

# Students' Nonverbal Communication in the Classroom

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Double Major BA Study Program in English Language and Literature and  
Pedagogy

Lucija Mustač

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Alma Vančura, Ph. D. Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2022

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the issues of students' nonverbal communication in the classroom. Communication refers to sending and receiving messages both verbally and nonverbally. Students, as the main subjects in the classroom, are usually left with only nonverbal communication to express their opinions and emotions about the events happening in the classroom. The aim of this paper is to analyze students' nonverbal communication inside the classrooms by looking into how they use eye behavior, facial expressions, gestures and body movements, touch, proximity, vocalics, and physical appearance to send messages to their teachers. Additionally, this paper will examine students' disruptive behavior and how nonverbal communication differs across cultures. Therefore, this paper will provide an overview of the literature and research concerning students' nonverbal communication in the classroom.

### Key words:

Nonverbal communication, students, classroom, teachers, disruptive behavior, cultural differences

## Sažetak

Ovaj rad bavi se problematikom neverbalne komunikacije učenika tijekom nastave. Komunikacija se odnosi na slanje i primanje poruka verbalno i neverbalno. Učenicima, kao glavnim subjektima u učionici, uglavnom ostaje samo neverbalna komunikacija kao način izražavanja svojeg mišljenja i emocija o događanjima unutar učionice. Cilj ovog rada je analizirati neverbalnu komunikaciju učenika u učionici, promatrajući kako oni koriste kontakt očima, izraze lica, geste i pokrete tijela, dodir, osobni prostor, ton glasa i fizički izgled kako bi poslali poruke svojim učiteljima. Osim toga, ovaj rad će proučiti ometajuće ponašanje učenika i kako se neverbalna komunikacija razlikuje u različitim kulturama. Ovaj rad daje pregled literature i istraživanja o neverbalnoj komunikaciji učenika tijekom nastave.

## Ključne riječi:

Neverbalna komunikacija, učenici, učionica, učitelji, ometajuće ponašanje, kulturne razlike



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## 1. Introduction

Communication is essential to classroom interaction, but most people will think of verbal communication as the only means to convey a message. Contrary to that belief, nonverbal communication is just as, if not even more, important in the classroom setting. Students and teachers use various nonverbal signs to share knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and emotions. While there are different categorizations of nonverbal communication, it typically includes oculosics, olfactics, kinesics, haptics, proxemics, vocalis, and physical appearance (Barry, 2011). Students' nonverbal communication is not a topic of many researchers, but it does contain crucial information for the teachers. By reading students' nonverbal language, the teacher can tell how they feel about the class, the teacher, their colleagues, and themselves. It enables teachers to know if their students do not understand the curriculum or if they need something to be repeated. Moreover, nonverbal communication is important in creating first impressions and assumptions of the students, which can have many pedagogical implications if communicated by the teacher. In interpreting nonverbal signs, it is also important to pay attention to cultural differences regarding the presentation of nonverbal behavior since the same emotions and thoughts can be displayed differently, depending on the culture. For this reason, research on students' nonverbal communication is of essential value and should be studied more.

## 2. Nonverbal Communication

Johnson (1999) defines communication as an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that allows people to share their knowledge, attitudes, skills, opinions, and emotions. There are two types of communication: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. While verbal communication relies on words as a means of transmitting a message, nonverbal implies communication that does not use words to send a particular message. Instead, it includes facial expressions, body movements, touch, physical appearance, posture, vocal intonation, and spatial distance as a means of communication (Johnson, 1999). Even though verbal and nonverbal communication are two different terms, Knapp (1972, as cited in Johnson, 1999) mentions six ways in which they are connected one with another:

1. Repeating – nonverbal communication has the role of repeating what was said through verbal communication, e.g., “Leave”, and points to the door.
2. Contradicting – nonverbal communication can contradict what was said through verbal communication, e.g., A student says he is not lying but is avoiding eye contact.
3. Substituting – nonverbal communication can be used instead of verbal communication, e.g., Nodding instead of saying ‘yes.’
4. Complementing – nonverbal communication may elaborate or modify verbal communication, e.g., Waving with hands while talking.
5. Accenting – nonverbal communication can accent verbal communication, e.g., Using hands to emphasize what is being said.
6. Regulating – nonverbal communication can regulate the flow of verbal communication, e.g., Head nods show if the student is paying attention.

Nonverbal communication can be used instead of words when one does not know how to express their feelings or opinions adequately. Nonverbal communication can be divided into two categories: “paralinguistic features and physical nonverbal behaviors” (Slattery Rashotte, 2002, p. 93). Paralinguistic features are aspects of the voice, including speech rate, tone of the voice, pitch, voice volume, pauses, and self-interruptions. Physical nonverbal behavior relates to gestures (head movements), body movements (positioning, use of space), and facial expressions (for example, smiling) (ibid.). Even though there are many divisions, Zoric, et al. (2007, as cited in Barry, 2011, p. 2-3) offer categorization of nonverbal communication that includes:

- Chronemics – timing of verbalizations and pauses

- Haptics – contact and deliberate touch between individuals
- Kinesics – all forms of body language and body movement, including facial expressions, eye movement, gestures, and posture
- Oculistics – intentional and unintentional eye contact in the act of communication
- Olfactics – the influence of odor
- Physical appearance – characteristics of the body, clothing, hairstyle, etc.
- Proxemics – consideration of personal space and arrangement of physical items
- Silence – the absence of verbal and nonverbal communication
- Symbolism – meaning associated with symbols
- Vocalics – vocal impact on the act of speaking, to include tone of voice, timbre, volume, and rate of speech

While each category can be discussed on its own, it is important to remember that they usually appear together in clusters (Zoric, et al. 2007, as cited in Barry, 2011).

