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NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION NORMS FOR EFL TEACHERS

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article explores the significant role of nonverbal communication in the classroom, emphasizing its impact on teaching and learning. Drawing from historical and contemporary perspectives, it highlights how body language—encompassing facial expressions, gestures, posture, and eye contact—affects student engagement, behavior management, and overall classroom dynamics. The article reviews various categories of nonverbal communication and their practical applications, including the importance of maintaining eye contact, using expressive gestures, and respecting cultural differences in personal space and touch. By integrating insights from prominent scholars and behavioral theories, the article underscores the necessity for teachers to align verbal and nonverbal messages to enhance credibility and foster a positive learning environment.

Introduction

"Of those who say nothing, few are silent," says Thomas Neil emphasizing the power of silence and body language in communication. There is another quotation by Ralph Waldo Emerson that manifests the priority of nonverbal communication over spoken words: "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say."

The role of body language elements in the context of teaching is undeniably immense. Body language is an ancient field of study, initially known as Physiognomy.[12] This practice involved interpreting a person's temperament and character based on their outward

appearance. Robert Fulghum says that teachers shouldn't worry that the children never listen to them; they should worry that they are always being watched by them. Nonverbal communication functions in many different ways. Body language can captivate students' attention and keep them engaged. A teacher who uses expressive gestures, maintains eye contact, and moves around the classroom can command attention more effectively. Nonverbal cues can help convey emotions, clarify instructions, and provide feedback without words. Body language can also be an effective tool for managing classroom behavior. A teacher's confident and assertive posture can establish authority and control, while subtle cues like a raised eyebrow or a firm stance can signal to students when they need to refocus or behave appropriately. Positive body language, such as smiling, nodding, and maintaining an open posture, can help build rapport and create a positive classroom atmosphere. This can foster trust between teachers and students, making the learning environment more conducive to collaboration and participation.

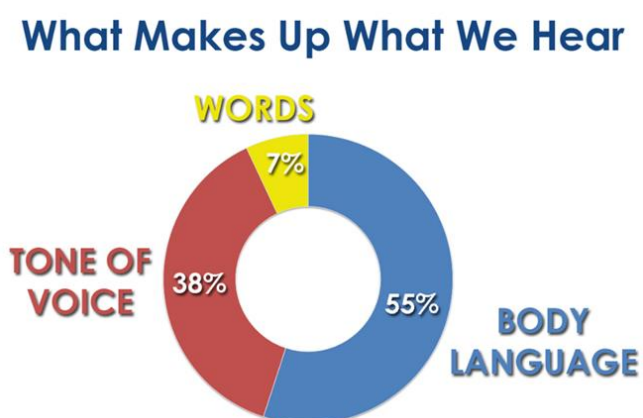
Learners are sensitive to teacher's body language elements. For example, nine-year-old Nadav says that when teachers smile at him, it demonstrates their love to him. That's why "the most effective and persuasive communication in classroom occurs when verbal and nonverbal messages are in sync, creating communication synergy." [1]

Teachers employ nonverbal communication for the subsequent purposes: [5]

- Verbal expressions are constrained in their effectiveness.
- Nonverbal cues carry significant influence.
- Nonverbal communications tend to be more authentic.
- Nonverbal signals can convey emotions too uncomfortable to articulate.
- An additional communication avenue is essential for conveying intricate

messages.

To illustrate, the chart below can say more than words: [11]



Teachers can gain insights into students' understanding, engagement, and emotional states by observing their nonverbal cues. Facial expressions, posture, and eye contact can signal whether a student is confused, disinterested, or needs further support. This awareness allows teachers to adjust their teaching methods and provide targeted feedback. However, when a teacher's verbal messages conflict with their nonverbal signals, it can confuse students and impact their learning and attitudes. Teachers must strive for consistency between what they say and how they express it nonverbally, creating what is referred to as communication "synergy." [10]

