

An Analysis of Non-verbal Behaviour in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication is a critical component of human communication. McNeill (2000), who interprets that both verbal and nonverbal communication are under the concept of communication and are inseparable. In addition, intercultural communication and nonverbal communication have become two important areas of communication study. The fascinating relationship between the two areas has attracted many scholars (Ma, 1999). Many studies have demonstrated the close relationship between the two areas on a theoretical basis and explored the specific nonverbal behaviour in cross-cultural or intercultural context (Althen, 1992; Barnlund, 1989; Ma, 1996). Therefore, it is suggested education for nonverbal communication needs to be taken into consideration in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms in order to develop English learners' intercultural communicative competence. This paper examines the role of non-verbal communication in intercultural communication. The findings indicate that inappropriate nonverbal behaviours may cause potential breakdowns in intercultural communication. It is also shown the necessity of incorporating skills of nonverbal communication into English language teaching in order to enable English learners to communicate cross-culturally. The study also suggests that teachers should use more nonverbal behaviours in language classrooms to improve learners' study motivation.

Introduction

With the development of globalization, intercultural communication has become more frequent and more significant than ever before (Wang, 2007). As an international language, English has played an important role in facilitating the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. As a result, the EFL education has considered the communicative competence as one of the important aims of EFL teaching. It seems that intercultural communication will be successful, as long as the speaker has achieved high proficiency in the language, namely English. However, it is indicated in many studies that the failure or misunderstandings in intercultural communication are largely caused by the misinterpretation or misuse of nonverbal behaviours (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007; Ma, 1996). It is, therefore, important to raise the awareness of the nonverbal communication in the process of intercultural communication. This study aims to examine the role of non-verbal communication in intercultural communication. In particular, the study identifies the importance of understanding and using non-verbal behaviour when living and study in an English-speaking country. Furthermore, the findings reveal some difficulties that participants have encountered when they communicate intercultural. These difficulties further suggest the necessity of incorporating skills of nonverbal communication into English language teaching in order to enable English learners to communicate cross-culturally.

Background

Recent years have seen the increasing demands of intercultural communication from the ESL learners. Smith (1976, p. 38) coins the term "International Language" which is defined as one language "used by people of different nations to communicate with one another". As an international language, English has two features. Firstly, English learners do not need to incorporate the socio-cultural norms of so called "English native speakers" (1976, p. 38). In other words, English is more than a language owned by some specific countries. Instead, the ownership of English has been globalised. Besides, the purpose of learning English has been enlarged to enable learners to communicate intercultural. That is, English is used as a lingua franca within worldwide. Considering the characteristics of English

as an international language, the scope of English language education should be widened to include the cultural elements so as to enable learners to communicate in a culturally appropriate and acceptable way (Kaikkonen, 2001).

Learning to live, work and study in a new cultural environment is a challenging experience. Kim (2005) describes such experience as starting an enculturation process all over again. According to Chen and Starosta (1996), the abilities of negotiating cultural meanings and executing appropriately effective communication behaviours allow people to become competent in intercultural communication. Kramsh (1998) suggests the importance of mutually establishing a “place”, in where students from different cultures can understand each other through dialogical exchange of ideas, emotions, stories and visions. Therefore, mutual understanding seems to be an important factor in intercultural competence. Such mutual understanding is realised by appropriately interpreting and conducting verbal and non-verbal behaviours in intercultural contexts.

However, a large number of studies have been done to reveal the challenges facing Asian students who are studying in English speaking countries. These challenges come from both verbal and non-verbal perspectives. In the field of verbal communication, many studies reveal Chinese background students’ insufficient language skills both in and out of academic fields (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Holmes, 2006; Tran, 2009). These language difficulties have negative impacts on their academic performances and participations in classroom activities. For example, according to Holmes’ study (2006), some Chinese background students would not communicate with New Zealand local students until they acquired the so called “linguistic competence”. Besides, Berman and Chen (2001) argue that the language difficulties of speaking and writing may have a negative effect on EFL master students’ academic achievements.

