

Role of Non-Verbal Communication In Education

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Abstract Educators rely on verbal communication as a central tool for providing students with valuable information for academic development. Our daily nonverbal behaviors reveal who we are and impact how we relate to other people. Nonverbal communication has implication for the teacher as well as the learner. It is often said that one can always recognize a language teacher by their use of gesture in normal conversation. Feldman (1990) asserts that research regarding the use of non-verbal cues in education demonstrates that educators often send messages regarding their expectations via non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and overall body language. These nonverbal cues, according to Feldman, can have a notable impact on outcomes for student response and behavior. With the realization that non-verbal communication can play such an important role in the process of education, there is a direct impetus to further examine this issue. Using this as a foundation for investigation, the current research considers the issue of non-verbal communication between students and teachers in the context of mitigating and managing conflict. By understanding these cues, educators can work to improve outcomes when conflict arises with a student in the classroom.

Introduction

Although research on nonverbal did not originate in education, most nonverbal research is still conducted on behavioral sciences. One of the major topics of nonverbal research in education is microteaching which followed the technological advances in video recording. Microteaching research was developed by Dwight Allen at the Stanford University of teachers training. It is basically a data-based feedback intervention for teachers' self inquiry and skill training. Typically a class session is videotaped and the recording serves as the empirical data for further analysis. The videotaped material captures an unbiased evidence of teacher behavior and teaching situation. Upon completion, the material is usually viewed together by the teacher in training, supervisor and sometimes by the teacher's peers.

Microteaching according to researchers was conceived as a tool for instructional evaluation instead of focus on nonverbal aspects of behavior. But, due to its salience visual aspects, the nonverbal component has gained overwhelming prominence in nonverbal research. It's worth mentioning that, with microteaching sessions, teachers can receive feedback on how to improve their conduct in their teaching and in their interactions with students. The analyses focus on teacher's position towards the entire classroom, appearance, dress, poise, use of voice, body and hands, movement in the classroom, teacher's enthusiasm, eye contact etc. Microteaching is a categorized research method in education due to its qualitative and reflective actions.

Another area of nonverbal research in education focuses on the effects of educator's expressive style namely: teacher immediacy and teacher enthusiasm. The research in teacher's enthusiasm originates from the conventional SRT measurement in higher education Murray 1983; Schonwetter et al.1994; Wood 1998). Teacher immediacy research stem in part from the researchers (Andersen & Andersen 1982; Titsworth 2001) interest in high school students teaching and learning processes. However, the emphasis of both researches is focus on the role of teacher's expressive style and nonverbal behavior in affecting their students. According to researchers, highly immediate teachers are characterized by eye contact, movement, learning forward, vocal variety, gestures, humor and smiling. The opposite or what is known as non-immediate teachers are described as reading from notes, standing behind a podium, and using monotone delivery and abstract examples. Based on the result of various studies, there is overwhelming evidence that teacher immediacy and teacher enthusiasm are indeed related to positive outcomes of learning process.

Thin slices research is another nonverbal research that measures decoding sensitivity via judgments of brief instances of nonverbal behavior. It is often conducted using the profile of nonverbal sensitivity (PONS) test. The process of conducting thin slices research involves exposing brief sample of nonverbal behavior to judges and asking them to rate their impressions of these target figures. These ratings are then correlated with different diagnostic or predictive criteria of the target people. Although thin slices research is quite complicated and expensive to run, studies in both secondary and post-secondary school setting indicates that, student's evaluations of their teachers can be predicted. Nonverbal behavior in educational environment can be measured in three distinct ways such as: asking participants (student and teacher) about their impression; conducting behavioral observation in the classroom and videotaping ongoing nonverbal behavior in the classroom. Asking students about their teacher's behavior seems to be the most economical and maybe practical method of researching nonverbal behavior within educational setting.

Review of Related Literature

In order to begin this investigation, it is first helpful to provide a review of non-verbal communication in education and what has been reported about the development and impact of this process on teacher and student interaction. Comadena, Hung and Simonds (2007) provide a review of the impact of teacher non-verbal behavior on the development of students in the classroom. As reported by these authors, research regarding non-verbal behaviors has consistently demonstrated that the specific non-verbal language used by the educator will have a direct impact on both the psychological attachment of the student to the teacher and the ability of the teacher to connect with the student. Comadena and coworkers assert that non-verbal communication in the context of education serves as the foundation for creating intimacy and allowing the student to feel connected to the child. This connection can have marked implications for the development of student in terms of overall academic performance.