### 3. Students' Nonverbal Communication

When it comes to communication inside a classroom, most people will think of verbal communication as the only way to properly send a message. In the majority of classrooms, teachers are the ones that spend the most time speaking, while students are usually quiet and only talk when the teacher asks them some questions. In reality, students' communication is much more than just what comes out of their mouths. In a classroom setting, the teacher and the students are senders and receivers of verbal and nonverbal messages. Students use nonverbal communication to show their interest or boredom about the topic, to show their attentiveness, or their willingness or unwillingness to work on a particular problem. According to some schoolers, classroom communication is referred to as "here and now" (Parker & French, 1971, p. 276). That means that what happens in a classroom at a specific time depends on an individual's way of sending or receiving a message. "Student nonverbal behaviors are important because they offer a means of perceiving the students as an individual" (French, 1971, p. 306). Every student is different and perceives and feels things differently. While openly expressing emotions in a school environment is not desirable or even allowed, the teacher can learn a lot about the student's needs, values, and feelings by reading and recognizing their nonverbal communication.

Moreover, the nonverbal communication of students helps shape teacher's expectations and actions (Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987). Based on the information they get from nonverbal cues, teachers will make assumptions about students' dispositions, abilities, and characteristics (Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987). Nonverbal cues can also help in the creation of a first impression. According to Brooks and Woolfolk (1987), first impressions are determined by static nonverbal characteristics, including skin color, height, and clothing, and by dynamic nonverbal characteristics like eye contact, facial expressions, posture, and gestures. Besides creating first impressions, nonverbal cues also influence judgments. The cues indicate emotional state, attitudes, personality traits, background, and reactions to certain situations (Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987). Communication in a classroom is specific because it has characteristic activities, certain formal and informal rules, time constraints, and additional defining features. Therefore, to understand communication between teacher and student in a classroom, these aspects need to be considered (Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987). Argyle (1975, as cited in O'Hair & Ropo, 1994, p. 92) states that nonverbal behavior has four functions: "expressing emotions, conveying interpersonal attitudes, presenting one's personality, and accompanying verbal communication". Expressing emotions is a vital sign for teachers to know how their students feel about school, themselves, their friends and colleagues, and even their teachers. By reading students' emotions through their nonverbal behavior, the teacher can tell how they are feeling about the subject of their learning, the teacher's methods of work, and learning in general. Conveying interpersonal attitudes includes expressing one's opinions towards other people. The teacher can tell how students feel about school or themselves by reading their nonverbal communication when they enter a classroom. If the students say "hi" without enthusiasm and direct eye contact with the teacher, they are perceived as less interested. On the other hand, the students who smile at their teachers and look them in the eyes are viewed as more genuine in their salutation (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994). The third function, presenting one's personality, can be referred to as "the process of impression formation and management" (Burgoon, Buller & Woodall, 1989, as cited in O'Hair & Ropo, 1994, p. 93). Teachers who know the personality of their students can predict their actions, plans, behaviors, and reactions in certain situations and react accordingly to the students' behavior.

#### 4. Oculistics

Since the majority of verbal communication is done by the teacher, students often use eye contact to send their messages. Ergin and Birol (2005, as cited in Zeki, 2009) indicate that real

communication starts when eye contact is established between two people. O' Hair and Ropo (1994) state how "eye contact refers to mutual and simultaneous eye gaze between two people" (p. 100). According to some researchers, gaze direction affects the degree of emotionality permitted during an interaction, and it depends on participants and what they expect when it comes to positive and negative reinforcements (Keith, Tornatzky & Pettigrew, 1974). Some studies show how gaze and eye contact can provide information, regulate interaction, express intimacy, exercise social control, and facilitate goals (Miller, 1988). According to Miller (1988), "eye contact can be manipulated, (...) to open or close channels of communication" (p.12).

#### 4.1. Eye Movement

Barry (2011) states that observing eye movement can indicate a student's mindset and thoughts. For example, when students try to remember an image, their eyes will wander upwards. To remember a sound, the eyes will drift to the left or right in order to be in line with the ears. While the student is thinking or trying to solve the problem, their eyes are looking down and to the left, but when they are dealing with strong feelings and emotions, their eyes will migrate down and to the right.

