Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

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Grade: _A—_

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Final Year Project Report ☒

Masters ☐

PhD ☐

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NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION AND STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

IMELIA KYRA BINTI MOHAMAD ISKANDAR

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This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for a Bachelor of Science with
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The project entitled 'Non-verbal Communication and Students' Engagement in the Classroom' was prepared by Imelia Kyra binti Mohamad Iskandar and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Science with Honours (Cognitive Science).

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ABSTRACT

This research documented the nonverbal communication exhibited by lecturers and students' engagement in a classroom. This is in the context of two classes consisting of 50 to 70 third year students from the Cognitive Science program of the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development (FCSHD), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The data was collected through class observations and student interviews - from the sample of 2 male lecturers and 5 female student respondents and was used to identify key themes regarding the lecturers' nonverbal communication and student engagement. Specifically, it addressed the types of nonverbal behaviours and cues displayed by lecturers when teaching, and the factors which affected students' engagement in the classroom. This research identified the types of nonverbal behaviours exhibited: chronemics, kinesics, oculesics, physical appearance, vocalics and proxemics. Additionally, this study concluded that student engagement is affected by the students' interest and interaction in the classroom, and the presence of intrinsic motivation. Nonverbal behaviours were also found to be linked to students' classroom engagement in terms of cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement based on the transcribed data.

Kajian ini mendokumenkan komunikasi bukan lisan yang dipamerkan oleh pensyarah dan penglibatan pelajar di dalam bilik darjah. Kajian ini adalah dalam konteks dua kelas yang terdiri daripada 50 hingga 70 pelajar tahun ketiga dari program Sains Kognitif Fakulti Sains Kognitif dan Pembangunan Manusia (FCSHD), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Data ini dikumpul melalui pemerhatian kelas dan temubual pelajar - dari sampel 2 pensyarah lelaki dan 5 responden pelajar perempuan dan digunakan untuk mengenal pasti tema utama mengenai komunikasi bukan lisan pensyarah dan penglibatan pelajar di dalam kelas. Khususnya, kajian ini menyentuh jenis tingkah laku bukan lisan dan isyarat yang dipaparkan oleh pensyarah semasa mengajar, dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi penglibatan pelajar di dalam kelas. Kajian ini mengenal pasti jenis tingkah laku nonverbal yang dipamerkan:

kronemik, kinesik, oculesics, penampilan fizikal, vokal dan proksemik. Selain itu, kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa penglibatan pelajar dipengaruhi oleh minat dan interaksi pelajar di dalam kelas, dan kehadiran motivasi intrinsik. Perilaku bukan lisan juga didapati dikaitkan dengan penglibatan bilik darjah pelajar dari segi penglibatan kognitif, tingkah laku dan emosi berdasarkan data transkripsi.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This chapter introduces the research topic. It discusses the study background and problem statement as well as its research questions. The objectives and key terms are also explained. Besides that, the significance and the limitations of this study are addressed.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, engagement, learning, experience, learning science

1.1 Background of Study

Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad introduced 'Wawasan 2020' or Vision 2020 in hopes to produce a nation that is self-sufficient in all aspects including economic prosperity, social well-being, political balance, and educational world-class. Education is important to the country's future development. According to Wart, Cayer and Cork (1993), education provided an individual with general knowledge and skills that are not occupation-specific, hence, increasing the individual's capability. The learning process is the "acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d) and often takes place in a formal setting, such as classrooms and lecture halls. The learning process can be affected by many factors. Some of the more widely known ones included the students' learning environment, level of motivation, the educator's teaching abilities and the quality of verbal communication in the classroom.

One factor that is less commonly explored by researchers yet still played a significant role in education is nonverbal communication between teachers and students. Nonverbal communication is defined as sending and receiving messages without the usage of words (Nordquist, 2017) but could also include nonverbal aspects of speech such as the tone of voice

(Collins English Dictionary, 2012). It tended to be overlooked or underestimated by educators on its importance in a classroom setting (Ledbury, 2004), despite carrying an equal amount of weight in learning as verbal communication. According to Anderson (2004), nonverbal communication played a vital role in human social interaction. In fact, about 65% of human interaction consisted of nonverbal communication (Birdwhistell, 1970), though, most people are unaware of their own nonverbal cues (Lakin, 2006).

