



The Impact of Perceived Teachers' Nonverbal Immediacy on Students' Motivation for Learning English

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Bio Data

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors in relation to students' motivation for learning English. A sample of 303 participants was drawn from a technology institution in central Taiwan. The participants were asked to respond to instruments designed to measure the frequency of teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors influencing students' motivation for learning English. The results of the Pearson correlation indicated that teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors were correlated positively and significantly with students' motivation for learning English. In addition, multiple regression analyses reveal that five nonverbal behaviors are significant predictors to students' motivation for learning English. Findings of this study suggest that students' motivation for learning English is likely enhanced when the teacher utilizes the following behaviors: smile, gesture, has a relaxed body position, uses a variety of vocal expression, and uses a monotone voice while teaching. Finally, limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research are addressed.

Key Words: teacher immediacy, nonverbal immediacy, motivation

Introduction

One common question English teachers often ask themselves is, "How do we motivate students to learn English?" Students' motivation has continually become a major concern for English teachers, novice or experienced, because students' motivation is critical for the effectiveness of English teaching-and-learning. English teachers usually handle effectively classroom management or teaching techniques, but they continue to struggle with motivational problems among students. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on what "students" do to increase learning motivation, but considerably less has been done on what "teachers" do, much

less focusing on “teacher immediacy behaviors”, a concept which describes teacher’s positive characteristics while teaching. The teacher can do much to capture students’ interest for learning English and maintaining the students’ motivation if the teacher builds positive characteristics or utilizes immediacy behaviors.

Teachers are identified as a key factor in making learning effective (Nasr, Booth & Gillett, 1996), even more so in an English classroom where students learning relies so much on teachers’ teaching (Wen & Clément, 2003). As those of us who have learned a foreign language know well, learning the target language effectively requires a supportive atmosphere. In order to facilitate learning, a learning environment in which the students do not feel threatened or intimidated is needed (Boyle, 2000). In a supportive classroom climate where a teacher creates an atmosphere of warmth, safety, acceptance, and genuineness with his or her students, the student becomes a more self-initiated, self-confident, self-directed, and less anxious learner (Rogers, 1983). As a result, students experience the comfort and enjoyment of learning and much more, positive instructional outcomes are likely to occur (Sorensen & Christophel, 1992; Banfield, Richmond & McCroskey, 2006).

Numerous studies suggest that teacher immediacy behaviors and students’ motivation for learning are correlated at a significant level, but few researchers investigate how teachers’ nonverbal immediacy behaviors cause students to increase learning motivation. The research has shown a positive correlation between the use of immediacy behaviors and the overall learning of the students (Christophel, 1990; Menzel & Carrell, 1999; Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996; Witt & Wheelless, 2001). However, many of these articles fail to agree on exactly how nonverbal immediacy behaviors impact students’ motivation for learning. Neither did they examine each individual behavior and its contribution to students’ motivation for learning, and in particular as they apply to learning English as a subject.

The rationale of this study to examine teachers’ nonverbal immediacy behaviors in relation to students’ motivation for learning English is due to the following presumption: First, immediacy originally was constructed as behaviors which “enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another.” (Mehrabian, 1969, p. 203). Second, a wealth of evidence indicate that teachers’ verbal immediacy seems to have an impact on students’ motivation in learning (Lin, 2003; Allen, Witt & Wheelless, 2006), but no significant link was found between teachers’ nonverbal immediacy and students’ motivation for learning in other studies (Ellis, 2004). Lastly,

teachers' nonverbal immediacy impact on students' affective learning varied from culture to culture (Johnson & Miller, 2002; McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer & Barraclough, 1995; Myers, Zhong & Guan, 1998; Neuliep, 1997; Roach & Byrne, 2001). Therefore, this study explores the relationship between teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors and students' motivation for learning English. This study also attempts to discover how confidently predictions can be made when teachers employ certain nonverbal immediacy behaviors. This present study limits its focus to the examination of Taiwanese college teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors in relation to students' motivation for learning English.

