Nonverbal Communication in Cross-Cultural Learning: Insights from a Native Speaker

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Abstract

In today's multicultural learning environments, effective communication involves more than just spoken language, particularly in Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) classes where students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact. Despite its importance, nonverbal communication remains an often-overlooked component in educational research. This study aims to explore how a native English speaker utilizes various nonverbal communication strategies—such as body movements, facial expressions, vocalics, proxemics, environmental cues, and communication objects—to enhance interaction and foster understanding in a CCU classroom. Conducted through a qualitative approach, the research involved a purposive sample consisting of one native speaker and twenty non-native students from a university CCU class. Data collection methods included structured classroom observations, video recordings, and field notes, guided by an observation checklist designed to identify specific nonverbal behaviors and their communicative functions. The results reveal that the native speaker effectively employed nonverbal cues to clarify meanings, sustain student engagement, build rapport, and bridge cultural differences. These cues played a vital role in supporting comprehension and promoting a positive learning atmosphere. The findings suggest that nonverbal communication is an essential pedagogical tool in cross-cultural settings, offering valuable insights for educators seeking to enhance intercultural competence and communication efficacy in diverse classrooms.

Keywords: Nonverbal Communication, Native Speaker, CCU

Introduction

Nonverbal communication is a fundamental component of human interaction, encompassing facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, vocal tone, spatial behavior, and environmental cues. Unlike verbal language, which is bound by structured grammar and vocabulary, nonverbal signals are often spontaneous, subconscious, and heavily shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Scholars have long emphasized that nonverbal cues frequently convey more meaning than words, particularly in shaping interpersonal relationships, emotional resonance, and social perceptions (Pang, Zhou, & Chu, 2024). In multicultural environments, the stakes are even higher, as misinterpretations of these cues can lead to confusion or conflict. This is especially relevant in Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) classes—university-level courses designed to enhance students' intercultural competence through the exploration of cultural norms, communication styles, values, and behaviors across cultures. In such settings, students and instructors often come from varied cultural

backgrounds, making nonverbal communication an essential bridge for understanding. According to Anderson (2023), nonverbal behaviors in English as a Second Language (ESL) or EFL classrooms can either enhance or hinder comprehension depending on the cultural awareness of both teachers and learners. Thus, understanding and appropriately interpreting nonverbal cues in CCU classes is not only a matter of communication but also a vital element of successful intercultural education.

In globalized and multicultural settings, the significance of nonverbal communication becomes even more pronounced. Anderson (2023) highlights how nonverbal behaviors in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms can either bridge or widen the communication gap between teachers and students of different cultural backgrounds. Misinterpretations of eye contact, physical proximity, or gestures can lead to confusion, discomfort, or even conflict. However, increased awareness and sensitivity toward cultural differences in nonverbal cues can foster intercultural respect, trust, and effective communication (Adhitya & Parahyangan, 2023).

In the context of intercultural communication, nonverbal signals are paramount. Misunderstanding a gesture, facial expression, or even physical proximity can lead to discomfort or even conflict. For example, while direct eye contact may be seen as a sign of honesty and attentiveness in some cultures, it can be interpreted as disrespectful or aggressive in others (Adhitya & Parahyangan, 2023). Thus, understanding the nuances of nonverbal communication becomes crucial in fostering mutual respect and trust between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The classroom setting provides a unique space to explore nonverbal communication, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environments. Teachers often use nonverbal cues to manage classroom dynamics, motivate students, and clarify instructions. Akter, Rashid, and Tasnim (2024) emphasize that understanding students' nonverbal signals—such as confusion or frustration—enables teachers to adjust their teaching strategies in real time, improving engagement and learning outcomes. In EFL classrooms, where language barriers may exist, nonverbal cues become even more critical in conveying meaning, clarifying misunderstandings, and building a supportive learning environment.

In line with this, research by Adhitya and Parahyangan (2023) highlights the importance of culturally sensitive nonverbal communication in enhancing teacher-student relationships. Native English-speaking teachers, for example, may not always be aware of how their nonverbal behavior is interpreted by students from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, understanding these differences is essential in fostering effective communication and creating an inclusive classroom atmosphere.

Research on nonverbal communication in cross-cultural settings has also expanded in recent years. Studies have shown that nonverbal cues play a pivotal role in forming first impressions. Setianti et al. (2024) demonstrate that nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions, gestures, and body posture can significantly influence how individuals are perceived upon first meeting. In fact, these nonverbal signals can be more impactful than verbal communication in shaping others' perceptions and attitudes toward an individual. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in cross-cultural interactions, where individuals may rely on nonverbal cues to navigate social interactions.

