

STUDY ON NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND ITS APPLICATION IN EFL
CLASSROOMS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Duan Ran

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Abstract

STUDY ON NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND ITS APPLICATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

Duan Ran

Under the Supervision of Dr. Hollingsworth

In this paper, a brief review of literature on the studies of nonverbal communication and its application in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms of primary school was conducted and the findings was summarized. Nonverbal communication can emphasize, contradict, or substitute for verbal behavior. It plays a significant role in people's daily communication. This review of the literature on nonverbal communication focuses on the four points:

1. What is nonverbal communication?
2. What are the functions of nonverbal communication?
3. What are the similarities and differences of intercultural nonverbal communication?
4. What are the roles of nonverbal communication used in EFL classrooms of primary schools?

This work will make an impact on the using nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms of primary school and should be of importance to others seeking information related to best practices.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, EFL classrooms

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Chapter I Introduction

English learning during primary school is beneficial to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners because young learners have great capacities for learning and comprehending new knowledge. According to Zhou (2013), primary school students, are skilled at processing concrete, meaningful, and visual information. They are lively and active. They are clever at imitation and they love acting, which means merely giving lectures is inappropriate in the classrooms of primary school. Therefore, EFL teachers of primary school should take their students' cognitive and physiological characteristics into consideration and apply effective teaching strategies, for example, nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication is defined as “a process in which communicators use the natural features of their bodies to deliver information and express specific meaning instinctively to the other communicator” (Guan, 2004, p.90).It can help people express their emotions and deliver information. It also plays an important role in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom of primary school. For example, it can contribute to students' comprehending and remembering of vocabulary terms, sentences, and dialogues.

The three branches of nonverbal communication are paralanguage, proxemics, and kinesics. According to Brown and Eisterhold (2004), paralanguage is concerned with the use of the voice during speech, such as pitch, loudness, and rate of speech. It can signal our emotions. For example, when we say “I'm not angry”, it may deliver different emotional messages if we change our pitch or drawl the word “not”.

Proxemics is the study of how to use space properly when communicating with others (Brown and Eisterhold, 2004). Hall (1973) classified it into four types: (a)intimate distance, between touching and 18 inches, often used between intimate family members or best friends;

(b) personal distance, 18 inches to 4 feet, often used between ordinary friends or teachers and students; (c) social distance, 4 to 12 feet, often used in business affairs; (d) public distance, more than 12 feet. This distance is often used in very formal occasions, such as lecture halls. The distance used between teachers and students is often personal distance. If a teacher approaches a student nearer than the distance in the classroom, that often means the teacher wants to convey something, for example, to warn the student to concentrate on study.

The third branch of nonverbal communication is kinesics. Kinesics is the study of body motion. It includes gestures, postures, facial expressions, and eye contact (Brown and Eisterhold, 2004). According to Neill (1991), "Nonverbal communication is an important element in classrooms. A lot of meaning is conveyed between students and teachers through posture, facial expression, and gestures" (p.16). Posture, facial expressions, and gestures can be called kinesics. It's an important branch of nonverbal communication and it plays an important role in English teaching and learning.

The study of using nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms of primary school is very important for young students' English development. It can help students better comprehend and remember new knowledge. Moreover, it can help students better understand teachers' instructions and thoughts. Thus, learning and teaching efficiency can be improved (Su, 2015).

Despite existing research, many teachers are prone to neglect the importance of nonverbal communication and lack of intensive study. According to Jie Su (2015), Chinese primary school teachers of English are lacking scientific knowledge of nonverbal communication. Sometimes, they casually use body language during their teaching.

Moreover, some of the teachers even use their body parts incorrectly. For example, when one teacher said “listen” to her students, she just held up her index finger upward in front of her lips instead of pointing to her ear. Holding up the index finger upward usually means “one” in Chinese, which may make students feel confused. Therefore, it’s necessary for us to attach great importance to this area and understand how to properly use nonverbal communication in the EFL classrooms in primary schools.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is, “What is nonverbal communication? Is it necessary and significant to use nonverbal communication in the EFL classrooms of primary school? How can EFL teachers in primary school appropriately use it?”

Definition of Terms

Nonverbal communication: “Nonverbal communication is a process in which communicators use the natural features of their bodies to deliver information and express specific meaning instinctively to the other communicator” (Guan, 2004, p.90).

Kinesics: Kinesics is the study of body motion, including gestures, posture, facial expressions, and eye contact (Brown &Eisterhold, 2004, p.134).

