

World Conference on Educational Sciences 2009

The importance of non-verbal communication in classroom management

Canan P. Zeki^{a*}

^a*Eastern Mediterranean University, Faculty of Education, North Cyprus*

Received October 23, 2008; revised December 23, 2008; accepted January 5, 2009

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine students' perceptions about nonverbal communication in class focusing on eye contact, mimics and gestures. 67 students who were enrolled into two classroom management groups of the researcher were adopted as the participants of the study. The students were assigned to write a "critical moments reflection" report on any of the incidents that they consider to be critical once a week right after their classes for two months. Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the reports through coding, categorizing and labelling the primary patterns/occurring themes in the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). The researcher focused on the following research question: "What do the students enrolled in the classroom management course report on the meaning of eye contact, mimics and gestures?" The findings revealed that non-verbal communication can be an important source of motivation and concentration for students' learning as well as a tool for taking and maintaining attention.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Keywords: Classroom management; eye contact; mimics; gestures; body language; facial expression

1. Introduction

Teachers often complain about discipline, lack of attention and motivation and many other problems, many of which lead to a breakdown in communication between teacher and students or between students themselves. It is well known that speech is only one part of communication, yet teachers often forget about or underestimate the importance of non-verbal communication in their own and their students' performance (Ledbury et al. 2004). Indeed many communication experts believe that most interpersonal communication is nonverbal. People's faces disclose emotions and telegraph what really matters to them (Santrock, 2001). Two aspects of non-verbal communication are the use of eyes and the facial expressions; both of which are powerful tools to convey messages. Yet, much

* Canan P. Zeki Tel: +90 630 10 01; fax +90 392 630 4038

E-mail address: canan.perkan@emu.edu.tr

classroom time is spent with eyes firmly fixed on the book, the board, the OHP, the window or roaming randomly around the teaching and learning environment. Ergin and Birol (2005) indicate that the real communication between two persons begins when two of the persons establish eye contact; so, eye contact has an important role and meaning in communication. If a person looks you in the eye (builds eye contact with you), it can be interpreted as that person cares for you or is interested in you. However, a person who avoids eye contact might be hiding something which is a sign for lack of confidence.

The use of eyes and facial expressions are considered as having a disciplinary function in most of the sources and are reported as having many related functions which help teachers in managing classrooms. According to Gower and Walters (1983), the main uses of eye contact in the classroom are to show a student who is talking that the teacher is taking notice; to check that everyone is concentrating; to indicate to a student that you want to talk to him or you want him to do something; to encourage contributions when one is trying to elicit ideas; a teacher only knows students have something to say by looking at them; and to hold the attention of students not being addressed and encouraging them to listen to those doing the talking and to maintain attention (Snyder, 1998).

The use of eyes, mimics and gestures are also believed to help establish rapport; a teacher who never looks students in the eye seems to lack confidence and gives the students a sense of insecurity (Gower and Walters, 1983). Similarly, Pollitt (2006) also indicates that eye contact is an important key in the sense that if a teacher does not look the students in the eye when speaking to them, it may show a lack of confidence in oneself hence, the teacher is likely to have problems with discipline. Rossman (1989) also added that “teachers need to coordinate their body language, speaking voice, eye contact and wardrobe to create a convincing, but not confusing impact on the learner. Hence, it can be concluded that facial expression and eye contact can play an important role in reflecting teacher’s confidence. A teacher needs to be convincing and trustworthy in order to be credible in the eye of the students. Cruickshank et al. (2003) state that regardless of a teacher’s knowledge, experience, education level, or position, a teacher is credible only when his/her students believe s/he is. Since eye contact and facial expressions are considered as signs for reflecting teacher’s self-confidence; they have an impact on teacher’s credibility and trustworthiness. The NLP approach to eye contact is also based on the premise that good eye contact increases rapport (Ledbury, 2004)

Nonverbal communication is also used to check that the students understand; puzzled expressions quickly tell the teacher what is to be revised or repeated. Similarly, Ledbury et al. (2004) suggest that teachers watch learners as well as listen to them, particularly while they are performing tasks to look for signs of being bored or being lost. Thus, eye contact is not only to be considered as a tool for the teacher to convey messages but as a means to interpret the messages students can display nonverbally via their eyes, mimics and gestures.