Mackay (2006) further examines the development and use of non-verbal cues in the classroom. As reported by this author, students often respond first to the non-verbal body language used by the educator. Specifically, this author makes the following observations:

The mood and tenor for the day or lesson is established in the first few minutes. At the outset of every class, students and teacher both instinctively assess how they should act and respond to each other. A teacher's facial expression, eyes, voice, movement and gesture all convey confidence and control, or lack of these. As students become familiar with the teacher's ways their responses don't change unless the teacher gives due cause (p. 54).

In this context, Mackay asserts that the nonverbal communication used by the educator can have a powerful influence over the class. Changes in nonverbal communication patters can garner the attention of students, especially if this change occurs after consistent patterns of nonverbal communication which has been established over time.

Researchers examining the impact of non-verbal communication on the development of the classroom have also reported that the impacts of non-verbal communication have different impacts depending on the situational needs which arise in the classroom. Sime (2006) notes that there are three areas for classroom development which are impacted by the teacher's use of non-verbal communication. Reviewing data regarding teacher non-verbal communication Sime argues that teacher's non-verbal responses reinforce classroom processes in three specific areas. First, non-verbal communication can be used to reinforce cognitive learning. Second, non-verbal communication reinforces emotional connections between the student and the teacher. Finally, non-verbal communication sets an organizational tone for the classroom—i.e. with respect to the management of the classroom. The use of non-verbal communication in the management of the classroom has implications for how conflict will be managed.

Liu (2001) also notes the importance of non-verbal communication in the classroom. As reported by this author, non-verbal communication in the classroom serves as number of specific purposes including:

"expressing emotions, conveying interpersonal attitudes, presenting personality, and amplifying verbal communication" (p. 30). Further, the author reports that research regarding the development of non-verbal communication in the classroom has demonstrated that there are five component parts to this process. These include: paralanguage, facial expression, eye contact and visual behavior, gesture and body movement, and space" (p. 30). Liu asserts that each of these dimensions functions differently in the classroom depending on the context of the classroom environment and the specific subject that is being reviewed.

Additionally, Houser and Frymier (2009) note the role of non-verbal communication in the development of student empowerment and achievement. According to these authors, the manner in which an educator responds to a student during an interaction will be reflected through both verbal and non-verbal communication. Educators whose verbal and non-verbal communication patterns are congruent and reinforcing will be able to provide students with a clear sense of confidence in their actions. When a lack of congruity in verbal and non-verbal cues results however, challenges arise creating a high degree of uncertainty for the student. This can impact the student's confidence level and reduce the overall sense of accomplishment established through verbal communication tactics. As such, the research provided by Houser and Frymier not only demonstrates the importance of non-verbal communication in student development, but also reinforces the need for congruity between verbal and non-verbal cues provided by the educator.

Conflict and Non-Verbal Communication in the Classroom

With a basic review of non-verbal communication and its impact on the classroom and students, it is now possible to consider what has been reported regarding the issue of conflict and non-verbal communication in the classroom. Looking first at the manner in which non-verbal communication impacts the development and management of conflict, Lincoln (2002) provides a succinct review of this process. In her assessment, Lincoln notes that during conflict there is often a discrepancy between what the individual is verbally communicating and the non-verbal language which is presented. This incongruity in verbal and non-verbal cues can have a direct impact on perception of the parties engaged in conflict. If this incongruity is not rectified, this can serve as the foundation for the escalation of conflict. "One party may develop a sense of distrust, negativity or inappropriate feelings if they question whether the other party means what is said" (p. 45). Lincoln goes on to note that while non-verbal communication is often unwilling, it can be controlled to improve outcomes when conflict arises.