Paralanguage: Paralanguage is concerned with the use of the voice during speech---pitch, loudness, and rate of speech, among other things (Brown &Eisterhold, 2004, p.134).

Proxemics: Proxemics is the study of how space is used to communicate (Brown

&Eisterhold, 2004, p.134).

Purpose of the Study

As Neill (1991) said, “Nonverbal communication is an important element in classrooms” (p.16). However, Chinese teachers of EFL in primary school are lacking scientific knowledge of nonverbal communication. Instead, they use body language casually and without intention (Su, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of the study is to support EFL teachers in primary schools to be mindful of nonverbal communication in EFL teaching, and give some suggestions to Chinese EFL teachers for using nonverbal communications.

Significance of the Study

The study of using nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms of primary school is very important in promoting English learning. It can contribute to students’ comprehension of vocabulary terms, sentences, and dialogues (Asher, 1969). It can help students to understand teachers’ instructions (Goldin-Meadow and Singer, 2003). It can also help teachers to regulate the atmosphere of the classes (Bell, 2010). Research supports using nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms in primary school. Teachers benefit from recognizing nonverbal communication as a best practice in the classroom.

Delimitation of the Study

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville using the University of Wisconsin system UW=search tool beginning

on February 2nd, 2016 through April of 2016. Searches of the literature will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and JSTOR as the primary sources. Key search topics included “Nonverbal communication”, “EFL”, “primary school”.

The database CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) will also be used since the research will be conducted on the basis of the situation of EFL classroom of Chinese primary school and many related researches on Chinese EFL teaching and learning are on that database.

Methodology

A brief review of literature on the studies of nonverbal communication was conducted and the findings will be summarized. While it appears little research has been done specifically looking at how nonverbal communication is used in the teaching of English to Chinese students, the small amount of available literature is summarized.

Some recommendations and cases will be described to show how to use nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms of primary school and how to solve the existing problems of Chinese EFL teachers in using nonverbal communications.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in people's daily communication. Nonverbal communication can emphasize, contradict, or substitute for verbal behavior. This review of the literature on nonverbal communication focuses on the four points:

1. What is nonverbal communication?
2. What are the functions of nonverbal communication?
3. What are the similarities and differences of intercultural nonverbal communication?
4. What are the roles of nonverbal communication used in EFL classrooms of primary schools?

What is Nonverbal Communication?

Communication is necessary to people's daily life. It can be divided into two types: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. Many people pay great attention to the accuracy and fluency of the verbal communication and overlook the importance of nonverbal communication, which plays an essential role in people's daily communication. The famous anthropologist E. T. Hall (1973) pointed out "silent language expresses more information than verbal language because it contains much information" (p. 188). We shouldn't ignore the significance of nonverbal communication.

Conceptions of nonverbal communication.

Guan (2004) defines nonverbal communication as, "a process in which communicators use the natural features of their bodies to deliver information and express specific meaning instinctively to the other communicator" (p.90). Nonverbal communication can help people express their emotions and deliver information. Stamatis (2011) offered further information

about nonverbal communication sharing that it includes facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, body posture and gestures, and positioning within groups. It may also include the way we wear our clothes or the silence we keep.

Brown and Eisterhold (2004) systematically divided nonverbal communication into three parts: paralanguage, proxemics, and kinesics. Paralanguage is concerned with the use of the voice during speech, such as pitch, loudness, and rate of speech. It can signal our emotions. Proxemics is the study of how to use space properly when communicating with others. Kinesics is the study of body motion. It includes gestures, postures, facial expressions, and eye contact.

Characteristics of nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication is different from verbal communication. According to Hu (2011), the characteristics of nonverbal communication are universality, uncertainty, vividness, generality, and integrity. First, nonverbal behaviors universally exist in our lives. A blinking of eye, holding up a finger, a sigh, and even silence are examples of nonverbal behaviors. Second, nonverbal behaviors do not necessarily have the same meanings as verbal ones. More often than not, we need to comprehend the nonverbal behaviors with the help of context. For example, more often than not, a smile is comprehended as friendly; However, it can also be comprehended as contemptuous. It depends on the context. Third, nonverbal communications are vivid and efficient. For example, when a teacher is teaching the word “fox”, he or she may explain the word’s meaning to the students, “It’s a kind of animal. It has a bushy tail. It’s clever but sly...” This method costs time and students may not completely understand the explanation. However, if the teacher shows a picture of fox to the students,

almost all the students will understand the meaning of the English word. Fourth, some of the nonverbal behaviors have general or similar signals all around the world. For example, a smile is recognized as friendly all over the world. Lastly, nonverbal communications have the characteristic of integrity. Nonverbal behaviors are often used in groups or in sequence. For example, when people express their feelings in nonverbal way, they often use their eyes, mouth, and hands together to convey meanings.