Materials and methods

Zoric et al. provide what appears to be a scientifically grounded and highly comprehensive categorization of nonverbal communication. [8] They identify ten distinct types: (1) Chronemics, which involves the timing of speech and pauses; (2) Haptics, which relates to physical touch between individuals; (3) Kinesics, covering all forms of body movement such as facial expressions, eye movements, gestures, and posture; (4) Oculistics, focusing on both deliberate and inadvertent eye contact during communication; (5) Olfactics, which considers the impact of odors; (6) Physical Appearance, including aspects like body characteristics, clothing, and hairstyle; (7) Proxemics, which involves the use of personal space and the arrangement of objects; (8) Silence, referring to the absence of verbal and nonverbal cues; (9) Symbolism, which pertains to the meanings conveyed by symbols; and (10) Vocalics, which includes the influence of vocal elements like tone, pitch, volume, and speech rate. In practice, these categories of nonverbal communication rarely occur in isolation; they typically interact with one another in real communication scenarios. There are some points to be regarded here:

Facial expressions such as smiling, nodding, or frowning can express emotions and reactions, reinforcing or modifying student behavior. Eye contact can create an individual connection with each student, enhancing engagement and making students feel seen and valued. Knapp and Hall identify five key functions of eye contact: managing the flow of conversation, assessing feedback, indicating cognitive processes, conveying emotions, and revealing the nature of interpersonal relationships. [4] However, excessive or insufficient eye contact can also cause discomfort, so balance is key. What concerns physical touch, small children benefit from positive touch, like a pat on the back or a high-five, which can boost confidence. However, as students grow older, particularly in diverse cultural settings, such touching becomes less appropriate, and alternatives like verbal praise or other rewards should be used, especially considering cultural sensitivities, such as those in Islamic traditions where cross-gender touching is often prohibited. Currently, the only form of physical contact between

students and teachers that is generally accepted is shaking hands to acknowledge a job done well. However, students from Islamic backgrounds may hold beliefs that prohibit physical contact with individuals of the opposite sex, including handshakes, even with their own teachers. Consequently, teachers should consider alternative methods to recognize and reward the achievements of these students, such as presenting "well-done" cards or other forms of acknowledgment.

Voice also counts. The way a teacher uses their voice—including tone, pitch, and volume—can greatly influence the classroom environment. A clear, upbeat, and controlled voice can capture students' attention and convey enthusiasm, while a monotone or low volume may lead to disengagement.

Teachers' postures and gestures should also align with their spoken messages. Open postures and expressive gestures can convey openness and confidence, while closed postures (e.g., crossed arms) might signal defensiveness or disengagement. Gestures should be purposeful and relevant to the content being taught, enhancing the verbal message. In addition, how teachers move and position themselves in the classroom affects student interaction and perception as well. Teachers who move around the classroom and reduce physical barriers, like standing behind a desk for too long, can foster a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. It's important to recognize that the accepted amount of personal space varies culturally and contextually, with formal and informal settings dictating different proximities.

Personal space differs widely between cultures and individuals, with its dimensions and boundaries shifting based on the context. In the United States, informal personal space is generally divided into four distinct categories:[9]

Intimate Space – This is for close relationships, such as sharing, protecting, and comforting, and ranges from 0 to 15 centimeters.

Personal Space – This zone is used for informal conversations between friends and ranges from 15 to 40 centimeters.

Social Space – Commonly used for interactions between strangers, teachers and students, or business acquaintances, and ranges from 40 centimeters to 4 meters.

Public Space – This is typically reserved for one-way communication, such as lectures, and ranges from 4 to 25 meters.

Results and discussion

Every culture establishes its own communication norms for its members who speak the language. According to Hartley and Karinch (2007), culture can be defined simply as the

accepted social norms within a group (p. 38).[3] The following observations provide clear examples that support the statement above:[13]

- In American culture, white Americans tend to make eye contact about 80% of the time when listening, but this drops to around 50% when they are speaking. In contrast, African-Americans are more likely to maintain eye contact while speaking and less so when listening (Burgoon J.K. and Bacue A., 2003). In many Western cultures, eye contact during conversations signals attentiveness, interest, and respect towards the speaker. However, in Asian and African cultures, direct eye contact can be perceived as disrespectful, impolite, or even aggressive, while averting one's gaze is often seen as a sign of politeness (Ting-Toomey S., 1999). In Arab cultures, individuals are generally more inclined to maintain direct and prolonged eye contact compared to other cultures. Among the Japanese, direct eye contact with speakers of higher social status or older age is considered highly inappropriate, so they often nod their heads and look downward instead.