#### 4.2. Eye Contact and Avoidance of Eye Contact

"As the lesson starts, the teacher can check whether the students are ready or not only through eye contact" (Zeki, 2009, p. 1444). Through eye contact, the teacher can also get information if the students are bored with the subject of the class. "Students' eyes often signal listening and non-listening behaviors, thus transmitting subtle messages about their lack of attentiveness." (Miller, 1988, p. 13). Students who spend more time looking at the clock or with their eyes wandering around the classroom may signal that they need a break, that the content being taught is dull, or that the teacher lacks motivation and preparation (Miller, 1988). Another reason students avoid eye contact is emotional arousal such as despair, depression, or stress. For example, students who feel embarrassed or sad will avoid eye contact with other people and divert it to other places in the classroom because that seems to help them in their process of recovery (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994). Brophy and Everson (1981, as cited in Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987) say that teachers do not like students who avoid eye contact and they usually tend to be perceived as unhappy, inattentive, or uncooperative. Students usually avoid eye contact when the teacher asks difficult questions to which they do not know the answer. Students will then look down at their notes or desk to avoid opening communication channels (Miller, 1988). Another reason for avoiding eye contact is an

unwillingness to communicate. O’Hair and Ropo (1994) state that students avoid eye contact when they want to be left alone, either because they are busy talking with someone else or because they are unhappy with the teacher or other students in a classroom. On the other hand, Doherty-Sneddon and Phelps’ (2007, as cited in Haataja, Toivanen, Laine & Hannula, 2019) research on teacher’s interpretation of students’ eye contact states that teachers believe students’ avoidance of eye contact is linked with deep thinking and should not be disturbed. However, Haataja, Toivanen, Laine & Hannula (2019) claim that maintaining eye contact with the teacher signals motivation and understanding on the part of the student.

## 5. Kinesics

Ray Birdwhistell, an anthropologist who coined the term kinesics, argued that all body movements have meaning and that can be analyzed similarly to spoken language (Birdwhistell, 1970). According to Birdwhistell, kinesics includes facial expressions, gestures, posture and gait, and visible arm and body movements, and they express one’s thoughts, feeling, moods, intentions, and attitudes (Padula, 2012). Moreover, Birdwhistell identified the smallest meaningful unit of behavior which he called kinemes (Waiflein, 2013). He stated that there are 50 to 60 kinemes that are culturally universal, meaning that the same gesture can be used in different cultures and will have a different meaning in each one. Furthermore, he has also defined kines, which are kinemes that do not have a unique meaning but are still recognized in different cultures, and kinemorphs, which are created when kinemes are combined (Waiflein, 2013). Beebe (1980) defines kinesics as the study of posture, movement, and gesture. It is “the interpretation of body language such as facial expressions and gestures – or (...) non-verbal behavior related to movement, either of any part of the body or the body as a whole” (Affini, 2017, p. 62).

Kinesics is one of the most frequently used nonverbal cues in the classroom. “Students’ body language can convey their affection to the teacher and their attitudes toward the courses that they learn and toward school’s rules’ (Huang, 2011, p. 905). Students will use gestures like shrugging their shoulders, throwing their hands up in the air, or storming off from the class to show they are angry or upset (Kader, 2020). Furthermore, research done by Indah, Crestiani, and Ramadhana (2018) shows how students mostly use movements like nodding the head, raising the hand, folding the hand, bowing the head, rigid body, and slumped posture to portray emotions like fear, shock, smile, and shyness. Folding the hands shows the teacher that students are paying

attention to the lecture, nodding the head is a sign of understanding, and raising the hand means that the student wants to ask or answer a particular question. Additionally, Indah et al. (2018) concluded that the students use these movements in their communication without realizing it.

### 5.1. Facial Expressions

Some researchers say that facial expressions convey cues that indicate the emotional and attitudinal states of people involved in the interaction in the form of reinforcing events (Keith et al., 1974). Facial appearance can include wrinkles, muscle tone, skin coloration, and eye color. These elements can reveal information about a person's age, sex and gender, race, ethnic origin, and status. Other facial clues include the length of hair, hairstyle, cleanliness, and facial hair, and they represent an individual's idea of beauty. The third group of facial markers is momentary expressions that signal emotions. "These expressions are registered by muscle movements that cause changes in the forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, cheeks, nose, lips, and chin, such as raising the eyebrows, wrinkling the brow, curling the lip." (Miller, 1988, p. 10). Some facial expressions are easy to notice, while others pass so quickly that they go unnoticed. Regardless of the duration, both types can positively or negatively reinforce the verbal message and convey the participants' emotions and attitudes regarding the topic (Miller, 1988). Facial expressions can be voluntary, like when a person wants to hide their feelings, or they can be involuntary, like when a person is surprised by something (Miller, 1988).