Similarly, Ledbury et al (2004) report that establishing a management role in the classroom involves eye contact from the outset. Teachers need to be present in classroom before learners and welcome them individually with a combination of eye contact and their names as they enter the room. They added that eyes can set the tone of a lesson. As the lesson starts, the teacher can check whether the students are ready or not only through eye contact. Research shows that there is a strong link between the amount of eye contact people receive and their degree of participation in communication. It can be concluded that eye contact encourages students to take part in speech easily since teachers can nominate and invite responses by eye. Likewise, Parker (2006) indicates that “by maintaining eye contact with students when speaking or listening to them, the teacher is asserting that s/he expects conversation and is interested in what the student is saying”; in other words, encourages participation by students.

Ledbury et al (2004) report that eye contact is, fundamentally, time and effort saving. Research indicates that teachers can save time and effort with specific messages delivered by eye and facial expression among which are praise, encouragement and disapproval. Pektaş (1988 cited in Ergin and Birol, 2005) report that in conveying messages to students, teachers can use facial expressions and eye contact in addition to their voices and intonation.

1.1. Aim of the research

This study aimed to examine students’ perceptions regarding eye-contact; facial expressions (mimics) and gestures (body language).

1.2. Research Questions

1.2.1. *What do the students enrolled in the classroom management course report on the meaning of eye-contact?*

1.2.2. *What do the students enrolled in the classroom management course report on the meaning of facial expressions (mimics) and gestures (body language)?*

2. Method

2.1. Design of the research

This study adopted a qualitative research method.

2.1.1. Sampling

The researcher collected qualitative data in two of her classroom management classes. 67 third year university students who are enrolled into these two groups were adopted as the participants of the study.

2.1.2 Data Collection Instrument

Students were assigned to write a “critical moments reflection” report (Amulya, 2004) on any of the incidents that they consider to be valuable and critical with their own justifications once a week right after their classes for two months at the beginning of the academic year 2008-09. Students were not guided in any way regarding the content of the reports. Students were given the freedom to report and reflect on any of the issue(s) or incident(s) they find worthwhile or significant indicating why those moments were significant and critical for them. They were only provided with a ‘Significant Moments Log’ electronically to report the events and e-mail them to the course instructor within two days of the class time. The students were expected to analyze the meaning of the moment to him/her. The goal of the analysis was to enable students to become more aware of why particular moments experienced in class were significant, to examine the nature of the significance of those moments to better understand certain events and teacher behaviour in class and to reveal important deeper questions. The outcome was to develop student awareness regarding and more complex understanding of what happened, why it happened and what it led to (Amulya, 2004).

So this topic of eye-contact; facial expressions (mimics) and gestures (body language) arose naturally out of the critical moments reflection reports students of the course emailed to the course instructor. This issue of eye-contact, mimics and gestures arose as two of the categories from these reports due to their frequency of mention by the students as the participants. The researcher was attracted by the frequency and the saliency that students mentioned these issues and attempted to examine the topic more closely by analyzing to what students have associated eye-contact, gestures and mimics to.

Documents were used as the source of data which is a suitable instrument for qualitative research. Creswell (2003) indicated that documents enable a researcher to obtain the language and words of participants and can be accessed at a time convenient to the researcher – an unobtrusive source of information. It represents data that are thoughtful, in that participants have given attention to compiling it.

2.1.3 Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the ‘critical moments reflection’ reports. Content analysis involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying and labelling the primary patterns/occurring themes in the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). While doing the analysis, Kvale’s (1996) ‘Meaning condensation’ and ‘Meaning categorization’ approaches and Creswell’s (2003) 6 step generic process of data analysis were also adopted.

3. Results and Interpretation

Data from the ‘critical moments reflection’ reports revealed two major categories based on the research questions as follows:

1. Eye contact

2. Facial expression (mimics) and Gestures (body language)

Category 1: Students' perceptions regarding the meaning of eye contact generated seven themes

Theme 1: 15 students reported that teacher's eye contact is a source of *motivation and concentration* for them towards the lesson making them feel important and confident as well. Authors and research indicated that eye contact can be used to check whether everyone is concentrating, to show a student who is talking that the teacher is taking notice and to encourage contributions, participation (Gower and Walters, 1983; Ledbury et al. 2004). This is similar to the findings of this study because mostly students reported that eye contact meant a source of concentration for them motivating them towards the lesson. Students also reported that eye contact makes them feel important and confident which is in line with Ergin and Birol's (2005) views that if a person looks you in the eye, it can be interpreted as that person cares for you or is interested in you which makes you feel important.