What are the Functions of Nonverbal Communication?

The functions of nonverbal communications refer to the roles they play in communications. According to Liang (2004), nonverbal communications can assist verbal communications in conveying information. They can repeat, substitute, complement, accent verbal meanings, and regulate verbal communications. Bi (1999) and Mehrabian (1972) also pointed out that there are six functions of nonverbal communications. The first one is repeating, which means nonverbal behaviors can repeat the information that verbal ones conveyed. For example, when a teacher says, "Draw two ears on your paper, please", she may hold up two fingers. Repeating information using nonverbal can help a message to be conveyed more clearly. The second function is substituting; this happens when we use a gesture in place of words. For example, when you are in a lecture hall, you can wave your hand to your friends in order to show your position instead of shouting to them. The third function is accenting. We can use nonverbal signals to repeat and reinforce our verbal contents. For example, when we get angry and shout to others, we may also pound our fist to express our anger. The fourth one is complementing. Generally speaking, nonverbal signals often accompany verbal communications. For example, when a teacher asks the students to

listen to him or her carefully, he or she may gaze at the two students who are talking in class. The fifth one is regulating. Nonverbal signals can regulate verbal communication. For example, when we talk with other people, we can nod to indicate that we agree with them and encourage them to go on speaking, or we can keep silent and frown to show that we have different opinions. The last one is contradicting or negating. For example, a frown may betray your pleasant words. When nonverbal behaviors contradict verbal words, people tend to believe the information that nonverbal behaviors conveyed.

What are the similarities and differences of intercultural nonverbal communication?

Like verbal communication, nonverbal communications also have some similarities and differences all over the world. Liang (2004) pointed out that the forming and developments of nonverbal behaviors have close connection with its culture. Nonverbal behaviors from different cultures can be quite different. For example, no matter how different the cultural backgrounds of people may be, they can often recognize the facial expressions of sadness or anger. Darwin, the famous English naturalist, hypothesized that there are universals in facial behaviors to convey emotions (1872). Ekman (1982) tested Darwin's hypothesis with colleagues in New Guinea and can support Darwin's hypothesis.

Ekman (1982) and his colleagues found some members of the Fore group in New Guinea who had very contact with Westerners. They were given a situation, for example, the death of a child, and then they were shown three pictures of different facial expressions. The Fore needed to choose which facial expression would occur in each situation. The choices of the Fore were consistent with the Westerners' to a great extent. Ninety-two percent of the Fore people matched the "happy" picture with the happy facial expression, and eighty-four

percent of the Fore people associated the “angry” picture with the angry facial expression. The Fore did not have consistent interpretations of the "fear" picture. While they could easily discriminate fear from sadness and anger, they could not discriminate fear from surprise.

In another study by Ekman (1982), the Fore people were asked to make the facial expressions according to the situations that were shown to them. For example, the participants were asked how they would you look if their child died. The Fore people were videotaped. Ekman and his colleagues showed the tapes to the U.S. college students who had never seen a person from New Guinea before. These U.S. college students were asked to label the emotions according to the facial expressions that the Fore people made in the tapes. The U.S. students identified most of the facial expressions correctly with one exception; the college students could not distinguish between Fore expressions of fear and surprise.

Both of the experiments that Ekman and his colleagues (1982) conducted support Darwin’s hypothesis that there are universal elements in facial behaviors that conveyed emotions, such as happy and anger; however, the expressions of fear and surprise are difficult to distinguish.

While there are similarities in nonverbal expressions across cultures, there also exist some differences in intercultural nonverbal communications. Take emblems, for example. According to Brown and Eisterhold (2004), “Emblems are the sort of gestures that we usually mean when we use the word gesture. They have conventional meanings within the culture and are not accompanied by speech” (p.137).They often substitute for speech. For example, a teacher may use an emblem of a thumbs-up to communicate to a student that she did a nice job on a task.

Different cultures have different usages of emblems. If we ignore these differences in using emblems, misunderstandings may occur in cross-cultural communication.