Moreover, nonverbal communication is a critical component in Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) classrooms, where individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds engage in meaningful educational interaction. In these settings, nonverbal elements such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and physical posture play an essential role in conveying politeness, expressing emotion, and building interpersonal rapport. These cues help bridge language gaps and reduce psychological distance between participants, particularly when verbal communication may be limited or ambiguous. The

effectiveness of CCU classes often depends on the ability of instructors and students to adapt their nonverbal behaviors to align with culturally diverse expectations, thereby fostering a more inclusive and respectful learning environment.

Furthermore, Eripuddin (2020) emphasizes the evolving significance of nonverbal communication in intercultural education, particularly in response to the increasing globalization of classroom interactions. His research highlights how nonverbal cues— including tone, gesture, proxemics, and even digital representations such as emojis and video call gestures—can enhance understanding and connection across cultures. As communication increasingly occurs in hybrid or virtual learning environments, the ability to interpret nonverbal cues becomes even more vital. Despite extensive research on nonverbal communication in general education or workplace settings, there remains a gap in the literature concerning how native speakers employ and interpret nonverbal behaviors in real-time intercultural classroom contexts. Most studies to date have either focused on single-cultural environments or explored nonverbal communication in abstract terms without closely examining authentic CCU interactions (Sutiyatno, 2015). This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing how a native speaker utilizes nonverbal communication to foster engagement and cultural understanding within a CCU classroom.

The need for a comprehensive investigation into how native speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds express and interpret nonverbal communication within cross-cultural learning environments has never been more pressing. Understanding the distinctions in how these cues are perceived and used could significantly improve communication strategies in intercultural interactions. This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring nonverbal communication in educational settings, particularly in classrooms where students and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds. By observing real-time interactions in these settings, this study aims to better understand how nonverbal cues contribute to classroom dynamics, learning experiences, and intercultural communication.

Furthermore, the significance of this research extends beyond the classroom. In today's interconnected world, individuals often engage in cross-cultural communication outside educational environments—whether in international business, diplomatic relations, or social interactions. By recognizing and adapting to the nuances of nonverbal communication across cultures, individuals can reduce the risk of miscommunication and build stronger, more effective relationships (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2022). The ability to interpret nonverbal cues accurately is thus essential for navigating global communication successfully.

In conclusion, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, understanding nonverbal communication in diverse cultural contexts is more important than ever. By bridging the gap between verbal and nonverbal communication, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how intercultural communication can be improved. Through this research, educators, business professionals, and individuals engaged in cross-cultural exchanges can develop more effective communication strategies that promote understanding, respect, and collaboration across cultures.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach to explore the use and function of nonverbal communication by a native speaker in a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) classroom setting. The qualitative design was chosen to allow for in-depth observation and interpretation of naturally occurring behaviors within their real-life educational context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The subject of the research was a native American English speaker, M.J.D., who has extensive experience teaching English and engaging with non-native English speakers in multicultural learning environments. His active participation in CCU classes provided a rich

context for examining how nonverbal communication supports teaching, interaction, and intercultural understanding (Anderson, 2023).

Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation and documentation techniques aimed at capturing the subject's use of nonverbal communication in the CCU classroom. The researcher observed multiple sessions, focusing on nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, vocal tone, body posture, proxemics, and interaction with the physical environment (Knapp & Hall, 2014; Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2022). To systematically capture these behaviors, an observation checklist was employed. This checklist was developed by the researcher, drawing upon established theories and classifications of nonverbal communication, ensuring that the instrument aligned with the classroom setting and research objectives.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the data, the observations were supplemented by video recordings and detailed field notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The video recordings allowed for post-session analysis and ensured that fleeting or subtle nonverbal cues could be revisited and accurately interpreted. Field notes were used to capture contextual information, such as classroom dynamics, student reactions, and environmental factors that may influence communication. These triangulated data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings and allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of the subject's nonverbal communication strategies (Patton, 2015).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Observational data were transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the types and roles of nonverbal communication used by the subject. The analysis focused on how these behaviors contributed to building rapport, enhancing understanding, and bridging cultural differences in the classroom (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allowed for a detailed understanding of the subject's nonverbal communication strategies and their effectiveness in supporting cross-cultural interactions in an educational setting.