Arnheim and Mc Neill (1994) stated that "gestures are an integral part of language as much as are words, phrases, and sentences – gesture and language are one system". This can be applied in a classroom setting, in which teachers and students tended to use gestures in their everyday communication, be it consciously or unconsciously (Karim & Sotoudehnama, 2017). Neulip (2003) further supported this statement by proposing that up to 90% of classroom interaction consist of nonverbal communication. Ritts and Stein (2011) believed that words are not as important in the classroom as compared as how the speaker says them. According to Young and Shaw (1999 as cited by Zhang, 2006), nonverbal communication is recognized as a teaching strategy. Nonverbal communication is also able to control "classroom interaction and discipline" (Neill, 1991).

1.2 Gaps in Previous Research

1.2.1 Topical Gap

There have been numerous experiments and research regarding the relationship between nonverbal communication and students' learning process. However, these researches did not specifically link nonverbal communication and student engagement in class. Similar studies merely explored the types of nonverbal communication in class and how it affected the student's perception towards the teacher and their overall learning process.

Previous research, which is explained in detail in Chapter 2, included case studies on the type of nonverbal communication present in the classroom, and correlational research on the factors which affects student engagement in classroom. It is mentioned in several correlational researches that the factors of student engagement include motivation, participation, etc. In a few case studies of nonverbal communication, it is also mentioned that the usage of nonverbal communication such as eye contact can increase a student's confidence to express their ideas in class, hence encouraging them to participate more in class.

The findings of these research may serve as a link between nonverbal communication and student engagement in class, hence this study is conducted to explore it.

1.2.2 Methodological Gap

Previous researches are often quantitative in nature. This means that the studies mainly focused on quantifying defined as "variables and generalize the results from a larger sample population". This study will be qualitative in nature, in which it will be conducted in terms of exploration and is more inductive as compared to previous studies.

1.2.3 Sample Gap

Previous researches mostly involved participants from western countries and very few from eastern ones. This is important to note as nonverbal communication is different across cultures. According to Bernstein (2017), there exists high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures depended largely on nonverbal communication; it used factors such as "closeness of their relationships, strict social hierarchies and deep cultural knowledge" to express the meaning behind their words. Low-context culture is the direct opposite, in which they depend mostly on the words themselves, hence communication is more direct, and relationships can begin and/or end quickly.

Western countries usually adopt the low-context culture, with examples including America (excluding South America) and Germany. Asian countries adopt the high-context culture, prominently in countries such as Japan, Korea, and China. Examples of cultural difference in nonverbal communication is the act of eye contact. In low-context culture countries, direct eye contact indicates honesty and attentiveness, however, in high context countries such as Japan, the speaker is expected to look down or avoid direct eye contact in a conversation as this is regarded as disrespectful and offensive (Raji Ridwan Adetunji & Kho, 2012.)

Malaysia is no exception to the high-context culture – this country has the highest score of 104 on the Hofstede comparative power distance index (Sweetman, 2014) - and this belief may hamper the quality of nonverbal communication in a classroom setting where students and lecturers may be more cautious on the social boundaries between them and some nonverbal behaviours, such as direct eye contact with lecturers or professors, may be considered inappropriate and disrespectful.

1.3 Problem Statement

In UNIMAS, it is observed that one of the factors student look for when choosing classes is the lecturer who will be teaching it. Their perceptions on their future lecturer are usually based on information gained either through their peers or personal experiences, and generally, they would choose the class with a lecturer they favour more than the other. One of the factors students look for in an 'ideal' lecturer is their nonverbal communication aspects; students tend to prefer lecturers who are easy to approach and give off a welcoming vibe rather than lecturers who seemed aloof or closed off even though their teaching methods might be good. However, some students do not entirely depend on this factor, especially the more introverted or shyer ones, as they would self-study on their own to understand the material themselves, so nonverbal communication, or lack thereof, in class generally do not affect them in terms of learning.

Hence, this study was conducted to investigate the level of nonverbal communication between lecturers and students of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The researcher explored the types of nonverbal communication which exist in the classroom and how they influence the students' engagement and their learning experience in class.

1.4 Research Question

1. What are the nonverbal cues given by lecturers when teaching in class?
2. How is the students' engagement in class?

1.5 Objectives

1.5.1 General objective

To explore the nonverbal communication present in the classroom and the students' level of engagement.

