

Perception of Nonverbal Immediacy and Effective Teaching among Student Teachers: A Study across Cultural Extremes

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Abstract

This study investigates the perception of nonverbal immediacy behavior with regard to effective teaching among student teachers of English language teaching (ELT) programs from a cultural aspect. Nonverbal immediacy behavior fosters various educational objectives such as affective learning, cognitive learning and motivation. Like many aspects of communication, nonverbal immediacy behavior constitutes cultural components that display differences among cultures. The present research was conducted on 450 student teachers studying in ELT undergraduate programs in Japan, Turkey and the USA. Nonverbal Immediacy Scale and a questionnaire item were utilized in a survey model. The findings indicated that each of the cultures considers nonverbal immediacy as an indispensable part of effective teaching, which also revealed that nonverbal immediacy positively correlates with effective teaching. Also American student teachers believe 'touching' is a critical variable in defining effective teaching. This study indicated while the perceptions of the nonverbal immediacy behavior vary across cultures, its use in effective teaching is considered to be indispensable by the student teachers.

Key words: Nonverbal immediacy behavior, student teachers, cultures

Introduction

The primary objective of all educational institutions is student success. Therefore, instructional communication stands at a critical point for educators and scholars who try to provide a clear account of the nature of student and teacher communication. To this end, the studies in communication and educational sciences have generated various constructs, one of the most popular of which may be immediacy. The immediacy concept was defined as behaviors which increase psychological closeness between communicators (Mehrabian, 1971). Later on, Andersen (Andersen, 1978, 1979; Andersen & Andersen, 1982) extended the

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immediacy concept and put forward that teacher's verbal and nonverbal immediacy promote classroom learning. Although verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors differ in nature, the philosophy of both in terms of instructional communication is based on the framework of Mehrabian manifesting that "People are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (Mehrabian, 1971, p. 1).

The introduction of nonverbal immediacy (NVI) concept to educational sciences arena opened a new and an uncharted territory of inquiry in which NVI was investigated as a teacher behavior and a variable affecting and shaping student learning in numerous ways. NVI behaviors generally involve kinesics, proxemics, vocalics, haptics, and oculosics, but the most noticeable teacher nonverbal immediacy behaviors usually include smiling, vocal variety and expressiveness, eye contact, gestures, touching and relaxed body position (Andersen, 1979). The classroom applications of such behaviors are presented in Table 1. The reason why NVI has been continuously studied over the last three decades is that it is related positively to teaching effectiveness, student state motivation, and affective or cognitive learning outcomes (Christophel, 1990; Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996; Zhang & Oetzel, 2006).

Much of the research revealed that nonverbal immediacy behavior can be improved through training (Nussbaum, 1984; Richmond & McCroskey, 2004). Teachers trained for nonverbal immediacy can generate more positive student attitudes towards instruction (Burroughs, 2007). The interaction of teachers and students is shaped by some certain nonverbal elements that are interpreted in terms of arousal, dominance and liking (Mehrabian, 1981). In other words, a teacher-student relationship cannot be affect-free. Also Pogue and AhYun (2006) report the effects of nonverbal immediacy on students' state motivation and affective learning.

Table 1. Nonverbal immediacy behaviors

BEHAVIORS	A teacher displaying nonverbal immediacy:
PHYSICAL PROXIMITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moves closer when talking to another• Stands closer to a person when talking to them• Sits closer to a person when talking to them
BODY ORIENTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leans forward when talking with another
TOUCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Touch on the hand, forearm, shoulder when talking to another• Patting the shoulder of another when talking to them
EYE CONTACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eye contact with the group as a whole when talking to them• Eye contact with individuals when talking to them• Looking in the general direction of another when talking to them
SMILING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Face is animated when talking to another• Smiles when talking to another• Nods head when talking with another
BODY MOVEMENT & GESTURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use hands and arms to gesture when talking to another• Calmly moves body around when talking with another
BODY POSTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Body posture is relaxed when talking with another
VOCAL EXPRESSIVENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changes in pitch and tempo of voice when talking to another• Short pauses when talking to another• Relaxed tones when talking to another

Adapted from Richmond and McCroskey (2004)

The literature on immediacy over the past 30 years has illustrated that immediacy is one of the foremost means of increasing affective outcomes with students, and the rationale that students might respond to behaviors that assist in an interpersonal connection more strongly. Pogue and AhYun (2006) suggest affective learning is not only dependent on student expectations of their instructor, but also student attitudes towards the recommended

classroom behaviors of the course. Thus, the studies on nonverbal immediacy behavior have clearly shown that both student expectations and attitudes towards the teacher, and accordingly the course and even course content, are parallel with the nonverbal immediacy level of the teacher (Allen, 1999; Pogue & AhYun, 2006).