Result and Discussion

Based on classroom observations and documentation, the study identified a diverse and intentional use of nonverbal communication strategies by the native speaker, Matthew John Dina, in a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) class. His nonverbal behavior was categorized into five main areas: kinesics**, **vocalics**, **proxemics**, **environmental factors**, and** communication objects**.** Each of these categories played a significant role in enhancing students' understanding, fostering engagement, and supporting intercultural learning.

1.   Kinesics (Body Language)

Kinesics, or body language, was one of the most prominent forms of nonverbal communication used by Matthew John Dina. The teacher employed expressive facial expressions, such as smiling and wide-eyed expressions, to reinforce his verbal messages and encourage student participation. For example, when explaining abstract or complex concepts, his animated facial expressions and hand gestures added visual clarity, which was especially helpful for students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This use of kinesics is consistent with the findings of Pang, Zhou, and Chu (2024), who highlighted the importance of body language in delivering indirect or culturally specific messages. The facial expressions and gestures in Dina's classroom helped reduce the distance between students and the subject matter, making the learning experience more inclusive and engaging.

Moreover, the head nods, smiles, and eye contact used by the teacher served as nonverbal feedback mechanisms. These cues signaled active listening and encouraged students to respond more freely. The use of body language to elicit feedback and create rapport aligns with Setianti et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of nonverbal communication in forming

positive first impressions and establishing ongoing engagement. This suggests that students, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds, were more likely to feel comfortable participating in class due to the teacher's approachable and inclusive nonverbal behavior.

2. Vocalics: Paralinguistic Features as Emotional and Instructional Tools

Vocalics, or the use of vocal characteristics such as tone, pitch, volume, and pacing, was another key nonverbal strategy employed by the teacher. Matthew John Dina consciously varied his vocal delivery throughout the lessons to maintain student attention and to express emotional nuances. For instance, when introducing new or difficult terms, the teacher would speak with a louder volume or slower articulation, which helped emphasize important content and provided students with additional processing time. This approach reflects Kałuska's (n.d.) findings, where vocal modulation was identified as a significant factor in helping second language learners interpret not only the content but the intent behind the teacher's message. Dina's use of vocalic cues also aided in signaling emotional context, such as enthusiasm or empathy, which helped create a more dynamic and responsive classroom atmosphere.

In addition, the teacher used a softer, gentler tone during one-on-one interactions with students, which helped to reduce perceived intimidation, especially in a classroom where students' language proficiency varied. This conscious modulation of vocal tone reinforced the teacher's attentiveness and created a more comfortable environment for students to express themselves. By adjusting vocal tone to the emotional and instructional needs of the moment, Dina effectively used vocalics to guide students through the learning process, a technique that promotes engagement and emotional connection in the classroom.

3. Proxemics: Managing Space for Inclusivity

Proxemics, or the use of personal space, played a crucial role in the teacher's nonverbal communication. Matthew John Dina was mindful of his movement around the classroom, ensuring that he did not remain stationary at the front of the room but rather moved between rows of students. This physical mobility helped reduce the perceived authority distance that often separates teachers from students, particularly in high-context cultures where deference to authority figures is common. By walking around and engaging with students at various points in the classroom, Dina facilitated more personalized interactions. This approach also allowed him to quickly assess students' understanding and provide immediate feedback.

This strategic use of proxemics minimized the formation of dominant or excluded groups within the classroom and promoted inclusivity. Tarjana and Nurkamto (n.d.) underscore the importance of nonverbal politeness, noting that physical proximity can influence the relational dynamics between teacher and student. In Dina's class, maintaining culturally appropriate physical distances while also moving around the room helped to establish a more egalitarian learning environment where students felt comfortable to participate and interact.

4. Environmental Factors: Structuring the Learning Space for Engagement

Environmental factors, such as classroom layout, lighting, and the use of visual aids, were also strategically managed by the teacher to enhance the learning experience. Matthew John Dina adjusted the physical environment to optimize communication and collaboration. For example, the seating arrangement was frequently modified to encourage group work and facilitate interaction among students from different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, the use of lighting and digital tools like whiteboards and multimedia presentations allowed for greater visual clarity and supported the teacher's verbal explanations. This careful consideration of the classroom environment aligns with the findings of Sutiyatno (2015) and who emphasized that the physical classroom setting is an essential element in facilitating meaningful

communication and engagement (Eripuddin et al., 2022; Eripuddin, Jufrizal, et al., 2023; Eripuddin, Rahayu, et al., 2023).