Observation of facial expressions can tell the teacher if students understand the lecture, if they are confused, or if something needs to be repeated. While holding a lecture, the teacher should read students' facial expressions in order to understand whether they need to slow down, speed up or adjust their lecture in any other way (Sathik & Jonathan, 2013). If the teacher successfully notices and identifies a problem, they can motivate their students to work on it and resolve it. Furthermore, facial expressions allow teachers to determine what is the real source of motivation of the students and what are their intentions. O'Hair and Ropo (1994) give an example of a student who says she understands the assignment but still looks confused. A skilled teacher who knows how to read nonverbal cues can tell that the student's behavior contradicts her words. The teacher should then explain the task again so that all students would understand it and do it correctly. Additionally, facial expressions can convey positive and negative emotions. The study by Sathik and Johnathan (2013) shows that students convey positive emotions when they understand the lesson, are satisfied with it, and want to reflect a positive response to the teacher. Positive emotions are expressed by wide-open eyes and raised eyebrows. In contrast, negative emotions are shown



when the student does not understand the lecture, wants the lecturer to repeat themselves, is confused, or is unable to keep up with the teacher's pace. These emotions are expressed by shrinking eyes and lowered eyebrows with forehead wrinkles, raised eyebrows, enlarged eyes, and curling lips. They (ibid.) assert that students will have lowered and drawn together brows, horizontal or vertical wrinkles on their foreheads, or they will avoid eye contact with the teacher when they feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, Barry (2011) states that students' satisfaction with the lesson will result in them showing relaxed and smiling facial expressions, while a frown and wrinkled brow is a sign of anger or confusion, and yawning is a sign of boredom or fatigue.

## 5.2. Gestures

Eunson (2012) describes gestures as movements of the body, especially the hands or arms, that express an idea or emotion. Gestures are connected to the emotional state of interactants and are associated with affiliative approach behaviors (Keith et al., 1974). Students use gestures to express themselves and complement what they are expressing with words. In the classroom, students raise their hands to ask for permission to speak. If the student is waving their hand in a frenzied way, they are excited to answer to the asked question, while shrugging shoulders will most commonly express a lack of knowledge (Barry, 2011). Neill and Caswell (1993, as cited in Barry, 2011) indicate that arms folded across the chest is a sign of dominance, whereas Miller (2005, as cited in Barry, 2011) explains it as a defensive mechanism or withdrawal from the conversation. Small children will show that they are stressed by sucking a thumb, while later in life, indicators of stress could be biting a pencil, arm of the glasses, or fingernails. Additionally, crossing the hands, self-touching, hair-stroking, and playing with jewelry are all signs of insecurity. The student who is lying will often scratch or rub their face or nose, cover their mouth with a hand, or play with their clothes (Eunson, 2012).

## 5.3. Body Movements and Posture

A person sends a message through the way they walk, stand, or even sit. Body movements can be misunderstood but are usually quicker to comprehend than speech. That is because they are "visual and can be seen quicker than the spoken word can be heard" (Johnson, 1999, p. 7). Posture

reflects emotionality and attitudinal states in interaction with relation to the feelings of liking and disliking between interactants (Keith et al., 1974).

Barry (2011) states that a student, who is attentive and engaged in the class, will sit mostly erect while leaning slightly towards the speaker. Students who are slumping or slouching in their seats are usually bored or discouraged. However, non-erect posture can also indicate fatigue or drowsiness. Moreover, students' body posture can reveal a lot about how they feel and perceive their teachers and colleagues. If the student is relaxed when addressing others, it shows a lack of respect for that person. On the other hand, a straight alignment while sitting demonstrates a higher level of respect. Head movements are mainly used to indicate approval or disapproval between people who are communicating (Keith et al., 1974). Barry (2011) claims that a person with a raised chin is forced to look down their nose. That head position will indicate that the person is imposing their dominance. If the student shows these characteristics, it can mean that he or she is challenging the authority set by the teacher to cause difficulties in the classroom. On the other hand, a bowed head is regarded as non-threatening and submissive. Moreover, students will show sympathetic interest by slightly tilting their heads to one side (Neill & Caswell, 1993, as cited in Barry, 2011). The agreement is usually shown by nodding (Miller, 2005, as cited in Barry, 2011), while lowering the head can indicate that the student is trying to come up with a response to the question (Radford, 1990, as cited in Barry, 2011).

## 6. Haptics

Stamatis (2011) claims that touch is the most important of all senses because it awakes all the others, like sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Miller (1988) states that tactual sensitivity begins in childhood and largely impacts the individual's mental and emotional adjustment. Children use tactual exposure as a primary tool for discovering and learning about their environment. As Miller (1988) states, until the ages of 10 to 12, children use touch to convey affiliation or aggression to their parents, while in adolescence, touch is limited to only their hands and arms. According to some researchers, body contact reflects the degree of emotionality of interactants (Keith et al., 1974). Prescott (1990, as cited in Stamatis, 2011) mentions how many researchers have indicated that inadequate touch early on in life or during puberty could lead to violent behavior in adulthood. Hatfield (1994, in Stamatis, 2011) states how touch deprivation results in the deterioration of healthy brain tissue, leading to deficits in health, behavior, emotions, and relationships. As with

any other sense, touch can also be distorted. Tactile Defensiveness (Stamatis, 2011) is a disorder that causes people to react negatively to the feel of touch and, in some cases, it can even trigger anxiety or panic. Children suffering from this disorder will arch away from body contact because they view it as a threatening action (Stamatis, 2011). Schapiro (2002, as cited in Stamatis, 2011) mentions how tactile sensitivities can include being unexpectedly touched (e.g., being tapped on the shoulder), being bothered by certain materials and fabrics, and reactions to different textures touching the skin (e.g., glue, clay, even the feel of food in the mouth).