The influential impact of NVI behavior on affective learning has led the scholars to pool their thinking on the other possible influences of the phenomenon in educational settings. To this end, Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney and Plax (1987) found that immediacy is substantially associated with cognitive learning. Later, in a cross-cultural investigation, McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer and Barraclough (1995) reached some convincing evidence supporting that NVI behavior beyond the expectations of the students might have a strong positive impact on cognitive learning. Teachers displaying NVI in their interaction can lead students to value knowledge which is linked to cognitive learning (Rodriguez et al., 1996). In particular, the use of verbal message is thought to have the most impact on the cognitive side of communication, whereas vocal variety, eye contact, and smiling seemed to produce the highest scores for student learning (Roach, Cornett-Devito & Devito, 2005; Zhang & Zhang, 2006).

The present study focuses on the understanding of NVI behavior with regard to effective teaching in three cultures; namely Japanese, Turkish and the American. Far East culture is typically portrayed as a collectivist, large power distance, and a high-context culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980, 1991). Also Japanese people are usually portrayed as silent, reserved and submissive to authority (Klopf, 1997; Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998). These cultural traits must permeate and manifest themselves in the classroom context (Zhang & Zhang, 2006). On the other pole is the USA culture, quite well-known in the world in terms of being individualistic. When it comes to Turkey, the country stands in the middle but surely with a collectivist orientation due to the cultural heritage. However, it is clear that individuals in Turkey is neither as collectivist as those in Japan nor as individualistic as those in the USA.

Sanders and Wiseman (1990) have found that immediacy behaviors of the teachers are correlated positively with perceived cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning for all racial and ethnic groups (White, Hispanic, Asian, and Black). Also the previous studies report differences in the expectation and understanding of NVI behavior of the teacher across cultures, which made it inevitable to design a study in which different cultures were compared to explore whether perceptions of typical effective teaching in terms of NVI behavior vary in different cultures. Such data will surely enable us to discuss the perception of NVI behavior and effective teaching in a universal perspective.

The evidence above provides a strong argument on the importance of valuing and using NVI in teaching. When it comes to teaching a foreign language, English in the context of this research, NVI may have even more importance due to the nature of teaching a foreign language communicatively in a context in which a relaxed and a positive atmosphere is a mandatory component of the teacher's methodology. It is surprising that we cannot come across an abundant number of research studies discussing NVI behavior in the literature of foreign language teacher education. Although teaching NVI to prospective teachers is a critical issue, analyzing student teachers' perception of NVI prior to teaching is of great importance. In this respect, this study aims at analyzing the perception and understanding of nonverbal immediate behavior among student teachers of ELT programs and making a cross-cultural comparison.

Method

Research Questions (RQ)

This study focuses on the perceptions of student teachers on who an effective teacher is in terms of NVI behavior. While the first research question was designed to investigate the perceptions of student teachers on NVI, another one arises from an assumption that the first research question puts forward: Does the understanding of effective teaching necessarily

relate to NVI behavior? However, while it is taken for granted in RQ1, it should be measured in this study to avoid an idiosyncratic argument. Therefore, two research questions were advanced, as follows:

RQ 1: How do the student teachers of ELT programs perceive effective teaching in terms of nonverbal immediacy behavior?

RQ 2: Do student teachers of ELT programs consider nonverbal immediacy behavior as a part of effective teaching?

Participants

The research study was conducted on 450 student teachers studying in third or fourth class of undergraduate ELT programs in three different countries, Japan, Turkey and the USA. 287 of the participants were female, and the remainder 163 trainees were male. Their ages ranged from 21 to 24, with an average age of 22.3 ($SD = .64$). Japanese sample included 146 student teachers from three Japanese universities. The USA sample included 154 samples from two different American universities located in the East coast of the USA. Turkish sample included 150 student teachers of a Turkish university located in Ankara. All the student teachers study at an ELT pre-service program. The scale and the questionnaire item were completed anonymously.