Literature Review

Motivation and Learning

What is the relationship of motivation to learning? Rogers, Ludington and Graham (1999) describe motivation as an internal feeling; it is the drive that someone has to do something. Whenever students feel a desire or need for learning something, they are motivated. Any teacher knows that using the best curriculum, technology, and assessment won't make a difference if the students don't want to learn. Russell (1971) mentions that in former times, teachers simply "taught", students would sit quietly, disturb no one, do the assignment, and absorb knowledge flowing from teachers and textbooks. Is teaching as simple as that? The answer is "NO". Teachers are dealing with many more students' behavior problems nowadays. Students are struggling more with the academic challenge than before. Interestingly, Rogers et al. (1999) indicate the problem is not that students are not motivated to learn, it's that they are not motivated to learn what teachers are teaching or in the way that they are being expected to learn. We have seen students put so much time and effort into improving their favorite sports, playing video games and some other things in which they have interest. As Rogers et al. say, "From the moment we're born, we're motivated to learn" (p.2). Each student is motivated to learn something. Sadly, many students are just more motivated to learn things other than what the teachers are trying to teach them. Furthermore, the effectiveness of teaching won't happen until we direct our students' hearts back to learning.

Motivation to a Second Language Learner

Motivation to learn another language is more complicated due to the complex nature of language itself. Gardner (1985) defines motivation to learn an L2 as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (p.10). MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Donovan (2002) hold a similar viewpoint by indicating three components that make up the motivation of L2 learning: the desire to learn L2, motivational effort, and attitudes toward learning L2. An effective communicative performance is not only shown in abilities (or competence) to communicate, but also is demonstrated in the individual’s motivation to communicate (Zorn, 1991). Researchers believe the frequency of using L2 can be influenced by the motivation components and learners’ willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Understandably, when one is motivated to communicate, that creates more opportunities to be effective and successful in L2 learning.

Wen & Clément (2003) indicated that students may have the desire to communicate in English, yet the desire does not necessarily imply their WTC due to the following variables students encounter when learning English: speaking anxiety, tension in the classroom, fear of risk-taking, and losing face. When students are not affectively and effectively prepared, their desire to communicate will not produce WTC, but results in an unwillingness to talk (UTT) (Hsu, Watson, Lin & Ho, 2007). A number of researchers stress that a teacher is of great significance in developing students’ affective learning (Kristmanson, 2000; Levine, 2003; Li, 2003; Myers, Martin & Mottet, 2002). Myers et al. (2002) claimed that students are motivated to communicate and participate when teachers are responsive and caring. When teachers demonstrate an immediate attitude through nonverbal forms of communication behaviors, such as tonality, vocal pace, eye contact, smiling, body tenseness, and trunk and limb movement (Burgoon, Birk & Pfau, 1990), a supportive classroom climate is established (Frymier, 1994; Frymier & Weser, 2001; Witt & Wheelless, 2001) where students feel encouraged and accepted (Li, 2003). In a supportive classroom climate where a teacher creates an atmosphere of warmth, safety, acceptance, and genuineness with his or her students, the student becomes a more self-initiated, self-confident, self-directed, and less anxious learner (Rogers, 1983).

Nonverbal Immediacy Construct

Mehrabian (1969, 1971) originally advanced the immediacy concept in his study of interpersonal communication. Immediacy was formerly conceptualized as a nonverbal variable (Mehrabian, 1981). The concept of immediacy is grounded in approach-avoidance theory that suggests, “People approach what they like and avoid what they don’t like” (Mehrabian, 1981, p. 22). According to Mehrabian (1981), immediate communicators generally convey a message through their behaviors that they like the individual with whom they are interacting and that a positive relationship exists between the two individuals. Teachers convey immediacy in the classroom to contribute to interpersonal attraction through proximity and reinforcement (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995). Immediacy behaviors, such as appropriate eye contact, the use of gestures, movement about the classroom, smiling, vocal varieties, and the use of humor, are considered to be highly effective teaching behaviors. Early research conducted in the field of education labeled these behaviors as “teacher enthusiasm” or “teacher expressiveness” (Abrami, Leventhal & Perry, 1982; Coats & Smidchens, 1966), while communication researchers have chosen to label them as “immediacy behaviors” (Andersen, 1979). Conversely, non-immediacy behaviors convey lack of enthusiasm and expressiveness, such as “low eye contact, a distal position, backward body lean, and the absence of smiling and touch, communicated greater detachment” (Sanders & Wiseman, 1990, p. 342).

