

# **An investigation of students' attitudes on teachers' nonverbal interaction in Iranian EFL classrooms**

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## **To cite this article:**

Fatemeh Behjat, Samaneh Bayat, Ali Asghar Kargar. An Investigation of Students' Attitudes on Teachers' Nonverbal Interaction in Iranian EFL Classrooms. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*. Special Issue: Innovations in Foreign Language Teaching. Vol. 2, No. 6-1, 2014, pp. 13-18. doi: 10.11648/j.ijll.s.2014020601.13

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**Abstract:** The aim of present research was to investigate the importance of nonverbal communication in EFL students' language learning. Communication is a means of sharing ideas, feelings, and attitudes. It is separated into two types: verbal and nonverbal. In verbal communication, we use the language while nonverbal communication is the behavior that can be perceived indirectly from physical language. The nonverbal aspect of communication, which plays an extremely important role in human social interaction, has been known for a long time, but it has hardly been investigated. Ignorance of nonverbal communication will result in problems in education such as incompleteness and inefficiency of classroom teaching. This study was conducted in Shariyar, Iran. The participants were 70 Iranian students at Shahriyar Islamic Azad University. They were selected from among B.A. students majoring in English teaching. The data were gathered through a questionnaire. The results showed high positive attitudes towards teachers' facial expressions and eye contact as two forms of nonverbal communication in Iranian students' L2 learning.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Teaching, Nonverbal Communication, Students' Attitude

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## **1. Introduction**

To be successful in communication, one needs to be both competent and experienced, not only in verbal communication but also in non-verbal one as well because much of the communication takes place at the nonverbal level.

Non-verbal Communication takes various forms, one of which is oral or speech. When people speak, they normally do not confine themselves to the mere emission of words. Furthermore, they also use their hands or gestures, head movements, eye contact, through smiling, body postures and symbols to communicate. The impact of these nonlinguistic cues in conversation is called non-verbal communication (NVC). It includes the "messages other than words that people exchange" (Gregersen, 2007, p. 52). In this definition, messages are seen as symbolic, which are "Silent infiltrators that provide us with a mode for conveying messages without the use of verbal language" (Dunn, 1999, p. 1).

Nonverbal communication is the process of one person stimulating meaning in the mind of another person by means of non-linguistic cues such as facial expressions, gestures, etc. This can be implied by the words of Miller (1988) who

defined nonverbal communication as communication without words. It includes overt behaviors such as "facial expressions, eyes, touching and tone of voice, as well as less obvious messages such as dress, postures and spatial distance between two or more people" (Miller, 1988, p. 3). "It includes both behavior and communication" (Hickson & Stacks, 1993, p.5). It is a process whereby people, through intentional or unintentional manipulation of normative actions and expectations, express experiences, feelings, and attitudes either singly or in combination with verbal behaviors in the exchange and interpretation of messages within a given situation or context and tell us about whether verbal messages are true, joking, serious, threatening and so on. The following differences between verbal and non-verbal communication will make this even clear. First, the majorities of nonverbal behaviors (NVBs) are intuitive and based on normative rules. There are not any clear-cut linguistic structures for non-verbal communication.

On the other hand, "verbal communication is highly structured and reinforced through an extensive formal and informal learning process" (Harris, 2002, p.153). Second, verbal communication is confined to the use of language. On the contrary, NVC delivers a message beyond the words. For

the analysis, this is a useful division. However, "nonverbal communication is so inextricably bound up with verbal aspects of the communication process that we can only separate them artificially" (Knapp, 1972, p. v).

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not distinct patterns can be found with regard to nonverbal communication process between instructors and students in the language classroom setting, which can lead to better language learning. This study also aimed at determining what forms of nonverbal patterns can be observed in instructor-students interactions in language classroom setting.

### 1.1. Literature Review

Nonverbal communication is the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless, mostly visual, cues between people. Messages can be communicated through gestures and touch, body language or posture, physical distance, facial expression and eye contact, which are all types of nonverbal communication. Speech contains nonverbal elements known as paralinguage, including voice quality, rate, pitch, volume, and speaking style, as well as prosodic features such as rhythm, intonation, and stress. Likewise, written texts have nonverbal elements such as handwriting style, spatial arrangement of words, or the physical layout of a page. However, much of the study of nonverbal communication has focused on face-to-face interaction, where it can be classified into three principal areas: environmental conditions where communication takes place, physical characteristics of the communicators, and behaviors of communicators during interaction.