St1: "Today, once again I realized that teaching is like acting! Teacher is a kind of actor! Each gesture that is acted by the teacher is very important for students' understanding and motivation! The most important example of this subject is you! Thanks to your gestures and especially eye contact, we are more motivated and concentrated on subject!"

St2: "You always maintain eye contact with your students and this is motivating me. I feel myself a part of the class. I become involved in the lesson."

St5: I saw my teacher for the first time in our lesson today. You described the course outline. It was our first lesson but my observation is that your eye contact was very good. You looked at everybody's eye equally. This made me feel important. I felt myself motivated towards the course"

St10: "On Mondays, our education course is held during the last two hours and we come to class very tired. It is very hard for us to follow but your eye contact makes us motivated towards the lesson; we concentrate and listen to what you are saying"

St11: "I like the way you teach us, the way you smile and have eye contact with us. It makes us believe we are each important and valuable for you. I feel myself deeply responsible for you and I try to do my best in your exams"

St12: "I think relationship is very important between teacher and student. The way you look at us, your eye contact, gestures and mimics make me feel confident. I feel myself comfortable in your lesson. The way you nod your head as you listen to us make us motivated. I feel myself encouraged to speak. I do not hesitate to speak. You have an encouraging look, the moment I hesitate to speak and I have eye contact with you I have myself close to you and I express my ideas easily"

Theme 2: 10 students reported that they perceive teacher's eye contact as a source for *taking and maintaining attention*. This is also similar to the views of Gower and Walters (1983) that eye contact is used to hold the attention and to the views of Snyder (1998) that it is used to maintain attention.

St2: "By looking students directly in the eye, teacher encourages students to pay attention, to respond and to respect the teacher. Good eye contact shows that teacher has confidence in herself and what she is saying. Good eye contact also allows reading students' faces and getting the feedback whether they are following."

St3: "As you lecture, you look students in the eye. I am very much affected by this, it takes my attention and it makes me to listen to what you are saying."

St4: "Teacher's eye contact is very important for me because it obtains motivation of the students. This way students pay attention to the lesson. I understand your words and speech thanks to your eye contact. Some teachers never have eye contact so students have difficulty understanding the lesson. In addition students may have lack of self-esteem."

Theme 3: 8 students reported that teacher's eye contact *helps them understand the topic better*. They stated that it captures their attention and makes them concentrated on the topic. This was a surprising result because research (Ledbury et al., 2004) indicated that eye contact is used by teachers to check whether students understand or not looking for signs of being bored or being lost but not for helping them understand the topic better. Nevertheless; puzzled expressions can tell the teacher what is to be revised or repeated which might have helped the students understand the topic in return.

St1: "Today, once again I realized that teaching is like acting! Teacher is a kind of actor! Each gesture that is acted by the teacher is very important for students' understanding and motivation! The most important example of this subject is you! Thanks to your gestures and especially eye contact, we are more motivated and concentrated on subject!"

St2: *“Teacher’s eye contact is very important for me because it obtains motivation of the students..... This way students pay attention to the lesson. I understand your words and speech thanks to your eye contact. Some teachers never have eye contact so students have difficulty understanding the lesson. In addition students may have lack of self-esteem.”*

Theme 4: 6 students reported that they perceive teacher’s eye contact as a means for emphasis; that teacher uses eye contact while stressing something important about the course content. This is a surprising result because neither research nor authors indicated such a use of eye contact.

St1: *“When you say something important you up your voice and also you use eye contact and look at us and we understand that topic is very important for us”*

St2: *“First I am going to start with your eye contact. You use your eyes very effectively. When your tone of voice is up, you also open your eyes. I mean your eyes and your tone go parallel with each other. Also you sometimes look at students very effectively. It makes students to pay more attention to the lesson and to be more careful with what you are saying, explaining”*

Theme 5: 5 students indicated that teacher’s eye contact reflects the mood of the teacher and that they can easily understand whether the teacher is happy or not. This is also a surprising result because eye contact is used for reading students’ facial expressions whether they are puzzled or lost (Gower and Walters, 1983; Ledbury et al., 2004) but not for the interpretation of the teacher’s mood by the students.

