Semantic Anchors

At the British School in Tokyo every vocabulary item is paired with a specific, intentional gesture which follows the AIM methodology. These gestures are designed to visually and kinaesthetically represent the meaning of the word. This pairing creates a visual semantic anchor which is a physical cue that reinforces meaning and aids memory retention. Learners internalise vocabulary without relying on translation, allowing for more natural language acquisition. The British School in Tokyo reinforces this in all of the lessons observed; from French to Mathematics to Japanese they demonstrated the versatility and effectiveness of gesture-based learning across subjects.

Multimodal Learning

Gestures engage multiple sensory modalities: visual (seeing the gesture), auditory (hearing the word), and kinaesthetic (performing the gesture). This multimodal approach aligns with cognitive research indicating that learning is more effective when multiple senses are engaged. It supports diverse learning styles, including those who benefit from movement and visual cues, and enhances overall engagement. This multimodal learning was evident in all classrooms at the British School in Tokyo, and the consistency in pedagogy was reinforced as all the teachers, moved from one classroom to another, teaching language acquisition in various languages across the lower school.

Incorporating gestures into language acquisition instruction offers several benefits:

- Enhanced retention: physical movement reinforces memory;
- Improved fluency: gestures support automatic recall of structures;
- Multimodal engagement: combines visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning;
- Inclusive teaching: supports diverse learning styles and needs.

Teachers can design gesture-based activities, such as sentence-building games, verb conjugation drills, and storytelling exercises, to integrate this approach into their classrooms.

Immediate Comprehension Without Translation

AIM classrooms use gestures to eliminate the need for direct translation. Teachers introduce new words by performing the gesture and saying the word in the target language. Learners quickly associate the gesture with the meaning, bypassing the need to translate into their first language. This immersion technique accelerates comprehension and helps learners think directly in the target language.

Scaffolding Sentence Construction

Gestures are used not only for individual words but also to scaffold entire sentences. As learners grasp sentence structures, they use gestures to represent each component, helping them visualise grammar patterns, remember word order, and build fluency through muscle memory. For example, one observation showed constructing the sentence わたしはがっこうにいきたいです (I want to go to school) involving gestures for each word or phrase:

- わたしは (I [pronoun]) – gesture for self and subject marker
- がっこうに (to school) – gesture indicating direction or location
- いきたいです (want to go) – gesture showing movement and desire

This approach reinforces syntax and meaning simultaneously, supporting learners in mastering Japanese sentence structure through embodied learning.

Reinforcing Verb Conjugation

Gestures can differentiate verb forms and tenses. For example, the present tense verb いきます (go) might be paired with a forward-moving gesture, while the past tense いきました (went) could include a backward motion to indicate a shift in time. This physical cue helps learners internalise conjugation patterns without relying solely on abstract grammatical rules. The gesture becomes a prompt for the correct form, supporting grammatical accuracy and fluency.

Supporting Function Words and Grammar Particles

Function words like clauses and conjunctions are often overlooked in traditional teaching. In AIM, each has a gesture, ensuring they are actively used and understood in context. For example, the subject might be represented by a gesture that sets the stage, while direction or location could involve a pointing motion. This builds grammatical accuracy and fluency, as learners consistently include these essential components in their speech and writing.

Reducing Cognitive Load

Using gestures allows learners to offload some cognitive effort onto physical memory, freeing up mental space to focus on meaning and communication rather than grammar rules. This is especially beneficial for younger learners or those with additional learning needs, making grammar more accessible and less intimidating.

Error Correction Through Gesture

Teachers can correct grammar errors non-verbally by repeating the correct gesture sequence. This provides immediate feedback, reinforces correct grammar, and maintains immersion in the target language. It allows for subtle, effective correction without interrupting the flow of communication and reinforces growth mindset and learning through mistakes.

Grammar as a Pattern, Not as a Rule

Gestures transform grammar from a set of abstract rules into a pattern of movement and sound. This mirrors how children acquire their first language through repeated exposure to patterns rather than formal instruction. AIM's gesture-based approach makes grammar intuitive and embodied, leading to deeper understanding and retention.

Japanese Gesture Examples

In the context of Japanese language acquisition, AIM gestures are adapted to reflect culturally and linguistically appropriate cues. For instance:

- The verb "taberu" (to eat) is taught with a hand-to-mouth motion, mimicking the act of eating.
- "Miru" (to look) is paired with a gesture resembling holding binoculars or framing the eyes.
- "Kiku" (to listen) may involve cupping the ear.
- "Aruku" (to walk) could be represented by alternating hand movements to simulate walking.

These gestures help learners connect physical actions with abstract language concepts, reinforcing meaning and supporting long-term retention. They also provide a universal, inclusive way for learners of all backgrounds to access and internalise Japanese vocabulary and grammar.

Implications for Welsh Schools

The consistent use of gestures in AIM offers valuable lessons for schools in Wales seeking to improve language acquisition outcomes. By adopting a unified, gesture-based pedagogy across classrooms consistently, Welsh schools can:

- Promote early oral production and confidence in speaking;
- Reduce reliance on translation and encourage immersive learning;
- Support diverse learners through multimodal engagement;
- Improve retention of vocabulary and grammar through physical reinforcement;
- Foster consistency in teaching practices across year groups and schools.

Professional development focused on AIM principles especially the use of gestures, pared-down language, and arts integration could empower Welsh educators to implement these strategies effectively. A whole-school approaches and multi-school approaches would ensure that learners experience coherent, engaging, and inclusive language instruction from early years through secondary education.

Conclusion

Our observations at British School in Tokyo demonstrated that gestures in AIM are not merely supportive tools, they are central to the method's success. By embedding grammar into physical movement, AIM enables learners to internalise complex structures naturally and confidently. Compared to traditional approaches in Wales, which often rely on translation and rule-based instruction, AIM's gesture-based pedagogy offers a dynamic, inclusive, and effective alternative for accelerating language acquisition. With thoughtful adaptation and consistent implementation, Welsh schools can harness the power of AIM to transform language learning outcomes across the curriculum.

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