- In terms of personal space, Latin Americans typically interact at closer distances compared to Europeans, while Italians tend to be in closer proximity than both Germans and Americans. Arabs often stand very close to each other during conversations, a behavior that can be perceived as intrusive or aggressive by Westerners. Similar to Arabs, Southern Europeans, Russians, Latin Americans, and Africans frequently engage in physical touch during interactions, whereas East Asians, including Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, generally avoid touching and maintain more distance. Meanwhile, individuals from Canada, the USA, Northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand usually occupy a middle ground between these two extremes.

- Cultural misunderstandings can also arise from different nonverbal cues, as seen with Russian students in the United States who often feel that their teachers smile excessively, perceiving it as a lack of seriousness. Conversely, American teachers might misinterpret Russian students' lack of smiling as a sign of disengagement or lack of enjoyment in class. These types of miscommunications underscore the importance of cross-cultural understanding, especially regarding nonverbal behaviors.

There many more other do`s and don`ts regarding teachers` effective use of body language elements:[2]

1. Open body language is more welcomed. Individuals who fold their arms, cross their legs, or turn their bodies away typically indicate a rejection of the communicated message. Conversely, those who display open hands, face their audience fully, and keep both feet on the ground (when seated) tend to be more receptive and engaged, demonstrating a willingness to

interact positively. By contrast, when people lean forward and direct their attention towards you, even slightly, they are actively engaging with or evaluating the information being presented. However, if they lean back, gaze at the ceiling, or become preoccupied with other tasks (like fiddling with their fingers or cleaning their glasses), it often signals disinterest or boredom, indicating a passive reception of the information.

2. As a teacher, it's crucial to project your voice clearly and energetically to maintain control over your students' attention. Nothing is more frustrating for students than struggling to hear a lecturer who speaks too softly or unclearly.

3. Remaining behind the table for extended periods can create a physical barrier between you and your students, potentially hindering communication during class.

4. Use the space around you to convey confidence and comfort in your classroom. Your movement and posture on stage should reflect assurance, helping to build trust with your audience. However, excessive movement can lead to confusion and distraction among your students.

5. A more expressive face tends to capture students' attention and encourages greater participation, helping to achieve the goals of the class.

6. According to behaviorists, our unconscious use of hand gestures helps us identify trustworthy individuals. Teachers should keep their hands visible and use gestures effectively alongside their verbal communication to convey trustworthiness and engage students.[7] In many cultures, pointing with the index finger is seen as impolite or disrespectful, particularly when directed at someone, and using the left hand for pointing may be considered taboo. Using an open hand for pointing is often viewed as more respectful. Additionally, keeping your arms behind your back can signal defensiveness or vulnerability.

7. Focusing on your notebook or register rather than making eye contact with your students can convey uncertainty and anxiety, potentially undermining your credibility and impeding effective communication. It is advisable to engage in eye contact with students as they enter the classroom to avoid projecting an impression of vulnerability or timidity. However, it is important to exercise discretion, as excessive eye contact may lead to discomfort or feelings of being scrutinized among students. Strategically distributing eye contact among all students can enhance your authoritative presence and foster a positive rapport, thereby establishing an immediate connection, as suggested by Morris.[6]

8. Teachers should avoid adopting slouched or casual postures, such as standing with hands in pockets or leaning on furniture, as these can convey a lack of professionalism or engagement.

Conclusion

To sum up, nonverbal communication is a powerful tool that, when used effectively, can enhance teaching and foster a more engaging and inclusive classroom environment. By being mindful of cultural differences and using body language to complement verbal communication, EFL teachers can improve their interactions with students and create a positive learning atmosphere.

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