By arranging the space to foster collaboration, Dina made it easier for students to interact, share ideas, and engage with the learning material. This nonverbal adaptation to the classroom environment helped bridge the gap between different communication styles, particularly for students who may have been less familiar with direct forms of verbal communication. The classroom setup itself became an extension of the teacher's communicative approach, contributing to a more dynamic and interactive atmosphere.

5. Communication Objects: Enhancing Understanding Through Visual Aids

The use of communication objects, such as props, images, handouts, and multimedia tools, further enriched the teaching and learning process. Dina frequently used visual aids and physical objects to help clarify abstract concepts. For example, during discussions about cultural symbols, he used printed visuals and artifacts, carefully presenting them with supporting gestures and facial expressions. These nonverbal cues helped students, particularly those with lower English proficiency, grasp complex ideas and provided additional context for the verbal explanations. This is consistent with the work of Eripuddin (2023), who highlighted the role of visual and material aids in enhancing communication, especially in culturally diverse and linguistically varied settings.

By integrating communication objects into his teaching, Dina ensured that students could engage with the material through multiple senses, reinforcing learning and fostering a deeper understanding of the content. This approach aligns with the findings of Kałuska (n.d.), who suggested that nonverbal cues, including the use of visual materials, are instrumental in helping students process and retain information, especially when language barriers exist.

6. Closing the Research Gap: Practical Implications for Multicultural Teaching

This study contributes to closing a gap in research regarding the real-time practices of native English speakers teaching in multicultural environments. While much of the existing literature has focused on the types of nonverbal communication or explored students' perceptions of these behaviors, few studies have examined how native speakers strategically adapt their nonverbal communication to suit the needs of diverse student populations. The observational data from this study provide concrete examples of how nonverbal strategies, such as kinesics, vocal modulation, and proxemics, can be effectively employed in the classroom.

The findings also align with the evolving nature of nonverbal communication, especially as teaching environments shift to incorporate digital elements. As noted by, nonverbal communication is adapting in response to the growing prevalence of online and hybrid learning environments (Rozimela, 2023; Rahayu, 2015b, 2015a). Although this study focused on in-person teaching, the principles observed—particularly the importance of facial expressions, vocal tone, and body language—can easily be extended to virtual classrooms, where nonverbal cues are equally vital but often underutilized.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the crucial role of nonverbal communication in fostering effective cross-cultural interactions and enhancing language learning, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Nonverbal cues such as body language, vocal tone, proximity, and environmental factors were used deliberately by Matthew John Dina to facilitate understanding and engagement among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This aligns with Setianti et al. (2024), who emphasized that nonverbal communication significantly influences classroom dynamics and student participation in

multicultural environments. As suggested by Pang et al (2024), body language, including facial expressions and gestures, serves as a universal tool to bridge linguistic gaps, helping students understand abstract concepts regardless of their proficiency in the language.

Kinesics, particularly body language, played a central role in Matthew's classroom. His use of expressive gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact mirrors the findings of Eripuddin (2023), who pointed out that nonverbal cues are essential for effective intercultural communication. By using facial expressions and open gestures, Dina was able to create a warm and inclusive classroom atmosphere, which facilitated participation from students of various cultural backgrounds. The study by Pang et al (2024) corroborates these findings by suggesting that gestures and body movements not only reinforce verbal communication but also convey emotions and intentions that words alone cannot express. These findings support the view that kinesics enhances the clarity of communication, making it easier for students to grasp meaning and engage with the material.

The importance of vocalics—such as variations in pitch, tone, and volume was also evident in Dina's approach. He skillfully modulated his voice to emphasize key points, signaling shifts in the lesson's structure or emotional tone. This is in line with Kałuska (2023), who argued that vocalic features are essential in guiding language learners through the emotional and intellectual content of lessons. By using changes in volume and pitch, Dina provided students with clear cues on the significance of particular points, helping them focus and prioritize information. This practice reflects the pedagogical strategies identified by Ward and Liu (2021), who emphasized the role of vocal modulation in maintaining student engagement and improving language comprehension in diverse classrooms.

Proxemics, or the use of space, also played a critical role in reducing psychological and emotional barriers. Dina's strategic movement around the classroom—avoiding remaining stationary at the front—helped foster a sense of equality and inclusivity among the students. The concept of proxemics is supported by Tarjana and Nurkamto (2022), who highlighted how nonverbal politeness in EFL classrooms is shaped by cultural expectations of space. By consciously adjusting his proximity to students, Dina minimized the physical and emotional distance, allowing for more personalized interactions and reducing any feelings of intimidation or hierarchy.