The participants from Japan and the USA were randomly selected from the universities and were sent emails that invited them to the study. Those who wanted to take part in the study were provided with an internet link of the online version of Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (NIS). However, the participants from Turkey were selected randomly from an English language teaching department, and all the processes of the study were carried out face-to-face. All of the participants were informed about the objective of the study and about their rights.

Instruments

Nonverbal Immediacy Scale-Self Report (Richmond, McCroskey & Johnson, 2003) was used as the data collection instrument (Appendix). NIS (Richmond et al., 2003) is a norm based scale including 26 items that measure NVI behavior. Thirteen of these items are positively worded (1, 2, 6, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, and 25) and the rest thirteen are worded negatively (3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 15, 18, 20, 23, 24, and 26). Each of 26 items is scored using a 5-point Likert-type response format, and the degree of agreement is from 'rarely (1)' to 'very often (5)'. Scoring is provided in a study of the developers (See Richmond et al., 1995).

NIS was designed "to develop a measure of nonverbal immediacy which could be used as a self-report or an observer report in a variety of communication contexts (instructional, organizational, interpersonal, etc.) with a high reliability and validity" (Richmond et al., 2003, p. 515). Although the earlier versions of the scale were developed for the observations of teachers, this scale can be used for any target person, which makes NIS an appropriate instrument to be utilized with student teachers.

Alpha reliabilities for the NIS instrument in the present study for each culture were reported in Table 2. The fact that this scale was developed in the USA may explain the differences in Alpha scores, which shows NIS is culturally and cognitively more accessible for the American participants. Nevertheless, all reliability scores were satisfactory.

Table 2: Alpha Reliability estimates for NIS measure

Measure	Samples		
<i>Nonverbal Immediacy Scale-Self Report Measure</i>	Japan	Turkey	United States of America
	.79	.81	.92

In addition to the NIS, the participants were also provided with a questionnaire item in which they were asked to report which of the aspects of NVI behavior are more critical than others in defining an effective teacher (see Appendix).

Data Collection

This study was based on the data gathered in a survey in which NIS and a questionnaire item were utilized as the data collection tool. The student teachers of Japan and the USA were provided with an internet link and were asked to complete the instrument in terms of their perception of a typical effective teacher. Turkish student teachers were also given the same instruction. However, the data collected face-to-face in Turkey, and the student teachers might feel uncomfortable because of the professor monitoring them in the classroom, which may lead to a reliability problem (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey & Richmond, 1986). Therefore, the student teachers were asked to complete it outside the classroom context and submitted it one day later.

Data were collected at the end of the academic term in 2010 so that the student teachers might modify their perception of a typical effective teacher after language teaching methodology courses. Preliminary analyses indicated that there were no significant differences attributable to biological sex and age of student teachers. Therefore, the following analyses did not include these variables.

Data Analyses

Scores obtained from NIS were subjected to analyses to determine whether there were any differences in the perceptions of NVI behavior and effective teaching among student teachers in three cultures. The scores of NIS were presented in mean scores and standard deviation in Table 3. The major differences and similarities were discussed. Also for the questionnaire item, participants were asked to choose from eight aspects of NVI and address them as the indispensable part of effective teaching. The analyses of these data were presented in Table 4.

In these analyses, descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency, percentage and standard deviation were utilized via computer software.

Findings

The means and standard deviations for NVI behavior evaluation based on the data gathered via NIS were reported in Table 3. Analysis indicated that the student teachers were in an accord with the idea that NVI behavior is an indispensable part of effective teaching. The participants scored the NIS with a strong agreement. According to the findings Japanese student teachers scored 106 (SD = 1.1), Turkish student teachers 110 (SD = 1.5), and finally the American students scored 117 (SD = 0.9). While Japanese and Turkish student teachers obtained relatively close scores, the American student teachers got the highest score from the scale. This shows the correlation between NVI behavior and effective teaching is stronger for the American participants. The questionnaire item presented in Table 4 explains why this difference occurred across cultures.

