

A Study on the Use of Nonverbal Signals by EFL Students at Tomakaka University During Academic Activities

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan isyarat nonverbal pada mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Tomakaka Mamuju dalam konteks akademik. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan bagaimana mahasiswa memanfaatkan isyarat nonverbal selama interaksi di kelas untuk menunjukkan keterlibatan dan memfasilitasi komunikasi. Sebanyak 30 mahasiswa berpartisipasi sebagai subjek penelitian. Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif, data diperoleh melalui rekaman video, observasi kelas, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Analisis konten diterapkan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mengategorikan perilaku nonverbal, dengan fokus pada kontak mata, gestur, postur tubuh, dan ekspresi wajah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa secara aktif menggunakan kontak mata, gerakan tangan, perubahan postur, dan ekspresi wajah sebagai bagian integral dari praktik komunikatif mereka. Perilaku nonverbal tersebut berkontribusi pada pola interaksi yang lebih jelas dan mendukung partisipasi mahasiswa dalam proses pembelajaran. Studi ini menegaskan pentingnya komunikasi nonverbal dalam konteks akademik serta menyarankan bahwa pemahaman terhadap isyarat tersebut dapat membantu pendidik dalam mengembangkan strategi pembelajaran yang lebih efektif.

Kata Kunci: *Interaksi kelas; Konten Analisis; Komunikasi Non-verbal; Konteks Akademik*

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the use of nonverbal signals among English Education students at Tomakaka University, Mamuju, in academic settings. The research aims to describe how students employ nonverbal cues during classroom interactions to demonstrate engagement and facilitate communication. A total of 30 students participated as research subjects. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were obtained through video recordings, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Content analysis was applied to identify and categorize nonverbal behaviors, with attention to eye contact, gestures, posture, and facial expressions. The results show that students actively used eye contact, hand gestures, posture shifts, and facial expressions as integral components of their communicative practices. These nonverbal behaviors contributed to clearer interaction patterns and supported student participation in the learning process. The study highlights the significance of nonverbal communication in academic contexts and suggests that understanding these cues can assist educators in developing more effective instructional strategies.

Keywords: *Classroom Interaction; Content Analysis; Nonverbal Communication; Academic Context.*

Introduction

Nonverbal elements are essential to intercultural communication, playing a dynamic role in conveying messages that transcend language (J. N. Martin et al., 1994). Nonverbal cues are particularly valuable in educational settings, where they help bridge understanding between instructors and students. For instance, teachers rely on students' facial expressions and body language to assess comprehension; puzzled looks signal the need for clarification, while enthusiastic engagement indicates comprehension and interest (Mahmud, 2014). Eye contact, therefore, serves as a dual-purpose tool allowing teachers to communicate effectively while also interpreting students' nonverbal feedback, which includes eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions (Ledbury et al., 2004).

While students often learn verbal language structures explicitly through grammar and language arts lessons, nonverbal cues are usually acquired through implicit socialization. Certain nonverbal behaviors, such as leaning forward, smiling, and frequent touching in U.S. culture are associated with immediacy and positive engagement (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). These implicit forms of communication play a significant role in building rapport and enhancing interpersonal interactions, especially in English study contexts.

Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in academic settings, as elements such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact strongly influence how messages are interpreted during classroom interactions. For English Education students, the ability to manage nonverbal cues is essential because it enhances clarity, builds rapport, and supports a professional presence in learning activities (Burgoon et al., 2021). In an academic environment that encourages active participation, understanding and applying these nonverbal behaviors not only contribute to learning success but also serve as valuable assets for strengthening interpersonal communication skills and preparing students for their future roles as educators.

In the academic environment of Tomakaka University in West Sulawesi, nonverbal communication takes on added importance due to the region's cultural diversity. During classroom activities such as group discussions, presentations, and collaborative tasks, the effective use of nonverbal cues particularly eye contact, gestures, and body posture helps students convey confidence, respect, and active engagement. Gestures and body posture signal participation and attentiveness, while appropriate eye contact fosters trust and strengthens interpersonal connections, which are essential in culturally varied learning environments (Samovar et al., 2013).