While many other factors could contribute to students’ motivation for learning English, teachers’ immediacy behaviors are found to have a significant correlation with students’ motivation for learning. Students’ affect and motivation for learning reflect on their initiative to participation in the classroom when teachers are responsive and caring (Myers et al., 2002). Research implies that students’ reluctance to communicate or participate in the classroom is not only from speaking anxiety, communication incompetence, low self-confidence and lack of motivation, but can also be caused by a fearful environment that a teacher unknowingly creates (Rocca, 2001). Tension in the classroom gradually increases the students’ fear of losing face, consequently, an unwillingness to participate in the classroom arises (Wen & Clément, 2003). To put it another way, when students are not affectively prepared, their learning will not bring about a positive or productive learning outcome due to the affective filter being high (Krashen, 1982, 1997).

Liu’s (2001) study indicates those Asian students’ (including Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese) oral classroom participation modes are strongly affected by the teachers’

communication behaviors and teaching styles. English teachers in Taiwan tend to teach in an authoritative way (much as they were taught), thus, the learning environment is centered on the teacher and the lecture (Li, 2003). These teachers tend to avoid conveying liking, warmth, and closeness in their teacher-student relationships (Gao, 1997). That is to say, teachers in Taiwan communicate greater detachment in the classroom due to lack of expressiveness. A great number of English teachers have experienced academic success in learning environments that were typically teacher-centered and relied heavily on lectures; it is understandable that teachers' preferred teaching styles would be to repeat the techniques they had experienced as students. Research supports this concept and states that those teachers who have a tendency to reflect the way they learn in their teaching styles (Li, 2003; Stitt-Gohdes, 2001; Savignon & Wang, 2003) usually favor less student involvement and prefer a formal teaching method (Pithers, 2001). These formal teaching methods will not motivate or stimulate student affect for learning (Menzel & Carrell, 1999).

Teacher's Immediacy and Student's Motivation

Farmer (2001) explains the most essential norm in student motivation that should receive primary emphasis is the behavior of the teacher. Russell (1971) indicates teachers are the most influential determiners of students' learning motivation. The influence of the teacher and the learning environment may replace methods and curriculum as the focus of educational research (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Harris, 1969). Empirical studies have emphasized that partially non-directive and autonomous motivational techniques are more successful and effective than the authoritarian type leadership. An autonomous classroom provides more interaction, independence, acceptance, student supported leadership, and more motivation in learning. Skinner and Belmont (1993) did research that focused on how teacher's behavior influenced student's learning motivation. The research found there was a reciprocal relationship between teacher's behavior and student's engagement in the classroom. As Skinner and Belmont concluded, teacher's behavior influences students' perceptions of their interaction with teachers. Teacher's involvement with individual students has the most powerful impact on students' perceptions of the teacher. When teachers are less involved with students, students not only miss the involvement, but also perceive teachers as less consistent and more coercive. In this research, they also found teacher's behavior influenced students' engagement, both behavioral and

emotional.

Students' learning attitude and learning motivation are influenced both by their perceptions of teachers and directly by teachers' actual behaviors (Allen et al., 2006). When students perceive their teachers are providing clear expectations, contingent response, and strategic help, they are more likely to exert more effort and be persistent. In other words, they are more motivated to learn. The students feel happier and more enthusiastic in class if they experience teachers' warmth and affection. When teachers focus their attitudes and actions upon this concept of teaching, they begin to see themselves differently. They become instruments, dynamic and influential, whereby the conditions develop to maximize the likelihood that motivation and learning will occur (Russell, 1971). Indeed, the teacher is a manager who leads and controls the class and tries to bring out the best out in students. Based on this rationale, the following research questions are plausible:

Research Question 1: What relationship exists between teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors and students' motivation for learning English?