Some studies showed that physical contact could greatly benefit students' academic success. Stamatis (2011) named how many researchers have shown that affectionate touch improves bonding and attachment relationships between teachers and children. "According to attachment theory and international research, an appropriate touch activated neuropsychological factors and contributed to reducing negative thoughts and feelings among the members of the educational community, normalizing interpersonal relationships" (Stamatis, 2011, p. 1439). However, new research questions this by saying that the risk of misinterpretation outweighs the benefits of human contact (Barry, 2011).

## 7. Proxemics

Proximity can convey the attitudinal states of the people involved in an interaction. Distance between people who are communicating reflects the level of like or dislike between them (Keith et al., 1974). Hall (1969, as cited in Miller, 1988, p. 20) identified three types of space

1. Fixed feature space (immovable walls or partitions and objects)
2. Semi-fixed-feature space (big objects, such as chairs and tables)
3. Informal space (personal space around individuals).

Proximity is one of the first nonverbal cues that a teacher can notice. At the beginning of a new school year, the student, if possible, chooses their own place of sitting. Students who choose to sit closer to the teacher are believed to be more attentive, likable, initiating, and responsive than those who choose to sit in the back of the classroom (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983). "The front rows contain the most interested students, those in the rear engage in illicit activities, students at the aisles are mainly concerned with quick departures, most absentees come from the rear quadrant, most distant from the windows." (Sommer 1969, as cited in Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983, p. 107).

Based on the teacher's first impressions of the student, their reaction will be either inviting or defensive (Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987). Students sitting in the front or middle row are more likely to be asked questions and are more likely to enter into verbal communication with the teacher (Miller, 1988). Rollman (1976) mentions how students who sit at the front of the class want to be involved in the lesson, while students sitting at the back want to maintain maximum distance between them and the teacher. Some researchers discovered that students' position in the classroom might impact their test performance. Students seated in the front of the classroom had better test results than those seated at the back of the room. Even students who previously were considered low-ability students improved their performance after sitting at the front of the classroom (Miller, 1988). The reason for that is more communication with the teacher and fewer distractions.

Moreover, personal distance between the student and the teacher shows how the student really feels inside the classroom. On average, the distance between students and the teacher is around 3.66 or more meters (Miller, 1988). Closer interaction between the student and the teacher shows a high level of confidence and comfort that the student feels. Neill and Caswell (1993, as cited in Barry, 2011) noted that depending on the culture, the distance students create between themselves and the teacher indicates how comfortable and confident they are. On the other hand, Thompson (1973, as cited in Barry, 2011) states that rocking, swinging of legs, and tapping are signs that the student feels uncomfortable with the distance between them and the teacher. The study by Andersen, Andersen, Murphy, and Wendt-Wasco (1985) proved that students increase the interpersonal distance between themselves and adults as grade level increases. The research also gave an insight into how students learn to respect others' spaces as grade level increases. That means they will not take someone's place if someone's book or jacket clearly occupies the seat.

## 8. Vocalics

Vocal intonation includes many components, like rhythm, pitch, intensity, nasality, and slurring which evoke the truth of a message (Miller, 1988). The sound aspects of voice can convey information about the speaker's age, emotional state, and other characteristics (Miller, 1988). Miller (1988) states that differences in loudness, pitch, timbre, rate of speech, and rhythm express various emotions. For example, high pitch, fast pace, and blaring sound are indications that the speaker is feeling angry. In contrast, higher pitch and words uttered at a higher speed than average

are indications of stress, whereas lower pitch and slower word pace are indicators of depression (Miller, 1988). When answering a question, a student's volume and speech rate slightly increases, making the student appear uncertain in their answer (Barry, 2011). Furthermore, Miller (2005, as cited in Barry, 2011, p. 7) explains that "a slow to moderately slow rate of speech is an indication of boredom, 'normal' rate of speech is an indication of satisfaction, and a fast rate of speech is often an indication of anger". Seligman, Tucker, and Lambert (1972, as cited in Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983) did a study on student voice quality. They created materials showing different students by manipulating appearance (photograph), speech quality (audio recordings of the reading of a standard passage), quality of written composition, and quality of drawings to determine what influences teachers' impression of students. The results showed that hypothetical students who were attractive and had good voice quality were judged to be more intelligent, enthusiastic, and academically successful than those who were unattractive and had poor voice quality.

### 8.1. Laugh

Petitjean and González-Martínez (2015), wanted to analyze how and why students laugh and smile in specific classroom interactions.. They wanted to focus on students laughing and smiling during problematic moments rather than humorous situations, because laughter can be seen as disruptive behavior, causing problems to the teacher, and distracting other students. Even though society will mostly associate laughter with a humorous situation, sometimes the laughter can be used as a defensive mechanism or a way to easily cause trouble in the classroom. Petitjean and González-Martínez (2015) discovered that students would smile if they performed a problematic action, like not being able to answer the teacher's question. Furthermore, they discovered that students would use smiling and laughter to avoid repercussions for their problematic behavior. That is, students use smiling and laughter as trouble-management strategies or to solve the problematic actions that can occur in a classroom setting. Jefferson (1984, as cited in Petitjean & González-Martínez, 2015) stated that laughter could be used as management when the student is discussing troubles. "The speaker laughs to display *troubles-resistance* while the recipient refrains from laughing to display *troubles-receptiveness*" (Petitjean & González-Martínez, 2015, p. 3). Sert and Jacknick (2013, as cited in Petitjean & González-Martínez, 2015) state that students smile after the teacher has shown that students' previous behavior was problematic, while Sert (2013, as cited in Petitjean & González-Martínez, 2015) states that students' smiles may be an indicator of their insufficient knowledge. Petitjean and González-