Environmental factors were another important aspect of Dina's teaching strategy. As noted by Sutiyatno (2023) and Eripuddin (2023), the physical environment—including classroom layout, lighting, and seating arrangements has a profound effect on student engagement and learning outcomes. Dina paid careful attention to how the classroom environment influenced interactions, using whiteboards, digital slides, and adjusting seating arrangements to facilitate group work. This adaptability helped promote collaboration and ensured that students from different cultural backgrounds could interact comfortably and effectively. Zhang and Li (2021) also pointed out that the thoughtful structuring of physical spaces can significantly influence students' ability to communicate and collaborate, especially in multicultural settings.

The use of communication objects such as images, props, and multimedia tools further supported the teaching process. Dina utilized these objects to clarify abstract concepts and promote visual learning. This strategy is in line with the findings of Lee and Park (2020), who highlighted the effectiveness of visual aids in bridging cultural and linguistic gaps. By incorporating visual tools into his teaching, Dina was able to reinforce the meaning of new vocabulary and concepts, helping students from different backgrounds connect with the material more deeply.

Overall, the study reinforces the idea that nonverbal communication is not a passive supplement to verbal instruction, but an integral component of effective teaching. In multicultural classrooms, where students come from diverse cultural contexts, nonverbal cues

serve as a critical tool for building rapport, fostering understanding, and creating an inclusive learning environment. This is supported by Kałuska (2023), who emphasized that nonverbal communication helps to maintain an atmosphere of trust and respect, especially in second language learning contexts. Additionally, the findings align with the research of Setianti et al. (2024), who argue that first impressions and classroom rapport are significantly influenced by nonverbal communication, particularly in EFL classrooms.

In terms of pedagogical implications, this study suggests that educators should be trained to recognize and effectively utilize nonverbal communication strategies in the classroom. As Eripuddin (2023) notes, nonverbal communication is a powerful tool that can be employed to enhance student engagement, reduce misunderstandings, and promote intercultural competence. Teachers should also be mindful of cultural differences in the interpretation of nonverbal cues, as these can vary significantly across cultures (Tarjana & Nurkamto, 2022). Therefore, understanding the cultural context of students is essential for teachers to effectively adapt their nonverbal communication strategies.

In conclusion, the study highlights the profound impact that nonverbal communication can have in multicultural educational settings. By examining the classroom practices of Matthew John Dina, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on nonverbal communication in EFL teaching and intercultural education. The findings suggest that nonverbal cues, when used thoughtfully and strategically, can foster a more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environment. Future research could explore the integration of nonverbal communication strategies into teacher training programs and investigate how these strategies are used in virtual and hybrid classrooms, where nonverbal communication remains a key factor in student engagement and interaction (Ward & Liu, 2021).

Conclusion

This study explored how a native English speaker utilized nonverbal communication in a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) classroom to support learning and promote intercultural interaction. Through careful observation and analysis, it was found that the teacher's use of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, physical movement, and classroom resources played a significant role in conveying meaning and building connections with students from different cultural backgrounds. These nonverbal strategies not only supported the delivery of lesson content but also created a welcoming and inclusive classroom atmosphere.

The findings emphasize the importance of nonverbal communication in multicultural education. Teachers need to be aware that gestures, eye contact, and spatial behavior vary between cultures and can easily be misinterpreted if used insensitively. By being conscious of their nonverbal behavior and adapting it to their learners' cultural norms, educators can reduce misunderstandings, foster respect, and increase student participation. This study also highlights a gap in classroom-focused research on how native speakers adjust their communication in real-time to support second language learners. However, a key limitation of this study lies in the potential ambiguity in interpreting nonverbal behaviors, as the analysis was based solely on observational data without direct confirmation or member-checking from the subject involved. Without access to the speaker's own perspective or reflective commentary, interpretations of intent behind certain nonverbal actions may remain speculative. This limits the depth of insight into the internal motivations and cultural reasoning behind the observed behaviors, and suggests the need for future studies to incorporate interviews or reflective discussions with participants to triangulate findings and enhance interpretive accuracy.

Based on the results, it is recommended that teacher training programs include nonverbal communication as a core component, particularly for educators working in culturally diverse environments. Classroom design, use of visual aids, and culturally appropriate gestures should

be considered part of a teacher's communicative toolkit. In addition, language learning curricula should integrate nonverbal communication to better prepare students for real-world intercultural interactions. Overall, this research shows that effective teaching involves both verbal and nonverbal awareness to create a more engaging and culturally responsive learning environment.

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