Research Question 2: What is the relative contribution of teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors to the prediction of students' motivation for learning English?

Method

Participants

A total of 303 students who enrolled in English courses in a central Taiwan technology institution participated in this study, including 77 freshmen, 87 sophomores, 103 juniors, and 36 seniors. English majors made up 85% (259) whereas 15% (44) were non-English majors. The sample included 44 male students and 259 female students. Participants' age mainly was in the range of 19 to 21 (76%), followed by age of 22 to 30 (23%), and age above 30 (1%). There were 2 whose age was not indicated. Seventy-nine students reported having male teachers, and 224 reported having female teachers. Participants represented 17 different English subjects which included Business English, Business Correspondence, News English, Speech, Meeting and Presentation, English Literature, Reading, Writing, General English, Principles in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Curriculum Design, Translation, Conversational English for Business, Conversational English for Travelers, Research Methods, Linguistics and TOEFL.

Procedures

Data was collected in the last week of the semester to ensure that students had been very well acquainted with the class and the teacher immediacy behaviors. Participants were recruited from English courses, and participation was confidential and anonymous. No extra credit was granted for participation. The questionnaire was sent to three teachers whose students were recruited. Participants were asked to complete a Likert-type scale, measuring their perception of the teacher nonverbal immediacy behaviors and their motivation for learning English. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. In order to avoid data collection problems or potential bias, the English major students were asked *not* to rate the teacher in the class in which they received the questionnaire; rather, they were requested to rate the behaviors of another English teacher they had had just prior to the one in which they received the questionnaire. Non-English major students were asked to answer the questions based upon their general English classes in the previous school term.

Instruments

Students completed two instruments. The first instrument measured students' perceptions of their teacher's nonverbal immediacy behaviors in the classroom. The second instrument assessed students' motivation for learning. The instruments were translated into Chinese and back translated into English by three bilingual scholars to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence. Teachers' nonverbal immediacy was measured by utilizing nonverbal immediacy behavior scale developed by Thomas, Richmond & McCroskey (1994), consisting of 10 items of nonverbal behaviors. Students were asked to report the frequency of which their teachers exhibit these behaviors on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The alpha reliability for this present was .86 with $M= 38.65$ and $SD= 7.08$.

Students' motivation was assessed via the measures of motivation developed by Christophel (1990). It consisted of twelve bi-polar adjectives designed to measure students' motivational attitude. The scale reliability in previous studies has ranged from .88 to .94. Cronbach's alpha in this study was .96 with $M=81.48$ and $SD=19.01$. A report for the instrument is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Alpha Reliability, Mean, and Standard Deviations

| Instruments | r_1 | M | SD |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Nonverbal Behavior | .86 | 38.65 | 7.08 |
| Motivation | .96 | 81.48 | 19.01 |

Results

To answer research question one, Pearson correlation was utilized to examine the relationship between teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors and students' motivation for learning English. The results indicated the relationship between teachers' nonverbal immediacy and students' motivation for learning English was significantly and positively correlated ($r = .648$; $p < .01$). Forty-two percent, $(.648)^2$, of the variance in students' motivation for learning English was linked with teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors. This positive relationship indicated that students' motivation for learning English was likely to increase when they observed their teachers demonstrating these nonverbal immediacy behaviors while teaching English. Table 2 presents a detailed correlation.