1.5.2 Specific objectives

1. To investigate the nonverbal cues given by lecturers when teaching in class.

2. To explore the students' engagement in class.

1.6 Conceptual and Operational Definition

1.6.1 Nonverbal communication

The term 'nonverbal communication' can be conceptually defined as sending and receiving messages without the usage of words (Nordquist, 2017) and can include nonverbal aspects of speech such as tone of voice (Collins English Dictionary, 2012). Its operational definition is the cues given by UNIMAS lecturers when teaching and students when learning.

1.6.2 Student Engagement

The term 'student engagement' can be conceptually defined as the "quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" (Hu and Kuh, 2001). Engagement can be operationally defined as the students' level of participation and body language in class.

1.6.3 Learning

Learning is conceptually defined as a behavioural change due to experience (Lachman, 1997). The term is operationally defined the students' ability to process the information presented to them in class.

1.6.4 Student

According to Oxford Online Dictionary, a student is conceptually defined as a person who studies at an institution. Student is operationally defined as a person who studies at University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

1.6.5 Lecturer

According to Oxford Online Dictionary, the conceptual definition of lecturer is a person who gives lectures at an institution of higher education, such as universities and colleges. The operational definition of lecturer is a person who teaches at University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

1.7 Significance of Study

1.7.1 Knowledge

The findings of these research may be able to provide necessary knowledge to the readers, especially for future researchers who may wish to continue this research topic or have similar topics of study.

From this research, more information regarding the nonverbal communication used by lecturers and students in class can be collected and studied for reference. The data collected can give the readers an insight of the cues made by lecturers and students in the nonverbal communication they use to exchange information and ideas, such as eye contact, body gestures, etc.

The data and findings of this research will also give more insight on the students' thoughts and opinions on how their lecturer's nonverbal communication affect their learning process in class. Students' perceptions on their lecturers' nonverbal communication were explored and documented and these data can be useful for those who wish to know what kind of teaching strategies that students generally find effective and those that are not.

1.7.2 Methodology

In terms of methodology, this research also contributed in various aspects. The findings and the data of this research are to be documented in a proper and comprehensive report, which may be useful for future researchers who may wish to continue or further this study. This research could also be used as reference for other students who have similar research topics.

This research provided a checklist for nonverbal behaviour observation that can be used by other researchers for their own convenience if the checklist is relevant to their own current research study.

1.7.3 Stakeholder

The stakeholders involved in this research are the students, teachers, university administrators and the Ministry of Education as a whole.

According to Barry (2011), nonverbal communication helps the flow of communication in ways which "simple verbalisation" could not. Leathers (1992) added that nonverbal communication has a higher accuracy and efficiency than verbalisation. Hence, this research is conducted to gather more evidence on the above theories and contribute to aspiring teachers or lecturers who hope to be able to improve their teaching skills. Students may also study more on the type of nonverbal communication which may affect their level of engagement and learning experience in class.

Aside from that, the findings of this research could be studied and utilized by the Ministry of Education to construct new or improve existing teaching programs for future use. They could also use the findings to actively monitor the quality of teachers and lecturers by taking note of the students' general perceptions of their educator's teaching styles which may be affected by their nonverbal communication skills.

1.7.4 Policy

By conducting this research, it is hoped that the findings will be able to contribute to the revision of current policies, or implementation of new ones. These policies are to consider of the students' opinions and perceptions of their lecturers' nonverbal communication skills and should be prioritized during the revision or implementation policies.

The following are the suggested policies which could be implemented following the guidelines of the research findings:

1. Students and lecturers are required to use appropriate language at all times in the classroom. This includes the tone of voice when addressing each other.

2. Students and lecturers are required to exhibit proper manners in the classroom, especially in terms of body language.

3. Students and lecturers are allowed to be expressive with their ideas in the classroom as long as proper boundaries are maintained.

1.8 Limitations

1.8.1 Topical Limitation

This research only covered the topic of nonverbal communication which exists in a classroom setting how it affects students' level of engagement and learning experience in class.

1.8.2 Subject Limitation

This research only covers learning science.

1.8.3 Methodological Limitation

The methods used in this research is a replication from previous research with little to no modifications made. The data of this research are collected through interviews and observation only. Furthermore, the checklist used in this research's observation is an existing one which was developed and tested by previous researchers.