Handshakes and eye contact are very commonly used when people greet others around the world, but the usages of both of the two kinds of emblems are quite diverse in different cultures. For example, in North America, people often shake hands when they meet others. The handshake is firm and quick and is often accompanied by looking into the eyes of the people they are meeting. However, the handshakes and eye contact are quite different in other parts of the world. The handshakes in the Arab world should not be so firm because Arabians consider a firm grip to be aggressive rather than polite. In Islamic countries, men and women are generally not allowed to shake hands. In Korea and Japan, if you looking directly into the eyes of the people you are greeting, you would be considered as a rude person. In South America, a handshake is often accompanied by a hug and a pat on the back (Brown &Eisterhold, 2004).

Farewell gestures are also quite diverse in different countries. The American “good-bye” gesture is quite similar to the European and Latin American “no” gesture. In large parts of Europe, the gesture of the good-bye wave is different from the American good-bye wave. The arm is extended with the palm down, not out, and the hand moves at the wrist. This gesture is similar to the “come here” gesture of Japanese. The Greeks and Italians’ “good-bye” gesture is similar to Americans’ “come here” gesture. The arm is out. The palm is up and the fingers are curled back and forth (Brown &Eisterhold, 2004).

The examples above clearly show that although nonverbal communications from different countries have similarities, they also have the distinctive characters. Therefore, it’s

necessary for people to understand the cultural differences of nonverbal communications to communicate effectively. As for EFL teachers under cross-cultural circumstances, understanding their students' cultural differences of nonverbal communications is very important; otherwise, misunderstandings may occur in cross-cultural classrooms.

What are the roles of nonverbal communication used in EFL classrooms of primary schools?

According to Birdwhistell (1952), nonverbal communication plays an important role in daily communications and implies 65% to 70% of our social meanings. Makarenko, the famous Soviet Union educator, pointed out that it is very important for teachers to understand how to use nonverbal communication properly (1985). Social norms dictate how to stand, how to sit, how to see, how to raise the pitch of voice, etc. He also pointed out that skilled teachers can make fifteen to twenty different facial expressions, postures, and tones of voice to facilitate their students' learning. Therefore, it's very crucial for teachers to master nonverbal communications.

Functions of nonverbal communications used in EFL classrooms of primary schools.

Primary school students are lively and active. They are capable of processing concrete, meaningful, and visual information, which means merely giving lectures is inappropriate in the classrooms of primary school (Qian Zhou, 2013). Therefore, EFL teachers of primary school should take their students' cognitive and physiological characteristics into consideration and apply effective teaching strategies, for example, nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication has the functions of substituting, accenting, complementing, and regulating. Its functions also play an important role in the EFL (English as a foreign

language) classrooms of primary schools.

First, it can help primary school students better comprehend and remember the new knowledge. For example, when teachers teach vocabulary terms about body parts to the first-year students, they can articulate the pronunciations of the words and point or show the corresponding parts of their own bodies instead of paraphrasing the meanings of those words to their students. It's also very efficient to teach verbs or verb phrases to students with nonverbal communications. Total Physical Response (TPR) is an effective teaching method in EFL classrooms of primary school. TPR, proposed by James Asher (1969), is a kind of teaching method which is based on the coordination of language and physical movement. In TPR, teachers will give instructions to their students in the target language, and students need to do the corresponding action. Through repeating the words and the corresponding actions, children can establish the link between them in their minds. For example, when teachers teach the meaning of the phrase "sweep the floor" to their students, they can do the corresponding action with the broom in the classroom. It's clearer and more efficient than verbal explanation. Then, students can repeat the phrase "sweep the floor" and do the corresponding action.

Second, nonverbal communication can help students better understand teachers' instructions and thoughts. According to Goldin-Meadow and Singer (2003), it's often easier for listeners to grasp the message conveyed in a speaker's words when that message is also conveyed in gesture. Bi (1999) and Mehrabian (1972) also proposed that one of the six functions of nonverbal communications is substituting. Sometimes, people can understand others' meaning just from the nonverbal behaviors. In childhood classrooms, teachers'

nonverbal behaviors also play an important role in giving instructions. For example, when a student is thinking how to answer a question, other students may also eagerly want to share what they know and they may break in on the student's thoughts. At this time, the teacher can put his or her forefinger on the lips to tell other students that they need to keep quiet. It is better than a verbal instruction since teacher's words may also interrupt the student's thinking. Moreover, teachers can use eye contact to communicate behavioral expectations. For example, when a teacher asks the students to listen to her carefully, she can gaze at the students who are whispering in class instead of criticizing them by their names. Through the use of nonverbal communication, the teacher helps the students to reflect on their behavior without causing them to feel chastised.