St1: *“Today canan hoca was a little bit stressful so for this reason canan hoca used eye contact minimum with students. All students understood that canan hoca was stressful and gave extra attention to her. This is very important for me. Canan hoca didn’t say anything to us but we could understand it from her behaviour in the class. It means she present her character so well that all students can understand her and what she wants in class easily. I think all teachers should present their characters clearly so students can understand easily what the teacher wants or how they should behave”*

St2: *“Today, our teachers seemed not happy. We could understand it from her eyes and eye contact easily. She did not have eye contact with us as usual. Her eye contact was less compared to other days. Moreover, even when she looked at us, her eyes and her look were not as powerful as before. I understand that something bad happened and she was sad.”*

Theme 6: 4 students reported that teacher’s eye contact can display teacher’s confidence or lack of confidence. Students indicated that they could easily understand whether the teacher has self- confidence and is sure of what s/he is saying or not through the eye contact teacher has with his/her students. This is supported by Gower and Walter’s (1983) and Pollitt’s (2006) views that a teacher who never looks students in the eye seems to lack confidence and gives the students a sense of insecurity.

St1: *“As you lecture, you look students in the eye. I am very much affected by this, it takes my attention and it makes me to listen to what you are saying. It shows me that you have self-confidence and you trust your knowledge. It makes me believe in you and what you are saying”*

St2: *“By looking students directly in the eye, teacher encourages students to pay attention, to respond and to respect the teacher. Good eye contact shows that teacher has confidence in herself and what she is saying. Good eye contact also allows reading students’ faces and getting the feedback whether they are following. However, when the teacher avoids eye contact, students may get the impression that the teacher is too anxious or unplanned”*

Theme 7: Only 2 students reported that they perceive teacher’s eye contact as a tool for evaluating students’ understanding of the topic which is indicated both by Gower and Walters (1983) and Ledbury et al. (2004) that eye contact can be used to check whether students understand or are puzzled.

St1: *“By looking students directly in the eye, teacher encourages students to pay attention, to respond and to respect the teacher. Good eye contact shows that teacher has confidence in herself and what she is saying. Good eye contact also allows reading students’ faces and getting the feedback whether they are following. However, when the teacher avoids eye contact, students may get the impression that the teacher is too anxious or unplanned”*

Category 2: Students’ perceptions regarding the meaning of facial expression (mimics) and gestures (body language generated 5 themes

Theme 1: 10 students reported that teacher’s mimics and gestures is a source for motivation, enthusiasm and confidence towards learning, oneself and teacher.

St1: “Another thing that took my attention today was; when somebody speaks teacher always listens and **shows that she is listening** to the student by **showing or reacting** at least **by gesture**. This makes us more **motivated, encouraged and enthusiastic** to learn. This gives us **confidence**”

St2: “Your **gestures are very friendly** so the **students feel safe**. I **developed confidence**. I feel myself **comfortable** in your class.”

St5: “Your way of talking, **your mimics and your body language** made me think that we as next generation of teachers had to think not only the teaching materials or topic in the class, but also **our students’ psychological situation**. Your **body language and gestures show that you care for us**. This makes us **trust you**. This gives us **self-confidence and motivation**. I can ask question easily when I am confused. I think I should do the same for my own students in future”

St10: “I think relationship is very important between teacher and student. The way you look at us, your eye contact, **gestures and mimics make me feel confident**. I feel myself **comfortable** in your lesson. The way you **nod your head as you listen to us** make us **motivated**. I feel myself **encouraged** to speak. I do not hesitate to speak. You have an encouraging look, the moment I hesitate to speak and I have eye contact with you I have myself close to you and I express my ideas”

Theme 2: 5 students reported that that they perceive teacher’s mimics and gestures as a source for **taking and maintaining attention**.

St1: “Even though the topics were too boring and uninteresting our teacher presented the lesson in a very confident active posture which gave us a message that our teacher has a confidence in herself, knows what she is talking about and has a feeling that we can succeed throughout the semester. The way our teacher used her hands, eye contact, **facial expression and gestures**, students managed to **stay awake and pay attention** to the teacher.”