Table 2 Correlations between Teachers' Nonverbal Immediacy and Students' Motivation

| Nonverbal Behavior Description | Correlations r square |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Gestures while talking to the class | .490** (24.01) |
| 2. Uses monotone/dull voice when talking to the class | .454** (20.61) |
| 3. Looks at the class while talking | .454** (20.61) |
| 4. Smiles at the class while talking | .517** (26.73) |
| 5. Has a very tense body position while talking to the class | .430** (18.49) |
| 6. Moves around the classroom while teaching | .375** (14.06) |
| 7. Looks at board or notes while talking to the class | .244** (5.95) |
| 8. Has a relaxed body position while talking to the class | .496** (24.60) |
| 9. Smiles at individual students in the class | .421** (17.72) |
| 10. Uses a variety of vocal expression when talking to the class | .501** (25.10) |
| Total | .648** (41.99) |

** $p < .01$

Note: Variances are in parentheses

To answer research question two, multiple regression was conducted to examine the relative contribution of each teachers' nonverbal immediacy behavior to the prediction of students'

motivation for learning English. The dependent variable was students' motivation for learning English, and the independent variables were teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors, which were entered individually into a linear regression equation in a stepwise manner. The regression models revealed five teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors were significant predictors to students' motivation for learning English. "Smiles at the class while talking" accounted for 27% of the variance in students' motivation for learning English (adjusted $R^2 = .265$; $p < .001$). In model 2, the prediction increased if teacher adds one other nonverbal immediacy behavior to teaching, "gestures while talking to the class" (adjusted $R^2 = .364$; $p < .001$); and higher prediction can be expected when teacher "has a very relaxed body position while talking to the class" (adjusted $R^2 = .425$; $p < .001$). Adding one other nonverbal immediacy behavior, "Use a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class", contribute a bit more variance in students' motivation for learning English (adjusted $R^2 = .444$; $p < .01$). In model 5, it contributed the most to students' motivation for learning English when teachers employing these four aforementioned nonverbal immediacy behaviors, plus "uses monotone/dull voice when talking to the class" (adjusted $R^2 = .451$; $p < .05$). Overall, the formula had a R^2 of .460 and adjusted R^2 of .451. Thus this explained 45% of the variance in predicting students' motivation for learning English in the present study. The results of the linear multiple regression analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Regression Model for Students' Motivation for Learning English

| <i>Nonverbal Items</i> | Dependent Variable=Students' Motivation | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Smiles | .517 ^{***} | .387 ^{***} | .296 ^{***} | .227 ^{***} | .186 ^{***} |
| Gestures | | .342 ^{***} | .283 ^{***} | .240 ^{***} | .236 ^{***} |
| Relaxed body position | | | .281 ^{***} | .255 ^{***} | .249 ^{***} |
| A variety of vocal expressions | | | | .178 ^{**} | .138 [*] |
| Monotone/dull voice | | | | | .121 [*] |
| R | .517 | .606 | .656 | .671 | .678 |
| F ratio | 109.94 | 87.25 | 75.39 | 61.17 | 50.57 |
| R2 | .268 | .368 | .431 | .451 | .460 |
| Adjusted R2 | .265 | .364 | .425 | .444 | .451 |

Notes. ^{***}denotes the coefficient is significant at $p < .001$; ^{**}denotes the coefficient is significant at $p < .01$; ^{*}denotes the coefficient is significant at $p < .05$

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore how teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors influence students' motivation for learning English. The results suggest that teachers' nonverbal

immediacy behaviors are associated positively and significantly with students' motivation. Teachers with a smile on their face, is an effective predictor of students' motivation for learning English. It increases the degree of prediction when teachers demonstrate a relaxed body position, have gestures, and use a variety of vocal expression while teaching English. The findings contribute to the knowledge of students' motivation for learning English in a number of ways.

First, this study introduces the concept of employing nonverbal immediacy behaviors in the classroom and its significance to students' motivation for learning English. The findings suggest that students' motivation for learning English is likely to increase when teachers demonstrate nonverbal immediacy while teaching. Teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors contribute to positive interpersonal relationships with students. The result makes sense based on the literature review, which is, students are less anxious and more self-initiated in the learning process where they feel that they are supported and accepted; concurrently, students' motivation for learning is increased (Frymier, 1994; Li, 2003; Richmond & McCroskey, 1995; Rogers, 1983; Witt & Wheelless, 2001).

