

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN VIETNAMESE EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ trong các lớp học tiếng Anh của người Việt

In the current context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Vietnamese high schools, many practitioners do not care about using nonverbal communication (NVC), which often leads to their unsuccessful instruction. Based on this fact, a library research was conducted with the aim of investigating the merits of NVC in ELT so that the great benefits of NVC over ELT in schools are reconfirmed.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, teachers' nonverbal behaviors.

TÓM TẮT

Trong thực tế giảng dạy Tiếng Anh của các trường trung học ở Việt Nam, nhiều giáo viên không mấy quan tâm đến việc sử dụng giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ; điều này thường dẫn đến không thành công trong giảng dạy. Dựa trên thực tế đó, tác giả tiến hành nghiên cứu thư cấp để tái khẳng định lợi ích to lớn của giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ đối với giảng dạy Tiếng Anh trong nhà trường phổ thông.

Từ khóa: giao tiếp phi ngôn ngữ, hành vi phi ngôn ngữ của giáo viên.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

As far as known, communication is an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that requires a medium of verbal or nonverbal in which the communicated information is understood by both sender and receiver (Negi, 2009). Actually, only 7% of information is sent through words, 38% is transmitted vocally (e.g. tone of voice), the remaining 55% of communication is nonverbal (Mehrabian, 1971). Therefore, being successful in communication requires people to be both competent and experienced not only in verbal but also in nonverbal. Definitely, effective communication will be enhanced if communicators are highly aware of NVC, and without the proper use of NVC, communication will become handicapped (Bull, 2001). With respect to education in which the current goal of language teaching is to develop communicative competence, apart from verbal communication, nonverbal behaviors should be more intensified and subtly used in classrooms.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The importance of NVC has been proven and it is now widely seen in numerous areas such as media, business, interpersonal relationships, education, and politics, etc... A lot of research and discussions on NVC have been carried out recently; however,

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there are little mentioning NVC in classrooms in general and in Vietnamese EFL classrooms in particular. Regarding the real situation of EFL classrooms in Vietnam, it is found that teachers are not fully aware of the roles of NVC and thus they do not use NVC properly, which may make students feel uncomfortable and unmotivated to the teacher and the subject matter (Huong, 2002). Relating this common reality to the researcher's setting, the problem has been in the same way. This truth is proved by the researcher's seventeen-year experience in teaching English, through his hundreds of class observations. Normally, teachers explain lessons, discuss ideas, or interact with students verbally. It is a pity that they rarely use positive NVC in front of students. It is really hard to find a smile on their face, or a glint of amusement in their eyes when they receive the best try from students (classroom observations). That is to say, they are quite unmindful of using NVC in classrooms, which often results in discouraging students to participate in classroom activities.

Consequently, a decision to conduct an investigation into the issue of teachers' NVC in Vietnamese EFL classrooms was made. The study was executed with the aim of: (1) reviewing such relevant aspects of NVC as its definitions, classification, functions, pros and cons, how to use it properly, and merits of teachers' NVC in EFL classrooms; (2) offering some implications of teachers' NVC behaviors in Vietnamese EFL classrooms in the hope to foster students' learning motivation. In order to reach these purposes, a library research was carried out with an attempt to work out the answers to the following research questions.

1. What is NVC?
2. How does teachers' NVC benefit EFL classes?
3. What are implications of teachers' NVC in Vietnamese EFL classrooms?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definitions of NVC

While a variety of definitions of the term *nonverbal communication* have been suggested, this paper will use the definitions suggested by Toomey (1999), E. Jandt (2001), and Knapp and Hall (2002). Toomey defines NVC as "the nonlinguistic behaviors that are consciously or unconsciously encoded and decoded via multiple communication channels" (p.15). Similarly, E. Jandt views NVC as a non-spoken symbol to communicate a specific message. However, the explanation given by Knapp and Hall is more evident and concrete. According to them, NVC refers to communication that is produced by some means other than words such as eye contact, body language, vocal cues.

2.2. Classification of NVC

Research has shown that NVC is a system consisting of a range of categories often used together to aid expressions. This system may be a bit different among the views and thus types of NVC can be classified in various ways. Two of the views that

are worth being taken into consideration are worked out by Toomey (1999) and E. Jandt (2001). According to them, these types of NVC can be summarized as can be seen in Table 1.