Given the overall impact of non-verbal communication on the development and exacerbation of conflict, it is not surprising to find that scholars have examined this issue in the context of the classroom environment and the interactions which occur between students and teachers. For instance, Rupert and Neill (1991) in their review of non-verbal communication and conflict in the classroom note that the manner in which educators approach conflict will have a direct impact on outcomes. In order to demonstrate this point, these authors note the case of an educator that approaches a conflict with aggressive body language—namely hands on hips. This body language communicates a desire for confrontation and can fuel the development of a conflict. Rupert and Neill go on to note however that the teacher that approaches a conflict with hands down and an open posture presents a calmer demeanor; one which will serve to diffuse hostility from the student.

The observations made by Rupert and Neill (1991) elucidate the overall steps that educators can take in dealing with the development of any type of conflict in the classroom. Educators need to develop the skills needed to effectively recognize conflict and employ responses which are non-confrontational and non-aggressive. Rupert and Neill assert that assuming this position will help diffuse conflict and allow both the student and the teacher to engage in dialogue which will facilitate conflict resolution. Rupert and Neill do note that conflicting messages sent through verbal and non-verbal behavior which is not complementary may

further increase tension, preventing conflict resolution. Thus, educators must be aware of how to match verbal and non-verbal communication patterns during times of conflict for the purposes of mitigation.

Cross-Cultural Communication

While current data regarding the issue of non-verbal communication in resolving conflict in the classroom demonstrates the importance of non-verbal interactions for improving communication outcomes, current research on this subject has extensively focused on the issue of non-verbal cues in a cross-cultural context. As reported by Helmer and Eddy (2003) non-verbal communication in a culturally diverse classroom can be an issue of concern. This is because students from different cultures may misinterpret non-verbal cues, escalating conflict or creating a barrier for effective communication to prevent the development of conflict. Helmer and Eddy assert that non-verbal communication is often culturally biased and unconscious. As such, educators may unwittingly employ non-verbal communication which serves as the foundation for creating conflict with culturally diverse students in the classroom.

The issue of cultural competence in non-verbal communication has also been noted by Le Roux (2002). In reviewing non-verbal communication and its impact on the culturally diverse classroom, Le Roux makes the following observations: "Communication may be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher. Otherwise, it could be a source of frustration, misapprehensions, intercultural conflict and ultimately school failure" (p. 37). In order to develop cultural competence in non-verbal communication, Le Roux asserts that educators need to investigate non-verbal communication patterns in culturally diverse groups. This process will help educators to better understand the specific needs of culturally diverse students and facilitate the implementation of culturally sensitive communication strategies which will help reduce the threat of conflict and aid in conflict resolution when problems arise.

Finally, Ting-Toomey (1999) provides a review of classroom conflict which can arise as a result of cultural differences in communication. As reported by this author, non-verbal communication between teachers and students accounts for a significant percentage of the outcome which is achieved during conflict. Because non-verbal communication primarily shapes individual perception, if non-verbal communication is viewed by either party as hostile, the end result will be an inability for both parties to resolve the conflict. Problems arise in this process as students from different cultures have been socialized to respond to conflict and adults in different ways. For educators, the challenge is recognizing these different modes of response, perceiving them correctly and responding in a manner which does not further escalate the conflict. This process, according to Ting-Toomey is one which can be notably challenging and complex for the educator.

Synthesizing the research provided here, it becomes evident that non-verbal communication can be used as a means to both prevent the development of conflict in the classroom and to mitigate conflict that may arise in the classroom. Even though non-verbal communication may be effective in facilitating classroom management, the issue of culturally diverse student populations may require educators to examine non-verbal behavior and tailor non-verbal behavior to meet the unique needs of diverse student groups. Given the overall impact the non-verbal communication can have on the classroom environment, educators owe it to themselves to understand this form of communication and to employ it strategically to improve classroom management and learning outcomes for all students.

Intercultural Communication

In intercultural settings nonverbal communication becomes especially important as successful interaction requires the partners from differing cultures to navigate both the verbal and nonverbal messages such that complete and shared meaning is created. It should also be noted that in contrast to verbal communication, nonverbal messages are less systematized but are more ambiguous and almost entirely culturally construed.