Second, this study represents an exploratory attempt to establish a link between teacher nonverbal immediacy behaviors and students' motivation for learning English. Teachers' posture, gestures, variety of vocal expression, facial expressions and distance between students are all found to be significant predictors of helping students' motivation. The correlation coefficient ranges from .244 to .517, $p < .01$. "Smiles at the class while talking," contribute 27% variance in motivation ($r = .517, p < .01$), the highest correlation among 10 nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Smiling has been associated with liking, affiliation, and immediacy. The teacher who smiles is perceived as more immediate and likeable than the one who does not. Students from kindergarten to graduate school respond better to teachers who smile (Richmond, McCrosky & Hikson, 2007). The student-teacher relationship is actually improved by smiling. A smile is the best bridge to communicate with students. Students tend to be more relaxed in the process of learning when teachers carry a smile on their face. This seems so simple, but often is neglected. The findings raise an awareness of the connection between teachers' facial expression and how this influences student motivation for learning English. The results of this study can appropriately and effectively guide teachers to smile more while talking to the class, thereby promoting the improvement of English teaching and learning.

Third, one non-immediate behavior, "uses monotone/dull voice when talking to the class"

is found to be a predictor of students' motivation for learning English while computing multiple regression. The outcome seems puzzling; one plausible explanation is that L2 learners require much of teachers' vocal behaviors in order to give their full attention. Students in Taiwan may associate a monotone/dull voice with a "gentle" or "non-angry voice." Therefore, a monotone/dull voice still has its impact on helping students' motivation. Teachers give a variety of vocal expressions while teaching, that should also include a monotone/dull voice. Teachers with a lively and animated voice vary their intonation from high to low. Sometimes an effective speaker will do just the opposite, using a dull voice for a better outcome and gain sudden attention from the audience (Fletcher & Crochiere, 2004). An English teacher should be aware and wise in utilizing this particular vocal behavior.

An important implication gleaned from this study is that teachers should be aware that their nonverbal immediacy behaviors effectively and powerfully enhance students' motivation for learning English. Therefore, teachers should be more sensitive in their English classrooms, knowing that their nonverbal immediacy behaviors could bring a positive influence—lessen students' anxiety on English learning—resulting in an effective outcome, enhancing students' motivation.

Limitations

Some limitations to this study should be considered. First, there was a disproportionate ratio of male to female students, (44 to 259). This gender difference could be problematic if gender makes a difference on motivation for learning English. Kitano (2001) found that male students tend to have a higher anxiety level when speaking L2 than females and are less active in class participation, but Menzel and Carrell (1999) claimed no significant relationship between gender and classroom participation.

A second limitation involved the degree of validity of the instruments utilized in this study. Although both scales yielded satisfactory levels of reliability in this study, their applicability in Taiwan culture should be accepted with caution because of divergent expectations and interpretation of teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors in the Taiwanese context. The findings of this study and some previous investigations (Myers et al., 1998) indicate that some immediate nonverbal behaviors in North American classrooms turned out to be non-immediate or vice versa in Taiwan classrooms. This lends substantial credence to the concern.

Another limitation that may occur in this study is the participant's potential loss of recall or confusion because of the short time given to recall information while completing the scales, causing a further bias of the result. The fourth possible limitation involves the fact that student perception of teacher immediacy may not indicate actual teacher immediacy behaviors, so the validity of these instruments could be problematic. The last limitation is that the result can only generalize the current population in central Taiwanese college classrooms due to the sample size and geographic distribution.

Future Research

Future research should consider developing a more culturally-related nonverbal immediacy behaviors measurement while investigating the impact of teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors in relation to students' motivation for learning English. Future research should further identify and contrast the impact of teachers' gender on their nonverbal immediacy as well as its impact on students' motivation for learning English. Researchers should also consider what factors contribute to Taiwanese students' de-motivation so that teachers can avoid these behaviors.

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