Categories	Descriptions
1. Kinesics	dealing with behaviors like gestures, body moments, facial expressions, and eye contact
2. Oculesics	closely related to kinesics, dealing with eye behaviors as an element of communication
3. Haptics	focusing on touching which is communicating affection, compliance, aggression, sexual interest, or support; announcing a response; and getting attention
4. Paralanguage	referring to sounds and other nonverbal elements that can be produced by the mouth and voice including vocal characterizers (laughter, sobs), vocal qualifiers (intensity pitch and extent), and vocal segregates ('uh', 'um', and 'uh-huh')
5. Silence	communicating agreement, apathy, awe, confusion, contemplation, disagreement, embarrassment, obligation, regret, respect, sadness, thoughtfulness
6. Proxemics	involving the social use of space in communication situation
7. Chronemics	dealing with the way people perceive and use time, such as formal time (i.e. minutes, hours, days, and so on) and informal time (i.e. seasons, social customs, lunar cycles, etc ...)
8. Clothing and physical appearance	dealing with the communication role played by a person's look that refers to physical aspects of body shape, hair style and skin tone
9. Olfactics	dealing with smells that might include the use of perfumes and spices, and also referring to body odor
10. Territoriality	involving how physical space can be used to communicate such as an arrangement of home, office, public area to encourage communication

2.3. Functions of NVC

The reasons why people use NVC are discussed by relatively similar views, typically Bull (2001)'s, E. Jandt (2001)'s, and Negi (2009)'s. All these arguments on functions of NVC can be evidently and adequately condensed in four main points: (1) reflecting identities, (2) expressing emotions and attitudes, (3) managing conversations, and (4) forming impression and interpersonal attraction. With number (1), they state that nonverbal cues serve as the markers of identities. With this they mean that the way one dresses, his/her accent pattern, his/her nonverbal way of gesturing, etc ... tell others something about himself/herself and how he/she wants to be perceived. For number (2), they conclude that it is through nonverbal messages (i.e. kinesics and vocalic) that one infers the feelings and attitudes of the stranger in the interaction. Towards number (3), they find that people generally use kinesics and oculesics to manage their conversations.

With respect to number (4), they mention that when we manage our impression on the nonverbal level, we are concerned with creating a favorable impression on others so that they can either be attracted to us or at least find us credible.

2.4. *Advantages and Disadvantages of NVC*

Despite its great functions in conveying messages, NVC still has both pros and cons. On discussing the advantages of NVC, Bull (2001) states that NVC is a quicker and easier means of communication. Also, he argues that body language, especially body movement, can be highly visible. Furthermore, it may sometimes be used as a substitute for speech where actually to formulate the words might be regarded as too explicit or indelicate. Over the disadvantages of NVC, two major drawbacks are pointed out by Sutton (n.d): lacking complexity, and imprecise and easily misread. With the former, Sutton implies that NVC lacks the complexity that language has to offer; it cannot communicate complex facts or concepts. For the later, he means that gestures, facial expressions and appearances can mean different things to different people, so we can misread people we do not know.

2.5. *How to Apply NVC Properly*

In his review of proper use of NVC, Toomey (1999) offers six suggestions of how to communicate mindfully on the intercultural nonverbal message exchange level: (1) Identify the appropriate nonverbal display rules in different cultures; (2) Understand the cultural values and attributions that are attached to different nonverbal norms and rules; (3) Realize that the fundamental functions and interpretations of any nonverbal cues are tied closely to identity, emotional expression, conversational management; (4) Convey acknowledgement and culture-sensitive respect in regard to different nonverbal norms and behaviors in different ethnic and cultural communities; (5) Deepen the complexities of their understanding of nonverbal behaviors within each culture along multiple dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, age, region, social class ...; and (6) Use culture-sensitive perception checking statements that help individuals make sure they are interpreting the speaker's nonverbal behavior accurately.

2.6. *Merits of Teachers' NVC in EFL Classrooms*

It is supposed that teachers' NVC plays very important roles in classrooms in general and in EFL classrooms in particular. Numerous studies have attempted to explain the significance of teachers' NVC in EFL classrooms, for example, Negi (2009), and Emerson and West (2009). They assert that teachers' NVC is a powerful classroom tool that can lead to many positive effects. According to them, (1) teachers' NVC creates more impression in the classroom than the knowledge of subject matter and verbal fluency; (2) nonverbal messages can be a more explicit and candid means of determining intent than merely the spoken word alone; (3) the way teachers touch, the way teachers use their eyes, the distance teachers stand from students carry important signals that create a profound effect on students' feelings of welcome and comfort with

teachers; (4) actions such as body language, facial display, eye contact, the way to wear clothes, to make hair style ... speak louder than thousand words and make accurate judgments about teachers' thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Additionally, Negi (2009) and Emerson and West (2009) show that (5) teachers' NVC creates opportunities for students to communicate. Indeed, teachers who make eye contact with students and who walk around the room among the students instead of standing in one place to lecture make it easier and more comfortable for students to speak up. Most importantly, they point out that (6) teachers' NVC models and reinforces positive nonverbal behaviors of students.

3. Discussion on Literature Review

First of all, as reviewed, there are numerous types of NVC. Of them, the most common forms that should be taken into consideration are kenesics, haptics, proxemics, oculestics, and paralanguage. The greatest functions of NVC that can be withdrawn are expressing emotions, managing and regulating conversations, reflecting identities, reinforcing and modifying verbal messages, and forming impressions on others. Regardless of its great functions, along with such pros of NVC as its visibility, its quickness and easiness, and its use as a substitute for indelicate words, there are still several remarkable cons. The typical instance of its cons is that NVC can lead to misunderstanding if people do not use it properly during conversations.