St 2: “During the lesson this week I noticed that every time you had something important to say, you switched off the OHP. This was such a **good way to get all of our attention**, because as soon as you switched it off, all my focus went on you and what you would say. It forced me to concentrate on you, rather than trying to read the notes on the board and miss important information you were to give us”

Theme 3: 4 students reported that that they perceive teacher’s mimics and gestures **as a means for emphasis**; that teacher uses eye mimics and gestures while stressing something important about the course content.

St1: “Firstly, I am going to write about the teacher attitudes in the classroom. I observe that when the teacher wants to emphasize the important points of a topic, she really spends a big effort like she stresses some of the words (**her lips become an oval shape**), she starts **walking around the desks** and says the important point again and again”

St 2: “During the lesson this week I noticed that every time you had something important to say, you switched off the OHP. This was such a good way to get all of our attention, because as soon as you **switched it off all my focus went on you and what you would say**. It forced me to concentrate on you, rather than trying to read the notes on the board and miss important information you were to give us”

Theme 4: 4 students reported that teacher’s mimics and gestures **reflect the mood of the teacher** and that they can easily understand whether the teacher is happy or not.

St1: “Firstly, I have to confess to you, **you looked like too stressful** and you **tried not showing this stress to us**. But **your gesture and mimics** and your speaking style **did not allow**. I think being an instructor is too difficult, because you tried to look like a happy person, **you tried to smile but** students felt that something was wrong. In this case both teachers and students make empathy with each others”

St2: “Today canan hoca was **a little bit stressful** so for this reason canan **hoca used eye contact minimum with students**. All students understood that canan was stressful and gave extra attention to her. This is very important for me. Canan hoca **didn’t say anything to us but we could understand it from her behaviour in the class**. It means she present her character so well that all students can understand her and what she wants in class easily. I think all teachers should present their characters clearly so students can understand easily what the teacher wants or how they should behave”

Theme 5: Only 2 students reported that teacher’s mimics and gestures **helps them understand the topic better**.

St 1: By using demonstrations and **expressing herself with body language**, she **explained the differences** between a person who can use her tone of voice in two ways but in the same situation.”

4. 4. Conclusion and Suggestion

Even though, literature indicates that eye contact, mimics and gestures are mostly used for having control over and keeping silence at secondary school level, none of the university students indicated this aspect of eye contact, mimics and gestures. The way university students interpret eye contact, mimics and gestures is different. They mostly perceive eye contact as a source for motivation, concentration, enthusiasm and a tool for taking and maintaining attention. According to cognitive scientists, meaningful learning occurs if students' attention is captured since information processing begins with students paying attention to the stimuli (Cruickshank et al., 2003). Evidence is very strongly in favour of establishing a classroom climate in which students are intrinsically motivated to learn (Eccles, 2000 cited in Santrock, 2001). Most of the students indicated how motivated they become as a result of teacher's eye contact, mimics and gestures feeling themselves comfortable, confident and important. Teacher's non verbal communication creates a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere for them and this enables them to have self-confidence which also leads to an increase in the participation and contributions to the lesson. When students participate in the lesson, they are more likely to ask questions which also increase their understanding of the topics. Teachers are recommended to be aware of the importance of the nonverbal communication and use it in favour of students to create a more motivating, comfortable, confident environment in class for a better classroom management.

References

- Amulya, J., (2004). *Guide to Integrating Reflection into Field-Based Courses*. Center for Reflective Community Practice <http://crpc.mit.edu>
- Creswell, J. W., (2003) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Cruickshank, D. R. et al., (2003). *The Act of Teaching*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Companies
- Ergin, A., & Birol, C., (2005). *Eğitimde İletişim*. Anı Yayıncılık. Ankara
- Gower, R. and Walters, S. (1983). *Teaching Practice Handbook*. Oxford: Heinemann
- Kvale, S., (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ledbury, R. et al., (2004). The Importance of Eye Contact in the Classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, VOL. X, No. 8 <http://iteslj.org>
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Parker, R., (2006) *.Classroom Management*. Tesol Course Articles. <http://www.tesolcourse.com>
- Patton, M. Q., (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Pollitt, L., (2006) *.Classroom Management*. Tesol Course Articles. <http://www.tesolcourse.com>
- Rossman, R. L., (1989). *Tips: Discipline in the Music Classroom*. Reston, VA: MENC
- Santrock, J., (2001). *Educational Psychology*. New York: McGraw Hill
- Snyder, D., (1998). Classroom Management for Student Teachers. *Music Educators Journals*, pp. 37-40