Beyond individual interactions, nonverbal behaviors also influence group collaboration and classroom dynamics. For English Education students working within diverse peer groups, understanding cultural variations in nonverbal signals is necessary for managing communication effectively. This study examines how students use and interpret nonverbal cues such as eye contact, gestures, and posture, highlighting their role in supporting meaningful academic interaction. Through this analysis, the research aims to strengthen students' communicative competence and contribute to their development as future educators.

Theory and Method

Theory

Nonverbal communication plays a central role in how students convey meaning and interpret messages during classroom interactions, particularly within culturally diverse environments such as Tomakaka University. Cues like eye contact, gestures, posture, and facial expressions strongly influence participation and understanding in academic settings.

1. *Eye Contact and Proxemics*

Eye contact functions as a regulator of interpersonal distance and engagement. Direct eye contact often signals attentiveness and respect, while avoiding eye contact may indicate discomfort or deference (J. Martin et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2017). Cultural norms, however, shape these interpretations; what is considered respectful in one context may seem confrontational in another (Knapp, 2020). Understanding such differences is important for improving communication among students from varied cultural backgrounds.

2. *Gestures and Cultural Variations*

Gestures also vary widely across cultures and may lead to misunderstandings if interpreted outside their cultural context. Common hand signals or head movements can carry different meanings from one region to another (Gudykunst, 2004; Koester & Lustig, 2015). While some cultures use gestures expressively to emphasize meaning, others prefer more controlled movements, especially in formal settings (Matsumoto et al., 2012). These variations highlight the need for students to develop cultural awareness when interpreting or using gestures during classroom discussions.

3. *Body Language and Academic Interaction*

Body language, including posture, movement, and facial expressions supports verbal communication and conveys emotional states (Burgoon et al., 2021). An upright posture may signal confidence and readiness to participate, whereas slouching can suggest disengagement (Knapp, 2020). Kinesic cues such as smiling or nodding often indicate interest, but their interpretations remain culturally dependent. Proxemics and touch also influence comfort levels and interaction quality, depending on cultural norms (Hall, 1966; Paterson, 2020).

4. *Facial Expressions and Emotion*

Facial expressions communicate a range of emotions, with basic emotional expressions generally recognizable across cultures (Jack & Schyns, 2015). However, cultural differences influence the intensity and interpretation of these expressions. For instance, East Asian cultures may display emotions more subtly, especially through the eyes rather than the mouth (Yan et al., 2016). These differences underscore the importance of sensitivity when interpreting emotional cues in multicultural classrooms.

Method

Content analysis was used to examine the qualitative data gathered from classroom observations, video recordings, and student interviews. These instruments provided a comprehensive view of how students displayed nonverbal communication during classroom interactions, while the interviews offered additional insight into students' own interpretations of their nonverbal behaviors.

The content analysis process involved identifying repeated patterns and themes related to nonverbal communication, particularly behaviors such as eye contact, gestures, posture, and facial expressions (Cohen et al., 2017; Drisko & Maschi, 2016). The analysis began with coding specific instances of nonverbal actions observed in the video data, observation notes, and interview transcripts. Labels such as "sustained eye contact" or "use of hand gestures" were assigned based on their communicative function in the classroom setting.

After coding, the data were organized into broader categories such as "engagement indicators" to capture their overall significance. Integrating information from videos, observations, and interviews allowed the study to develop a richer understanding of how often these nonverbal cues appeared and how they contributed to students' engagement,

motivation, and interaction patterns in the classroom.

Result

The study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the nonverbal communication behaviors of 30 English Department students at Universitas Tomakaka. Using systematic techniques of coding, organizing, and labeling (Cohen et al., 2017; Drisko & Maschi, 2016), the analysis focused on four key nonverbal elements eye contact, gestures, body posture, and facial expressions. In the context of English-oriented language learning, where effective communication is crucial, these nonverbal cues were found to play a significant role in shaping student interaction, engagement, and mutual understanding, consistent with previous research (Burgoon et al., 2021; Kiaer & Kim, 2024).