However, being fully aware of such relevant aspects of NVC as its significance, its great functions, and its pros and cons is not enough for successful communication. In order to communicate mindfully on NVC level, a communicator should bear in mind six suggestions provided by Toomey (1999): (1) identifying the appropriate nonverbal display rules in different cultures; (2) understanding the cultural values in relation to different nonverbal norms and rules; (3) realizing the close relationship between the fundamental functions and interpretations of any nonverbal cues and identity, emotional expression, conversational management; (4) conveying acknowledgement and culture-sensitive respect in regard to different nonverbal norms and behaviors in different ethnic and cultural communities; (5) deepening the complexities of their understanding of nonverbal behaviors within each culture along such multiple dimensions as ethnicity, gender, age, region, social class ...; and (6) using culture-sensitive perception checking statements to make sure the speaker's nonverbal behavior is interpreted accurately.

After all, it is apparent from the reviewed theory that teachers' NVC plays extremely significant roles in EFL classrooms. NVC is a powerful classroom tool that can result in such positive effects as creating more impression in the classroom, being used as a more explicit and candid means of determining intent, offering opportunities for students to communicate, and modeling and reinforcing positive nonverbal behaviors of students. Actually, teachers can control classroom activities, explain lessons, express

enthusiasm, warmth, confidence and displeasure through facial expressions, vocal intonation, and gestures. Simultaneously, students can receive nonverbal messages of enthusiasm or boredom communicated via a teacher's body orientation. More vitally, students can more easily understand the deliberated lessons by the support of teachers' appropriate NVC behaviors. In reference to the researcher's experience in teaching, some practitioners are found to become more proficient at sending accurate messages thanks to the positive NVC they display. Their hand gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice often prove to be the best in showing directions, giving pronounce instruction, controlling such activities as role-play or games, or commenting on student responses. They at times use shoulder shrugging to express "I don't understand" or "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" or "I'm sorry". They frequently smile and nod their heads to encourage students to share feelings and problems willingly. They are consequently always successful in making all students involved in their lessons.

4. Implications for Vietnamese ELT Classrooms

Aligning the theoretical framework with the context of EFL classrooms in Vietnam, some suggestions are given in the hope of helping teachers use NVC effectively in relation to Vietnamese learning styles and cultural backgrounds. First, teachers should be highly aware of classroom NVC for two basic reasons: to become better classroom message senders and receivers, and to get students' involvement in the lessons. Second, teachers should well exploit NVC applications in ELT by using body language, especially eye language, to attract student attention and master students in psychology (Wolfgang, 1999, as cited in Huong, 2002). Third, teachers should bear in mind that supporting NVC can help reduce teachers' redundant language, simplify explanations so that students more easily grasp lessons (Keith, 1994, as cited in Huong, 2002). Fourth, such facilities as classroom size and seating arrangement should be changed in order that students have more NVC contacts with teachers during the lessons (Huong, 2002). Last but not least, recent research shows that Vietnamese students belong to high-context cultures, depend more heavily on nonverbal and contextual cues, and often turn unconsciously to gestures, so Vietnamese teachers of English should make use of this tendency to model the use of gestures in expression (Emerson & West, 2001; Huong, 2002).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation for Further Research

On the basis of the reviewed theory associated with the researcher's perspective, it might be concluded that NVC is not only crucial in a plain daily communication but also extremely important for EFL classroom situations. The effect of EFL classes is firmly connected with the proper use of teachers' NVC, which is ready to assist teachers to gain control of their classrooms, so they are able to perform at their best. It is clearly shown that teachers who are most successful in their classroom management are those who are systematic in their use of NVC. That is, if teachers use nonverbal

behavior properly, it will increase information for students and involve their interests in learning. In short, nonverbal expressions have direct impacts on the effect of EFL classrooms. Thus, teachers should learn and work hard to master the use of NVC in classrooms to further their job.

Although the research is not a novel idea, its significance lies in the practicality. The topic is found to be very crucial, practical, beneficial, and worth being taken into account by all those who are concerned in education and ELT. It is hoped that the topic will make teachers deeply aware of the vital merits of NVC so that they try to make good use of positive behaviors of NVC in their teaching, which enhances their teaching skills and helps foster the English learning of their students. Also, the topic will shed light on the program of teacher training and teacher development, especially in Vietnamese setting.

Ultimately, this is just a library research owing to the limited time; it hence needs more surveys and classroom observations, especially in the setting of Vietnamese high school classrooms so that more interesting and convincing findings may be discovered. Furthermore, the next research should focus on the impact of negative NVC on the effectiveness of EFL classrooms. These recommendations should be acted out in the hope that Vietnamese teachers of English soon get improved in their NVC behaviors, which surely helps develop their teaching skills and motivate student learning as well.

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