Non-verbal behaviors are innate and universal. People in different cultures have a common understanding of non-verbal cues; however, the total meaning of discourse can be culturally determined and differ in different countries. For example, as Davis (1990) says, Caucasian school teachers associate students' avoidance of eye contact with deception whereas Asian students see such avoidance as a sign of respect.

Non-verbal communication uses wide varieties of non-linguistic cues such as bodily postures, facial expressions and touching behaviors simultaneously with the linguistic ones. These behaviors may change over time and across generations due to the changing cultural factors. For example, Nepalese male and female students in past did not use to sit together in the classroom. They even felt shy while talking but nowadays they shake their hands, sit and walk together. The role of non-verbal communication vary "depending on the age, sex, and the various culture involved" (Harris, 2002, p. 155). Most of the non-verbal behaviors are involuntary. For example, facial expressions such as blushing, sweating, or yawning are largely beyond the control of the individual. In such a case, the context and power relationships among participants play the vital role.

McNeill (1992) estimated that up to 82% of the communication techniques employed by teachers in the classroom are nonverbal, while other researchers such as Neuliep (2003) postulated that as much as 90% of all

communication occurs through nonverbal behavior. Taking the above figures into consideration, it is thus surprising that "linguists and SLA researchers have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with verbal aspects of language" (Lazaraton, 2004, p.80), and that "virtually no empirical studies have been conducted which systematically examine how FL teachers use nonverbal behaviors in ways that enhance comprehension of FL input" (Allen, 2000, p.156). Similarly, McCaffert (1998) pointed out that very little research has focused on the role that different forms of nonverbal communication play in second language learning although it has been considered to be potentially important. Meaning during the communication process is made "... in relation to the specifics of who we are, where we are, who we are talking to, and what we are talking about..." (Lazzarti & Turk, 2008, p.134).

At present, most researchers believe that nonverbal communication is highly cultural specific and that it is, to a certain degree, employed unconsciously (O'Rourke, 2004). Wardaugh (1985) argued that although much of non-verbal behavior is unconscious, it is learned and therefore specific to the cultural group in which it was learned. This learning process usually occurs through enculturation. Brown (2000, p.262-263) expands on Wardaugh's argument, stating "... the expression of culture is so bound up in nonverbal communication that the barriers of culture learning are more nonverbal than verbal ...there is tremendous variation cross-culturally and cross-linguistically in the specific interpretation of gestures".

It should be kept in mind that the nonverbal behavior employed by the individuals in a culture is heterogeneous and that intercultural variation does occur. It was argued by Fiksdal (1990, p.47) that "nonverbal behavior is inherently ambiguous because it is highly dependent on context for its interpretation ... since gestures are culturally and individually grounded".

Knapp and Hall (1992) made two important points regarding non-verbal behaviors. They say while we are in the presence of another person, we constantly give signals about our attitudes, feelings, and personality; and also people who receive these signals may become particularly adept at sensing and interpreting these signals. These points underscore the importance teachers need to attach to their knowledge and use non-verbal behaviors in the classroom. A person's non-verbal behavior has more bearing than his words when transmitting feelings or attitudes to others. According to Mehrabian (1971), ninety-three percent of the emotional meaning is transmitted through nonverbal communication and 38 percent by verbal expression.

Grant and Hennings (1971) indicated that as much as 82 percent of teacher messages are non-verbal while 18 percent are verbal. Knapp and Hall (1992) estimated that in simultaneous verbal and non-verbal communication, approximately 65 percent of the meaning is created by the non-verbal messages.

Argyle (1979) indicated one of the key processes in social skill sequences occurs when interactor A does what B wants

him to do; B is pleased and sends immediate and spontaneous reinforcement such as a smile, gaze, or verbal approval signals which modifies A's behavior. He indicated that A is modifying B's behavior the same way at exactly the same time. Thus, one may conclude that a teacher who exhibits non-verbal behaviors which students perceive as being strong rewards or punishments will be able to modify their behavior in a desired direction.

Through conducting a survey, Richmond and McCroskey (1995) reported more than 10,000 teachers felt that non-verbal behavior was a more effective communicative tool for improving student-teacher relationships than verbal communication. They also asserted that "many teachers discovered non-verbal communication helps them to be better controllers, managers, and helpers because non-verbal communication is more subtle and can be used more often" (p. 214-291).