A. *Eye Contact*

Eye contact emerged as one of the most influential nonverbal signals observed in the classroom. As a core aspect of nonverbal communication, it helped students build rapport, demonstrate attentiveness, and express respect during interactions.

1. **Signs of Confidence and Engagement:** Most students-maintained eye contact while speaking or listening, indicating confidence and a willingness to participate. This aligns with Ledbury et al. (2004), who emphasize that eye contact is central to displaying attentiveness in academic interactions. Likewise, Guerrero and Floyd (2006) note that sustained eye contact supports trust and reduces communication barriers, patterns clearly reflected in the students' comfort during discussions.
2. **Avoidance Behaviors:** Some students tended to avoid eye contact, especially when they felt unsure of their answers or anxious about being evaluated. Such instances of gaze aversion often signaled nervousness or a desire to protect themselves from scrutiny. This corresponds with previous findings that identify avoidance as a typical response to discomfort or insecurity (Burgoon et al., 2021; Ravshanovich, 2022).
3. **Culturally Based Respect:** Several students deliberately reduced eye contact when addressing lecturers, interpreting this behavior as a form of respect toward authority. This reflects cultural norms common in many Asian contexts, where limiting direct eye contact with senior figures signifies politeness rather than disengagement. Awareness of these cultural nuances can help lecturers avoid misinterpreting students' intentions (Kiaer & Kim, 2024).

B. *Gestures and Body Language*

Gestures and body posture played a central role in shaping how the 30 English Department students at Universitas Tomakaka expressed meaning beyond spoken language. These nonverbal elements often reinforced verbal communication or conveyed messages independently, providing valuable insight into students' engagement and interaction patterns.

1. **Hand Gestures as Communicative Support:** Hand movements were particularly prominent during group discussions and presentations. Students frequently used gestures to highlight main ideas, clarify explanations, and add emphasis to key points. Such gestures contributed to improving message clarity and helping peers follow the flow of discussion an important aspect in a setting where English proficiency varies among students (Burgoon et al., 2021; Mahmud, 2014). The use of gestures, therefore, functioned as a supportive tool that enhanced comprehension and enriched the overall communication process.
2. **Posture as an Indicator of Engagement or Discomfort:** Patterns in students' posture provided additional cues about their level of interest. Forward-leaning postures

commonly signaled focus and active involvement in the lesson. In contrast, slouched positions or crossed arms occasionally appeared during less engaging moments or when students felt hesitant toward the material. As Hall (1966) notes, body posture forms part of proxemic behavior, reflecting openness, resistance, or comfort within an interaction. Recognizing these postural cues enables instructors to better interpret student reactions and adjust teaching strategies to support higher engagement.

3. **Body Language in Peer Interactions:** The findings also highlighted the importance of body language in shaping peer dynamics. Behaviors such as leaning closer to classmates or light, friendly touches during group tasks often indicated solidarity, cooperation, and interpersonal warmth. These nonverbal behaviors contributed to strengthening peer relationships, particularly in diverse educational environments where verbal communication alone may not fully convey support or connection (Kiaer & Kim, 2024).

C. *Cultural and Educational Implications for EFL Classrooms*

The findings highlight the significance of nonverbal communication as an essential element in EFL instruction, particularly for students preparing for professional and intercultural communication. Understanding these nonverbal cues can help educators create more supportive and interactive learning environments. Several implications emerge from the study:

1. **Developing Culturally Sensitive Eye Contact Skills:** Considering the cultural differences associated with eye contact, instructors can guide students in practicing appropriate and context-sensitive eye contact. Such training can help learners avoid misinterpretations during cross-cultural communication and feel more confident in academic and professional interactions (Koester & Lustig, 2015).
2. **Integrating Gestures into Language Learning Activities:** Encouraging the use of gestures to complement spoken messages can enhance clarity and expressiveness in EFL classrooms. Teachers may intentionally include activities such as role-plays, presentations, or debates, that allow students to practice meaningful gestural communication (Samovar et al., 2013).
3. **Using Body Language as an Instructional Indicator:** Students' posture and physical responses can serve as valuable feedback for instructors. When signs of disengagement, such as leaning back or folded arms appear, teachers may adjust their instructional strategies to re-capture students' attention and create a more dynamic learning atmosphere (Burgoon et al., 2021).
4. **Enhancing Awareness of Facial Expressions:** Helping students understand the communicative value of facial expressions can strengthen emotional intelligence and improve group interaction. This awareness is particularly important in intercultural and professional contexts, where subtle facial cues can convey openness, interest, and cooperation (Matsumoto et al., 2012).

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that nonverbal communication plays a central role in shaping how the 30 EFL students at Universitas Tomakaka engage, interpret messages, and participate in classroom interactions. Eye contact, in particular, emerged as a key communicative behavior that reflected students' confidence, attentiveness, and willingness to participate. While many students used eye contact to establish rapport with peers and lecturers, others exhibited gaze avoidance during moments of uncertainty or discomfort. These avoidance patterns reflect cultural and emotional factors, indicating that

nonverbal behavior is influenced not only by personal confidence levels but also by cultural norms surrounding respect and authority. Such variations highlight the need for educators to interpret eye contact carefully in culturally diverse EFL settings.

Gestures and body language also contributed significantly to students' communicative behaviors. Hand gestures were frequently used to reinforce verbal messages, especially during group activities and presentations, enhancing clarity and aiding comprehension. Postural cues, such as leaning forward or displaying closed body positions, further served as indicators of engagement or resistance. These behaviors offer a window into students' levels of motivation and readiness to participate and align with research emphasizing the importance of body language in supporting comprehension and interpersonal connection. Additionally, peer interactions showed that body language such as leaning toward classmates helped create a supportive and collaborative learning environment, which is crucial in EFL classrooms where spoken proficiency may vary.

The cultural and educational implications of these findings suggest that nonverbal communication should be explicitly integrated into EFL instruction. Because students' nonverbal behaviors are shaped by both cultural norms and individual comfort levels, raising awareness of nonverbal cues can enhance their communicative competence, particularly for future professional contexts. Training students to use culturally appropriate eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions may improve both their academic and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, by reading students' nonverbal cues, instructors can adapt their teaching strategies to build more inclusive and responsive classrooms. In this way, understanding nonverbal communication not only enriches language learning but also prepares students for effective communication in multicultural academic and professional environments.

Conclusion

The study revealed that nonverbal communication played a significant role in shaping the interactions of EFL students during classroom activities. Key nonverbal codes including eye contact, gestures, body posture, and facial expressions, consistently contributed to clearer communication and more active participation. Eye contact emerged as a particularly important behavior, as most students used it to express attentiveness and respect, though brief gaze avoidance also appeared at moments of uncertainty or shyness, especially when engaging with lecturers. Gestures and body movements further enriched students' communication, with the frequent use of purposeful hand gestures to emphasize ideas, along with other subtle behaviors such as slow clapping to show agreement, tapping a peer to indicate readiness, rubbing the hands in moments of hesitation, and covering the mouth while smiling when addressed by the instructor. These cues provided meaningful signals about students' confidence, comfort, and engagement.

Facial expressions also played a central role in conveying emotions and intentions, with smiles indicating friendliness and openness, while more neutral or serious expressions reflected concentration or confusion. When combined, these nonverbal behaviors strengthened the overall classroom atmosphere by supporting verbal explanations, facilitating peer collaboration, and helping students navigate communicative challenges common in EFL contexts. Overall, the findings underscore that nonverbal communication is an essential component of effective interaction in language classrooms, promoting a more responsive, interactive, and supportive learning environment for English students.

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