Table 3: NVI scores of the countries in terms of a typical effective teacher

Countries	N	SD	Min	Max	Mean
Japan	146	1.1	98	117	106
Turkey	154	1.5	94	118	110
USA	23	.9	101	121	117

Table 4 reports the frequency and percentage of the responses given to the questionnaire item which asked participants to choose from the aspects of NVI to show the components of effective teaching that relate to NVI. Findings revealed that participants from Japan, Turkey and the USA unanimously agreed that some aspects of NVI behavior, such as 'eye contact', 'gestures', 'vocal expressiveness' and 'smiling,' are indispensable part of effective teaching.

Table 4: Nonverbal immediacy as the indispensable part of effective teaching

Factors <i>The Aspects of Nonverbal Immediacy</i>	Sample					
	Japan		Turkey		USA	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. Physical proximity	1	<1	7	4,6	13	8,4
2. Body orientation	2	1.3	5	3,3	9	5,8
3. Touching	19	13	17	10.8	51	32.6
4. Eye contact	115	78.6	132	88	137	88.9
5. Gestures	81	55.5	93	62	96	62.3
6. Postures	11	7.5	14	9.3	12	7.6
7. Vocal expressiveness	123	84.2	129	86	138	88
8. Smiling	145	92.9	148	98.6	151	96.7

Table 4 displays values four major aspects of the NVI at around same degree for all the cultures. The lowest percentage among these variables, 'eye contact', belongs to Japanese student teachers. While 'smiling' was chosen nearly by all of the participants, 'physical proximity', 'body orientation' and 'postures' seem to be the least referred variables. However, 'touching' stands at a critical point. The findings of the NIS scores revealed that American student teachers consider a positive correlation between NVI behavior and effective teaching slightly more than Japanese and Turkish student teachers. The reason behind this finding can be observed in 'touching' variable in Table 4. While around 10 percent of the Japanese and Turkish student teachers chose 'touching' as a critical variable in defining effective teaching, 32.6 percent of the American student teachers believe 'touching' is critical. This finding clearly explains why NIS scores of American participants are slightly higher than those of Japanese and Turkish.

Discussion

Research Question 1: Perception of Effective Teaching in Terms of NVI

The results of this study point to the critical role of teachers' NVI behaviors in defining effective teaching across three divergent cultures. The student teachers clearly see the importance of NVI behavior in becoming an effective teacher. They chose 'eye contact',

'gestures', 'vocal expressiveness' and 'smiling' as the major aspects of effective teaching that relate to NVI behavior. Also American student teachers got the highest score from the test; in other words, American participants believe the correlation between NVI behavior and effective teaching is stronger. This difference was result of the fact that American student teachers favored 'touching' variable more than Japanese and Turkish participants. This interpretation is consistent with the previous research on NVI behavior and effective teaching (McCroskey et al., 1995; Neuliep, 1997; Pribyl, Sakamoto & Keaten, 2004).

The findings also enable us to consider NVI behavior as a universal component of effective teaching owing to some reasons. First, effective teaching itself is a relative concept which may vary across cultures. The understanding of a good classroom communication, teacher and student interaction and efficient teaching methodology may emerge different pictures and concepts in different cultural environments. Second, either under NVI term or under other terms or concepts, the student teachers have been introduced to the critical literature of immediacy as a procedural or declarative knowledge. However, no studies available in the literature have focused on the perceptions of student teachers on NVI and effective teaching. Therefore, it was difficult to claim confidently that student teachers associate NVI with effective teaching. Similar studies support these arguments (Beverly & Smith, 2007; Özmen, 2010; Schrodt & Witt, 2006).

Research Question 2: NVI Behavior as a Part of Effective Teaching

The second research question is also an assumption of the RQ 1 and it investigates whether NVI behavior is considered to be a part of effective teaching. The first reaction to such a research question would indicate the literature in which NVI was established as a psychological construct that is strongly related to classroom learning (Andersen, 1979, Christophel, 1990; Rodriguez et al., 1996; Zhang & Oetzel, 2006). However, this fact does not necessarily mean that student teachers will agree on the influential impact of NVI.