Additionally, cultural influences on nonverbal behavior are taken into account through the analysis of African nonverbal behaviors both in their differences from other cultures and in their universally shared aspects. Additionally, one of the greatest intercultural differences among people of African descent is found in emblems. Gestures and movement differs dramatically in meaning, extensiveness, and intensity. For example, Northern Europeans and Northeastern Asians have restrained non-verbal displays compared to Africans.

To fully appreciate how cultures can influence nonverbal behavior, one must first have a working conception of culture. Culture is generally understood by Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (1999) to be "the rules for living and functioning in society" (p. 10). These shared rules are absorbed through social conditioning through the communicative and interactive experiences that children have as they develop. In this sense, culture is learned and is transmitted from generation to generation (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, 1999, p. 11). The function of culture is to provide a common framework that provides a source of social cohesion to a group of humans who can then participate collectively as well as individually in their daily activities. Culture enables people to coordinate their survival activities such as the securing of basic needs through work and even the reproductive needs of human beings. Because human beings are primarily social animals, their culture provides them with a basis for their identity as well as their social functioning. The human sense of self is thus interdependent and intertwined with the human sense of social belonging and culture (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, 1999, p. 11). Many of the ways that culture is transmitted are symbolic, making culture highly symbolic as well. For instance, language, cultural icons, images, and nonverbal communicative modalities such as gestures and facial expressions are all symbolic ways that human beings communicate culture to one another and even define their culture, i.e. their rules of living.

Finally, culture is also dynamic and ethnocentric in the sense that culture is continuously changing through the new individual influences that are introduced into it and through the interactions of individuals with those from other cultures by which cultural exchange occurs. It is ethnocentric because it provides the people with a strong sense of group identity which enables them to not only identify themselves with one another but also to distinguish themselves from other cultural groups. Culture is therefore a source of boundaries between peoples, making it centered on its own ethnic origins (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, 1999, p. 12).

This definition of culture leads to perceive nonverbal communication from two distinct perspectives – that of the modes of nonverbal communication that are universal to all human cultural groups and those that are culture specific. First of all, the universal types of nonverbal communication include emotional expressions through universal facial expressions which are in turn noted in both humans and other primates. Cross-cultural studies show that people from a variety of different cultures have similar physiological reactions to universal facial expressions, indicating that there is a basis for this universality (Manusov and Patterson, 2008, p. 224). For instance, smiling is universally recognized as an expression of happiness while frowning the brows and tensing and hardening the facial muscles is recognized as anger. Within the African male group there is noticeable way they punctuate laughter. For example, when something funny is said by an African American, the audience will raise a cupped hand to the mouth and laugh. This hand is not actually placed over the mouth rather it is held about 5 to 6 inches away from the mouth. This action "the cupped hands in front of the mouth" is common among West African. It conveys a non-verbal message of the wittiness of the speaker. Sadness is also universally understood to be communicated by wider eyes and elongating of the face. It is argued by Manusov and Patterson (2008) that the cross-cultural agreement in interpretation of facial expressions might well be the result of overlapping semantics between human cultural groups (p. 227). Semantics, or the study of how signs relate to things, is relevant in this case because the facial expression itself is a "thing" that must be interpreted by the communicative partner as a sign of an emotional reaction. The translation of facial expression to emotional feeling in one's communicative partner is not a direct cause and effect situation but is rather the result of the interpretation of the expressions (OregonState.edu, 2010). To understand this fully, one can recall that autistic people have a difficult time

understanding the relationship between facial expressions and human feelings which in turn leads to a sense of social disconnection from others that cannot be immediately remedied because the autistic person does not have the ability to understand the abstract symbolism of the facial expressions.

Although the interpretation of emotion in facial expressions is largely considered to be universal, there are important cultural differences in the nuances of that interpretation. One of those differences is that all cultures do not recognize universal facial expressions at the same rate. To understand why this might be the case, studies have analyzed the relation between cultural values and norms and recognition of universal facial expressions. It has been found that individualistic cultures like that of Americans were positively correlated with emotional recognition in facial expressions. It is surmised that individualistic cultures have this heightened sensitivity over collectivist cultures like that of Arab countries because individualistic cultures encourage and promote the open expression of emotions and thus are more motivated to interpret those individual expressions as well (Manusov and Patterson, 2008, p. 227).

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