Martinez (2015) noticed that formulating an opinion on a delicate matter, giving an insufficient or wrong answer, and getting caught for inattention may elicit a smile or laugh from students. They explained how students use laughter and smiling to prevent these problems from slowing down the flow of activities in the classroom and to return the class to the main point of the lecture.

## 8.2. Silence

Silence can be defined as a lack of sound or noise, but in a classroom setting, it refers to “limited participation or lack of participation during classroom interactions” (Zhouyuan, 2016, p. 106). In typical, traditional classrooms, the teacher uses frontal teaching, which leaves little room for students to talk, share their opinions, ask questions, or actively participate in the discussion. As the most common nonverbal cue, usually it is interpreted as a lack of understanding of the material. Gilmore (1985, as cited in Jaworski & Sachdev, 2010) states how in traditional classrooms, most of the talking is done by the teacher, while children usually spend time listening and reading. Moreover, silence can be understood as a “challenge” to the teacher, a lack of knowledge, a fear of failure, or a feeling of inferiority. At the same time, it can signify a learning preference or cultural background (Barry, 2011). Richmond and McCroskey (1995, in Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld & Medlcok, 2007) said how quiet children tend to be at a disadvantage in American classrooms because they are perceived as less competent than more talkative students. Jaworski and Sachdev (2010) state how certain studies have suggested that high levels of anxiety, which are connected with a student’s lack of confidence, are expected to result in silence regardless of the student’s cultural background. They mention the study involving Finnish learners of English who have demonstrated that the student’s increased anxiety levels result in their silence inside the classroom. Jaworski and Sachdev (2010) mention that students’ silence is subordinate but not submissive and shows reluctance to submit to the teacher’s authority. In their study of college students, Crawford and MacLeod (1990, as cited in Fassinger, 1995) discovered that women say their silence is a result of poorly formulated ideas, ignorance about the subject, and fear of appearing unintelligent. Conversely, men explain their silence as being unprepared or for fear of negative effects on their grades. Furthermore, Kramarae and Treichler (1990, as cited in Fassinger, 1995) discovered that males remain silent when they feel unfamiliar with a topic, while females’ silence may result from their reaction to classroom processes. Zhouyuan (2016) named some reasons why students stay silent while in a second language classroom. One reason is that students feel unconfident in their language knowledge and are afraid of being laughed at if they make a

mistake. Students are afraid of being mocked when they cannot accurately and effectively express what they want in the foreign language.

## 9. Physical Appearance

Thompson (1973, as cited in Barry, 2011) claims that students project their worldview through how they dress, the accessories they use, and how they style their hair. Barry (2011) says that "while physical appearance is not necessarily a real-time indication of a student's cognitive state, it does often provide context in which we can better situate other nonverbal cues" (p. 8). Physical appearance is one of the nonverbal communication factors that can influence the way teachers perceive their students. A study about the effect of physical attractiveness on teacher expectations (Clifford & Walster, 1973, as cited in Miller, 1988) asked teachers to evaluate students' intellectual abilities based on students' grades, verbal descriptions, and pictures of students who were categorized into attractive and unattractive categories. The demographic information was the same for all students, but the teachers favored students in the attractive category. Some experimental studies showed how this kind of behavior could create many pedagogical implications when communicated nonverbally (Miller, 1988). Another study asked teachers to read a report containing pictures, names, and ages of students said to have displayed disruptive behavior. Teachers had to read the report, evaluate the seriousness of the disruptive behavior, and give their opinion about the students involved in the accident. The physical appearance was not taken into account when the disturbance was mild. However, if the misconduct was more serious, teachers said that attractive students just had a bad day, while students considered unattractive were described as chronically antisocial (Miller, 1988). Furthermore, Singer (1964, as cited in Rollman, 1976) found a positive relationship between attractiveness and grade point average, meaning that students who were considered to be attractive had better grades than those deemed to be unattractive. Personal appearance might encompass different categories like personal look and attractiveness, hairstyle, clothing (Jung & Yoon, 2011, as cited in Šerić, 2020).

## 10. Students' Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior can be presented in different ways, depending on what the student wants to achieve. Neill and Caswell (1993) mentioned two types of disruptive behavior: (1) open challenges, which are intended to provoke the teacher and entertain the class, and (2) closed challenges which are not directed to the class or the teacher but are instead conducted within circumscribed limits. Open challenges are characterized by:

1. A high level of control checks – the deviant keeps an eye on the teacher to minimize the risk
2. Variation in gaze direction – the deviant will look around the classroom to track down the teacher and potential allies
3. Visual involvement of peripheral pupils who are attracted by the incident and distracted from the work
4. Postural changes that reduce the chance of being discovered
5. Low task involvement
6. Increased noise level
7. Willingness to argue with the teacher or other students (Neill & Caswell, 1993).