According to NIS scores of the three cultures, the student teachers consider NVI behavior as a part of effective teaching. Also they chose four aspects of NVI behavior as an indispensable part of effective teaching, namely 'eye contact', 'gestures', 'vocal expressiveness' and 'smiling'. Synthesizing the findings of NIS scores and those of the questionnaire item, it can be inferred that NVI behavior positively correlates with effective teaching and at least four components of NVI behavior significantly relate to the nature and dynamics of effective teaching. While no study on student- teachers' perspective is available in the relevant literature, these findings are parallel with the research showing evidence that student learning and NVI behavior correlate positively (Beverly & Smith, 2007; Christophel & Gorham, 1995).

Conclusion

The present study focuses on the perceptions of the ELT pre-service student teachers of three countries, Japan, Turkey and the USA, on NVI behavior with regard to effective teaching. 450 participants of different cultures responded to Nonverbal Immediacy Scale of Richmond et al. (2003) and a questionnaire item. The findings indicated that all of the participants consider NVI behavior as a part of effective teaching, whereas some cultural differences revealed that both perception of NVI behavior and effective teaching vary across cultures. For instance, 32.6 percent of the American participants believe that touching is a critical component of effective teaching; however, this percent is around ten percent for Japanese and Turkish participants.

Another critical finding relates to the positive correlation of effective teaching and NVI behavior in terms of the perception of the student teachers. The findings of the present study are quite important in that little or no research has been conducted so far on student teachers' views on NVI. Much of what is known on NVI behavior and learning derives from the studies conducted on secondary and tertiary level students or teachers (eg. Folwell, 2000).

Therefore, the participants of this study are complementary and critical for the relevant body of literature.

The findings drawn from this study open up a number of promising directions for future research. First of all, more attention should be paid to the teaching of NVI behavior as a set of skills for effective classroom communication and for developing stronger teacher identities. No doubt teacher education departments teach some components of NVI both theoretically and practically under different concepts and terms in any way. Nevertheless, there are many insights that foreign language teacher education should learn from general education and communication studies (Richmond, 2002). Thus, it is important that student teachers be aware of nonverbal immediacy behavior, its impact and possible applications in classroom communication.

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Appendix

Age: Gender:

NONVERBAL IMMEDIACY SCALE-SELF REPORT (NIS-S)

DIRECTIONS: Please indicate in the space at the left of each item the degree which you believe the statement applies to you as a student teacher. Please use the following 5-point scale: **1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Often; 5 = Very Often**

A. Respond to the following statements in terms of the qualities of an effective English teacher

- ___ 1. I use my hands and arms to gesture while talking to my students.
- ___ 2. I touch my students on the shoulder or arm while talking to them.
- ___ 3. I use a monotone or dull voice while talking to my students.
- ___ 4. I look over or away from my students while talking to them.
- ___ 5. I move away from my students when they touch me while we are talking.
- ___ 6. I have a relaxed body position when I talk to my students.
- ___ 7. I look tense while talking to my students.
- ___ 8. I avoid eye contact while talking to my students.
- ___ 9. I have a tense body position while talking to my students.
- ___ 10. I sit close or stand close to my students while talking with them.
- ___ 11. My voice is monotonous or dull when I talk to my students.
- ___ 12. I use a variety of vocal expressions when I talk to my students.
- ___ 13. I gesture when I talk to my students.
- ___ 14. I am cheerful when I talk to my students.
- ___ 15. I have a cold facial expression when I talk to my students.
- ___ 16. I move closer to my students when I talk to them.
- ___ 17. I look directly at my students while talking to them.
- ___ 18. I am tough when I talk to my students.
- ___ 19. I have a lot of vocal variety when I talk to my students.
- ___ 20. I avoid gesturing while I am talking to my students.
- ___ 21. I walk toward my students when I talk to them.
- ___ 22. I maintain eye contact with my students when I talk to them.
- ___ 23. I try not to sit or stand close to my students when I talk with them.
- ___ 24. I walk away from my students when I talk to them.
- ___ 25. I smile when I talk to my students.
- ___ 26. I avoid touching my students when I talk to them.

B.

DIRECTIONS: The table below shows the aspects of nonverbal immediacy that a teacher may display in a classroom environment. Please choose the aspects that you believe are **INDISPENSIBLE** in defining an effective teacher.

Aspects of Nonverbal Immediacy	Indispensable for effective teaching Put a cross please (X)
1. Physical proximity	
2. Body orientation	
3. Touch	
4. Eye contact	
5. Gestures	
6. Postures	
7. Vocal expressiveness	
8. Smiling	