1.8.4 Location of Research

This research was conducted within the areas of UNIMAS only, hence other places where students reside, such as nearby neighbourhoods outside the campus area, are completely disregarded during the process of data collection. Hence, the results of this research do not necessarily represent the opinions and perceptions of all the students of UNIMAS.

1.8.5 Population to be Studied

This research only involved UNIMAS students and instructors and did not involve students and instructors from other universities in Malaysia. Hence, the findings of this research do not necessarily represent the opinions and perceptions of all Malaysian university students and instructors. Besides that, the respondents involved were only from the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development (FCSHD), so the data collected do not necessarily represent the opinions and perceptions of the all UNIMAS students and instructors.

1.8.6 Sample to be Used

Observation was only done in two classes, each consisting of approximately 70 students and one instructor, and semi-structured interviews only involve several students from each class. Hence, the findings do not represent the entirety of the students and instructors of FCSHD.

1.8.7 Time Frame

The data collected from this research was only within the time frame of 2-4 weeks, hence, the findings do not necessarily represent the most current opinions and thoughts of the respondents. The number of respondents were also limited to the duration of time this research is conducted, and the convenience of the researcher.

1.7.8 Resources Limitation

Information used as reference for this research are previous Final Year Projects (FYP) of UNIMAS graduates, as well as online journals. Certain topics covered in this research had limited reference materials, so the information gathered are only from the sources that could be found and openly accessed whether through online or offline. While there were other journals and online works that could potentially be used as a reference, they were restricted and could not be easily accessed by the public, hence they cannot be studied.

Summary

This chapter provided the background of the study and explained the statement of problem. It also established the general and specific objectives of the study. Besides that, this chapter provided clear definitions of the key terms of this research and stated the possible contributions and limitations of this study.

Introduction

This chapter discusses the literature review related to the topic of nonverbal communication and its role in a classroom setting. Topics included the definition of nonverbal communication and its role in the classroom setting. The types of nonverbal communication are also discussed in detail in this chapter. Besides that, this chapter discusses the concept of engagement in the classroom. Empirical findings from previous research are also explored in this chapter.

2.1 Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is described as a type of communication without the usage of words. Saitz (1966) stated that most people are unconscious of their own gestures. Each component can convey a message differently and sometimes, more efficiently than verbalisation. This statement can be supported by Bunglowala (2015) who believed that nonverbal communication is more reliable as it is able to support verbal communication. As an example, one common way to give an affirmative is to simply nod and most people would understand the gesture as a 'yes'. In certain countries, certain body gestures can also display authority and confidence, such as direct eye contact and a straight posture. Emotions can also be expressed nonverbally, such as frowning when angry, smiling when happy, and looking around aimlessly when bored. According to the Mehrabian's nonverbal communication theory, communication consists of 7% spoken words, 38% of paralanguage and 55% of body language. Based on these numbers, it is clear that nonverbal aspects are dominant as compared to the verbal aspects of communication.

2.1.1 In the classroom setting

Bunglowala (2015) further stated that nonverbal communication is useful and important in a classroom setting. It is stated that nonverbal communication helps teachers gain better command of the classroom and students can understand the learning material more vividly. Miller (1988) suggested that teachers should be aware of the role of nonverbal communication as a receiver of students' feedbacks and a sender of "positive signals" to students. which "reinforce" learning in the classroom. Nonverbal communication in the classroom can be several types: eye contact, body gesture, paralanguage, touch, facial expression, and appearance (attire).

2.1.2 Eye contact

Eye contact is a situation where two people look at each other simultaneously (Cambridge Online Dictionary). Barati (2015) believed that eyes can produce a "sense of connection", and this applies even to "drawn or photographed" ones. She stated that new-born babies instinctively seek eye contact with their guardian, and this instinct prevail until adulthood (Hall, 2006). Barati added that students will become more engaged in class, be it physically or emotionally, if they share an open and positive relationship with their teachers, which can be nurtured through appropriate eye contact. However, as stated by Chen (2005), eye contact can be perceived as negative if used inappropriately. Too much eye contact can be regarded as disrespectful or even challenging, and may cause discomfort to the giver or recipient of the eye contact. Hence, some students tend to look away in class if this was the case (Barati, 2015). Huang (2006), however, argued that longer eye contact does not necessarily carry negative implications especially in the case of learning. He stated that longer eye contact can be used by teachers to express admiration towards students and vice versa.

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