On the other hand, features of closed challenges are:

1. Limited gaze direction (only at the other pupil involved), with no attempt to recruit other members of the class
2. Directed conversation (only to the other pupil involved)
3. Relaxed posture (leaning on desk or chair)
4. Few or no control checks – the children are not trying to keep an eye on the teacher to avoid detection
5. Rapid head and arm movement – gesturing concerning their conversation
6. Increased smiling
7. Sporadic involvement in the work (Neill & Caswell, 1993, p. 53).

Noisemaking activities appear to be the most frequent way the students misbehave during the class. That includes moving objects around the classroom or student's desk, kicking objects, scrapping, or tapping items, throwing materials, and similar activities (Keith et al., 1974). Another inappropriate behavior in a classroom is not sitting still and in silence. If the child is quiet, teachers consider him well-behaved even though students work in close quarters, and the silence is not an indicator of learning (Parker & French, 1971). During the first few weeks of school, children are trained to sit still and not to speak one with another unless given permission. That is because “we



assume that a child who is still and quiet has a better chance of learning than one who is noisy and active” (Parker & French, 1971, p. 277). Teachers justify that practice by explaining how, even if children do not learn the subjects, they will at least learn how to behave appropriately in a public space. This idea shows their distrust towards their students and their desire to learn something new. According to some theorists, children want to learn new things and improve themselves. They want to have an active part in their education, they learn in various ways, they need the freedom to interact with other students, and teachers should act as guides so that the learning process would be truly fulfilled (Parker & French, 1971).

## 11. Cultural Differences In Students’ Nonverbal Communication

Levine (1973, as cited in Wolfgang, 1977, p. 147) defined culture as “an organized body of rules concerning the ways in which individuals in a given population should communicate with each other, think about themselves and their environment and behave toward one another and objects in the environment”. O’Hair and Ropo (1994) state that research shows that nonverbal communication is affected by the culture of the people. “Successfully teaching children of diverse cultures and backgrounds requires an understanding of unspoken messages sent to and received from students and parents of different cultures, races, and genders” (O’Hair & Ropo, 1994, p. 92).

### 11.1. Three categories of cultures

Wolfgang (1977) states how cultures, in terms of nonverbal communication, can be classified into three categories: (1) contact vs. noncontact (Montagu, 1971), (2) monochronic vs. polychronic, and (3) high context vs. low context (Hall, 1976). Moreover, Wolfgang (1977) gives examples of how people from monochronic, low context-oriented cultures, like Canada and the United States of America, prefer to deal with one person and one thing at a time. They are usually not involved with one another, do not expect much from others, “resist self examination and messages are explicit with the words carrying most of the information” (Wolfgang, 1977, p. 147). On the other hand, people from polychronic, high context-oriented cultures, like Arab, Mediterranean, Latin American cultures, and Japan, tend to be more involved with one another. They are rarely alone, they are more likely to interact with several people simultaneously, they expect to be understood, and “less information is contained in the verbal part of the message and more in the social context” (Wolfgang, 1977, p. 147).

## 11.2. Culture and proxemics

The feeling of comfort when personal space is invaded also differs from one person to another. However, there are some similarities between different cultures. For example, Italians, Latin Americans, Arabs, and French are comfortable with interactions that occur at a closer distance. On the other hand, North Americans, German, British, and Orientals feel uncomfortable if their communication partner is standing too close to them (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994).

## 11.3. Cultural influences in the classroom

Cultural influences are seen in nonverbal communication portrayed in the classroom. In the United States of America, children are taught to look directly in the eyes of the speaker, while Native Americans and African-Americans are told to avoid looking into the eyes of a superior figure, like a teacher, until trust is established. In their cultures, direct eye contact is considered impolite and inappropriate (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994). O'Hair and Ropo (1994) state that African-Americans will make eye contact when they want to ask a question, and then looking away while listening is considered a way to show that they are thinking about what is being said. Regarding paralanguage, African-Americans use the rhythmic structure of speech, use a wide range of voice quality, and have strong, assertive voices (Akkinaso & Ajitrotutu, 1982, as cited in O'Hair & Ropo, 1994). That results in them having louder tones and higher intensity levels when speaking. Because of that, the teacher can make a wrong conclusion that the student, who is African-American, is being aggressive or even obnoxious (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994). In most cultures (e.g., Southern Europe, West India, Latin America, Asia), students are accustomed to a more formal and authoritarian learning environment. Students are expected to stand up when the teacher enters the classroom, they wait until they are spoken to, they typically do not question the teacher or speak out of turn, they are more disciplined and their learning mostly consists of memorizing the teaching content to pass the exam. Because of these characteristics, immigrant students are often described as being passive and non-participatory (Wolfgang, 1977). Furthermore, Wolfgang (1977) states how immigrant students are more likely to sit in the back of the classroom for fear of involvement in the discussion because of language problems or for fear of ridicule for not knowing the answer. Another reason for them choosing to sit at the back is the strangeness of the new classroom, where they are not yet feeling comfortable. Silence is another element that depends on the cultural background of students. In North America, people are uncomfortable with silence or long pauses

trying to fill it in (Wolfgang, 1977). However, silence is more desirable in Japanese and native Indian cultures than talking. Immigrant students may need more time before answering because expressing themselves in a foreign language may be difficult, and they need time to translate the question and response into their native language (Wolfgang, 1977).