Third, communication can help teachers to regulate the classroom atmosphere. For example, teachers can promote a positive classroom environment and motivate students by smiling, quick speech, and exaggerated actions. When the students are introverted, timid, or afraid of answering questions, teachers can encourage them through smiling, nodding, a gaze of concentration, and by leaning forward to ease their fears and to show that they are interested in their ideas. Touch is also a good way to ease the anxiety of children. According to Bell (2010), touch can make children feel relieved and relaxed. It can provide attachment for children. Moreover, it can stimulate children. Teachers can come to the children and gently pet their heads to make them feel relaxed.

In short, nonverbal communications can help teachers in teaching knowledge and managing classrooms. If teachers can properly use nonverbal communications in their classrooms, learning and teaching efficiency can be improved.

Chinese English teachers of primary school lack of the consciousness of using nonverbal communications.

Novice teachers use nonverbal communication casually in their class, without a clear sense of purpose. They lack of clear understanding about when to use nonverbal cues, where to use them, and how to use them in their lesson plans. Jie Su (2015) studied Chinese English teachers' consciousness on using nonverbal communications during their classes. According to his findings, 85.7% of experienced teachers are conscious of their nonverbal signals and only 14.2% of experienced teachers are unconscious or not sure about it. However, only 63.7% of novice teachers are conscious of their nonverbal signals and up to 36.3% of novice teachers are unconscious or not sure about it (Su, 2015). From the study, we can see that experienced teachers, whose classes are usually more efficient and organized, are more conscious of their nonverbal signals during their classes than novice teachers.

Nonverbal signals are not consistent with meaning.

After observing experienced teachers' and novice teachers' English classes, Jie Su (2015) found that some teachers' nonverbal signals are not consistent with their message, especially some novice teachers. For example, when a teacher says "group work," indicating that 3 or 4 students should work as a group, and make the gesture for "pair work", the students feel confused.

The pace of changing nonverbal signals is inappropriate.

Sometimes, teachers may issue a series of coherent nonverbal signals, but the pace of changing nonverbal cues is so quick. For example, when a teacher says, "The first group, please stand up" with a corresponding nonverbal cue, she needs to wait a moment until most

of the students of group one stand up, and then ask the question, “What’s this?” with the forefinger pointing to the picture. However, some teachers didn’t allow enough wait time for students to process directions or questions. As a result, there are still some students thinking about teacher’s question, but their teacher already made the gesture of “sit down”. In contrast, some teachers’ pace of changing nonverbal cues is too slow. For example, Chinese teachers often use two kinds of nonverbal performances to stop students’ discipline violations. One is gazing at the students who violate disciplines. The other is approaching the students and using their hands to stop the students’ actions. When the two performances last too long, they will distract other students.

Over-use of nonverbal performances.

Some English teachers, especially novice teachers, tend to use nonverbal cues in order to excite students’ interests. However, overuse of nonverbal communication may make teachers overlook language teaching and even distract students. For example, when some teachers teach verbs, they will ask the students to follow their actions again and again to help students keep the meanings of the words in mind, but they don’t write the words on the blackboard and ask students to imitate the pronunciation. Therefore, students are engaged with the actions but they are unfamiliar with the vocabulary terms.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the review of existing literature related to nonverbal communication and its application in EFL classrooms of primary school, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, according to Zhou (2013) and Guan (2004), the characteristics and functions of nonverbal communication make it essential to an efficient English class, especially to the

English classes of primary school. Asher (1969), Goldin-Meadow & Singer (2003), and Bell (2010) further explain how nonverbal communication can help in the English classes of primary school. Second, the two experiments that Ekman and his colleagues (1982) made and the examples that were given by Brown and Eisterhold (2004) show that although nonverbal communications from different countries have similarities, they also have the distinctive characteristics. Therefore, under cross-cultural circumstances, it's necessary for EFL teachers to understand their students' cultural differences of nonverbal communications; otherwise, misunderstandings may occur in cross-cultural classrooms. Third, as for EFL classrooms of Chinese primary schools, there exist some problems in using nonverbal communication. Teachers often lack consciousness of using nonverbal communications and don't use cues that support the meaning of their language. Also, they can use an inappropriate pace or over-use nonverbal cues (Su, 2015). In short, Chinese English teachers, especially novice teachers, lack the knowledge and training needed for incorporating nonverbal communication into their teaching.

To solve the problem, Jie Su (2015) advises that novice teachers can learn to use nonverbal communications with the help of experienced teachers through class observations. Visiting teachers can support novice teachers in using nonverbal communications through feedback and professional development so that they can best support students' learning.

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