Non-verbal behavior in a diverse classroom setting can be frustrating for students and teachers. Manning and Baruth (1996) indicated that "in most school settings, teachers expect the culturally diverse learner to adopt the non-verbal communication of the majority culture of the school. Such a practice forces the minority diverse students to become bicultural". In order to minimize student frustrations associated with non-verbal communication, Manning and Baruth suggested that teachers analyze particular non-verbal behaviors when students do not respond as teachers expect.

According to Kroehnert (2006), nonverbal communication is anything that can alter or reinforce the message in any form of communication. He believed that we communicate nonverbally by the way we dress, our posture, the expression on our face, the amount of eye contact used, the way we position our hands, the way we touch things and the way we listen. Even a simple statement can have its meaning altered or reinforced by the way we shrug our shoulders when we put it to the group, by inflection in our voice when we say it, by the way it is written or typed when we give it as a handout. He further indicated that around 65 percent of our communication is through nonverbal signals, while other studies show that this figure could be as high as 93 percent. Teachers should be experts in communication, so it follows that they must know about these signals.

Hybels and Weaver (2004) presented four functions of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal gestures complement, regulate, substitute, and accent. They further stated the characteristics of nonverbal communication that all forms of nonverbal communication have four characteristics in common. First, much nonverbal communication is unique to the culture or subculture to which you belong. Second, verbal and nonverbal messages may be in conflict with one another. Third, much nonverbal communication operates at a subconscious level, that is, you are often not aware of it. Fourth, your nonverbal communication shows your feelings and attitude. These characteristics are considered basic principles that govern nonverbal communication.

Locker (2004) indicated communication does not use words; it takes place all the time. Smiles, frowns, place at a

meeting, the size of an office, length of a visitor waiting. All these, communicate pleasure or anger, friendliness or distance, power and status. Most of the time, we are no more conscious of interpreting nonverbal signals than we are conscious of breathing.

Zwozdiak-Myers and Capel (2005) stated that much teacher-pupil communication is nonverbal such as appearance, gestures, postures, facial expressions and mannerism. Non-verbal communication supports or detracts from verbal communication, depending on whether or not verbal; and non-verbal signals match each other; for examples, if one is praising someone and smiling and looking pleased, or if someone is telling him off and looking stern and sounding firm, you are sending a consistent message and are perceived as sincere. On the other hand, if you are smiling when telling someone off or are looking bored when praising someone, you are sending a conflicting message that causes confusion and misunderstanding.

In another research, Young (2006) stated that communication is more than words. The body language speaks to listeners through visual elements, such as eye contact, physical distance between the speaker and the listener, gestures, postures, and body orientation. Body language is as much a part of casual communication as it is of formal presentations.

Devito (2009) stated that space is a very important aspect of inter personal communication, but most of the time we overlook it. He further categorized the following four types of space or distance under a broad heading of 'Proxemic Distances or Spatial Distances': Intimate distance ranges from touch to 18 inches and considered close relationship between two persons. Personal distance ranges from 18 inches to 4 feet and a word 'bubble' is used for this category. Bubble keeps a distance between the persons and protects a person from touch by others. Social distance ranges from 4 feet to 12 feet and is more formal and loses the visual details, which one can have in personal distance. Public distance ranges from 12 feet to more than 25 feet. In this situation, one cannot visualize minute details but still can see what is happening around.

Following Kroehnert (2006), Young (2006), and Devito (2009), the research question posed in the present study is what Iranian EFL students' ideas about the nonverbal behavior of instructors in language classes are.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were students of Shahriar Islamic Azad University. The total number of participants was 70 students (11 males and 59 females). The students were selected from among B.A students majoring in English teaching. They were native speakers of Persian, and English was regarded as a foreign language for all of them. All of them were consent for their participation and took part in the study quite voluntarily.

## 2.2. Instruments

The major source of the data collection was a questionnaire. A close-ended questionnaire in English was developed for the students. The questions were chosen close because often people do not have enough time and patience to respond questions. Also the wording of questions was chosen in a way to make sure that everyone would understand them.