## 12. Why Is Nonverbal Communication Important in Schools

Barry (2011) claims that a small percentage of verbal communication will stimulate cognitive meaning for students, while the more prevalent, nonverbal communication will stimulate students' feelings and attitudes about the material. Miller (1988) states that teachers should be aware of nonverbal communication for two main reasons: (1) to become a better receivers of student's messages and (2) to be able to send proper signals to students that will reinforce learning, and at the same time to be able to avoid sending negative messages that suppress learning. "Research suggests that a student's nonverbal expressions serve as an important source in the formation of a teacher's impressions, attitudes, beliefs, and reciprocal behavioral expressions" (Miller, 1988, p. 6). Without nonverbal cues that happen in the classroom, teachers would not be able to adjust their teaching methods, strategies, and forms of work like they do now. Students' nonverbal behavior will signal to the teachers when they need to slow down, repeat what they said, or talk faster. It will signal to them when the students are bored or excited about the topic. It will signal whether the students agree or disagree with the teacher (Miller, 1988).

### 12.1. Teacher education students

Ostler and Kranz (1976) give suggestions to inservice teachers and teacher education students how to improve their decoding of nonverbal messages and behavior. One suggested possibility was for the teacher to videotape the college classroom interaction. In that way, both students and teachers could be able to see the student's interaction with a particular child and this would enable the students to observe their own behavior in the classroom. This method allows students and teachers to notice behaviors and interactions they missed during the class. Moreover, it brings greater understanding and awareness of inappropriate responses and reinforces appropriate interactions. Videotaping allows analysis of the relationship between the teacher education student and children and brings awareness to the child's responses. Another practical method with a video recording the classroom is deleting the audio. In that way, the students must rely on their judgment to

understand the child's nonverbal behavior. Furthermore, Ostler and Kranz (1976) give one more piece of advice to teacher education students to help train their reading and understanding of nonverbal communication. The technique consists of role-playing in which the students are required to communicate with one another without using verbal messages. This way, students are forced to develop alternative ways of relating their attitudes, thoughts, and feelings and it enables them to become more aware of the nonverbal behavior of others. Ostler and Kranz (1976) explain that once the students experience role-playing, the emotions they find most challenging to recognize and understand can be pointed out to them. With practice, students' ability to perceive, acknowledge, and use their own nonverbal behavior, as well as others, should increase.

### 13. Conclusion

In the everyday classroom, teachers and students communicate verbally and nonverbally, and through these means of communication share their knowledge, opinions, and emotions. Teachers and students are senders and receivers of nonverbal communication through eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body movements, touch, proximity, vocalics, and physical appearance. In the classroom, students are individuals who, predominantly via nonverbal communication, communicate their interest or boredom about the topic, attentiveness to the lecture, and willingness or unwillingness to work. Teachers use these signs to make assumptions about students' dispositions, abilities, feelings, and characteristics. Students' nonverbal communication allows teachers to create first impressions and predict students' actions, plans, behaviors, and reactions, enabling them to react accordingly to the situation. Therefore, students avoid eye contact when they do not know the answer to the teacher's question, do not want to open communication channels or suffer from emotional arousal or boredom (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994; Miller, 1988). Reading facial expressions will tell the teacher if students understand the lecture or if they are confused and need repeating. With gestures, students complement what they expressed verbally by raising their hands, shrugging off shoulders, or crossing their hands. Posture and body movements can reveal how students feel about the teacher or their colleagues, depending on their slumping or erect sitting form and bowed or raised head (Barry, 2011). Haptics, or touch, is another crucial element of nonverbal communication. It greatly benefits students' academic success, but its use is limited because of fear of misinterpretation. Proxemics, or where students choose to sit, will influence the teacher's perception of the students. Students choosing to sit at the front of the class are considered more open to communication and work, but the distance between the teacher and the student can also be a sign of their cultural background (Rollman, 1976; Miller, 1988; Neill & Caswell, 1993 as cited in Barry, 2011). Just like facial expressions and body movements, vocalics will also indicate how the student feels. Students will use laughter to manage the trouble in the classroom, while silence is reserved for moments when they lack confidence. Moreover, physical appearance influences teachers' perception of students, where more attractive students are treated better than those considered to be unattractive (Miller, 1988). Another factor connected to nonverbal communication is students' disruptive behavior, where anything but silence is deemed to be a distraction from the lecture. Furthermore, all nonverbal communication factors are affected by students' cultural backgrounds. Same signs can have different meanings in different cultures, while the same emotions can be expressed differently depending on the culture. For this reason, teachers can make mistakes in interpreting students' nonverbal language, resulting in unnecessary

conflicts. To avoid errors, teachers should educate themselves in nonverbal communication to make the reading of students' body language easier and to become more aware of their own nonverbal communication.

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