The questionnaire included statements to which the participants were expected to respond anonymously. It was taken from MUHAMMAD NAEEM BUTT's article. The students' questionnaire consisted of 28 items. All the items used 5-point Likert's scale. The questionnaires solicited the information on body language, facial expression and eye contact. The Likert format had 5 points adapted from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scales were coded as (Strongly Agree =5, Agree =4, Undecided =3, Disagree =2, Strongly Disagree =1).

## 2.3. Procedures

The participants answered the questions during their class time. At the beginning, the instructor gave them information about the questionnaire to ensure that students clearly understood the instructions. Also the students were ensuring that their responses would be kept secret. Then, the collected data from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively, and the emerging patterns of findings were interpreted to clarify the nonverbal interaction of instructors with EFL students' language proficiency.

## 3. Results & Discussion

As mentioned before, the question posed in this study was to investigate students' idea about the nonverbal behavior of instructor in class. After computing percentages and analyzing the data by SPSS, the results were presented in frequencies. The following tables summarize the students' responses in terms of instructors' nonverbal communication. Table 1 shows the frequency of the students' ideas towards facial expressions.

*Table 1. Students' Views about Instructors' Facial Expressions*

| <i>Responses*</i> / <i>Items</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| Statement 1                      | 16             | 29    | 23        | 2        | 0                 |
| Statement 2                      | 18             | 30    | 20        | 2        | 0                 |
| Statement 3                      | 21             | 24    | 22        | 3        | 0                 |
| Statement 4                      | 23             | 25    | 21        | 1        | 0                 |
| Statement 5                      | 17             | 22    | 29        | 2        | 0                 |
| Statement 6                      | 23             | 23    | 19        | 5        | 0                 |
| Statement 7                      | 13             | 30    | 25        | 2        | 0                 |

As Table 1 indicated, facial expressions are considered one of the most important techniques in class and out of 70 students, 30 students agreed with the statement that teacher's facial expressions positively affect the teaching learning

process in classroom, and only 1 of the students disagreed with the statement that anger on teacher's face motivates students to take interest in the studies. Table 2 indicates frequency of students' ideas towards eye contact.

*Table 2. Students' Views about Teachers' Eye Contact*

| <i>Responses*</i> / <i>Items</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| Statement 1                      | 33             | 29    | 7         | 1        | 0                 |
| Statement 2                      | 32             | 29    | 9         | 0        | 0                 |
| Statement 3                      | 28             | 37    | 4         | 1        | 0                 |
| Statement 4                      | 23             | 37    | 10        | 0        | 0                 |
| Statement 5                      | 30             | 32    | 6         | 1        | 0                 |
| Statement 6                      | 21             | 38    | 8         | 3        | 0                 |

As Table 2 highlighted, eye contact is considered one of the most important techniques in class and out of 70 students, 38 students agreed with the statement that instructor's regular eye contact makes the classroom environment alive to the lesson taught and 1 of the students disagreed with the statement that teacher's eye contact makes students attentive in the class.

The results of this study support that body language was considered as an important nonverbal communication. Antes (1996) describe this unique function of body language as

being able to stand alone and replace the spoken language. According to Antes (1996), body language is one of the important semiotic systems that people use in their lives. From this perspective, the body language system should be presented with verbal system to the learners so as to enable them to be really competent in that language (Antes, 1996).

The findings are compatible with some of the empirical studies conducted earlier and reported in introduction and literature review. In Kusanagi's study (2003), 19 of 35 learners responded that teacher's gestures made them relax.

Both Allen (2000) and Kusanagi reported that the learners said the teacher's gestures were stimulating and fun. Toyama (1993) and Kita (2000) similarly concluded that one key function of gestures is to build positive relationships between the interlocutors. Although great caution should be taken in accepting these assertions, nonverbal behaviors play an important role in human interaction, and an extensive number of NVC studies (Harris, 2002; Davis, 1990) stress the importance of nonverbal behavior.

## 4. Conclusion

According to the results of this study, students agree that teachers' facial expressions and eye contact can play a role in students' language learning. Teachers can make the learning environment active through their eye contact whereby students feel alert in the classrooms and take active participation in the learning process, which consequently enhances the level of their retention and understanding. Body movements also provide a strong foundation to the teachers to teach effectively and their proper use supplied additional information to the students especially in the teaching of stories. Proper use of head, shoulders, and hands facilitated the students in better understanding of difficult learning concepts, and the use of this technique by teachers also reflects their expertise in the field of teaching.

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