Nonverbal communication may serve as the underlying reason for Chinese background students’ incompetence in intercultural communication. Liu’s study (2001) suggests that Chinese students’ silence in American classrooms can be explained by the polite strategy and face-saving view in Chinese culture. Gao (2000) discusses the causes that might lead to the problems in Chinese background migrants’ intercultural communication, “ problems can arise either from verbal or nonverbal encounters...it is sometimes very difficult to make a distinction between what is cultural and what is linguistic.” In addition, Xiao and Petraki (2007) discover that nonverbal communication is a significant reason for the difficulties in the intercultural communication between Chinese background students and those from other countries. This view is also supported by Lustig and Koester (2006), who caution that miscommunication always occurred in the understanding of nonverbal behaviors because different social contexts might create extremely different rules for appropriate and effective use of nonverbal behaviors.

Nonverbal communication is defined in many ways. According to Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall (1989), nonverbal communication is the unspoken dialogue which involves the messages conveyed beyond the words. Similarly, DePaulo and Friedman (1998) write that “nonverbal communication is the dynamic, mostly face-to-face exchange of information through cues other than words”. Knapp and Hall (2006) specify the three major components of nonverbal communication, the communication environment, the communicators’ paralinguistic characteristics and the nonverbal behaviours such as body movements and positions. Applbaum et al. (1979) describe the role of nonverbal communication as the major resources of meaning people obtain in communication. This view is also supported by McNeill (2000), who argues that nonverbal communication plays an indispensable role in the process of face-to-face interaction.

The important role of nonverbal communication can be manifested in different ways. Poyatos (1984, p. 433) describes human communication behaviours by the so called “Basic Triple Structure” which is composed by verbal language, paralinguistic and kinesics (body language). Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1989) argue that in the context of natural communication, people rely on nonverbal behaviours both to produce and understand communicative messages. Nonverbal behaviours are involved in language producing in two ways. In other words, nonverbal behaviours have close relationship with phonemic clauses and help speakers to organize their thoughts clearly (G. Brown, 1977). In addition, nonverbal behaviours also contribute to the comprehension of messages in three ways, heightening attention, providing additional context and facilitating recall (Allen, 1999). In terms of the role of nonverbal factors in intercultural communication, Brown argues “The expression of culture is so bound up in nonverbal communication that the barriers to culture learning are more nonverbal than verbal (1994a, p. 166).” Therefore, he suggests that it is more important for language learners to overcome the difficulties of nonverbal factors in order to assimilate into the target culture.

Although nonverbal behaviours are important in both the fields of human communication and intercultural communication, nonverbal communication remains minor position in language education. According to Kaikkonen (2001), foreign language education fails to take students' needs into consideration, because the focus was the analysis of linguistic factors rather than their actual usage in real contexts. In addition, Kirch (1979) emphasises the importance of incorporating nonverbal behaviours in EFL classrooms. He (1979) points out that since verbal and nonverbal communication are complementary in the process of human interaction, teaching nonverbal elements in EFL classrooms can enable students to reach a full stage of communication in the target language. Hurley (1992) also suggests that if EFL learners could learn the skills of nonverbal communication, they would communicate more effectively in the context of intercultural communication. He (1992) also indicates that incorporating nonverbal factors into language teaching can raise students' awareness to the differences between cultures and to modify their own behaviour accordingly.

As discussed above, many studies were carried out in terms of the Chinese background students' competence in intercultural communication in many contexts, such as classroom settings, academic assignments, and daily interaction with students from other cultures. According to those studies, many of the challenges in intercultural communication met by the Chinese background students can be traced back to language education, since the current language education fails to include both linguistic skills and intercultural communication skills (Xiao & Petraki, 2007). To find out the importance of integrating non-verbal communication into ESL teaching, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent do nonverbal behaviours influence the quality of intercultural communication?
- How important are the factors of nonverbal communication in English Teaching?
- Is it necessary to incorporate nonverbal factors into the foreign language teaching, in order to develop the intercultural competence?

Participants and methods

This study involves the participation of eight Chinese background students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. Among the eight students, six of them were postgraduate students from the TESOL program, and two of them were research students from the PhD program. All of these students had experiences in learning English language and three of them had experiences in teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. All participants had the needs to communicate with lecturers, tutors and other Australian colleagues. These Chinese background students all agreed to participate in the study voluntarily.

Data were collected through interviews and the participants' reflective journals. The interview questions were carefully designed using open-ended questions so as to get more information from the participants. The interviews were conducted with the participants face-to-face and/or by telephone. The few interviews were conducted in Chinese were translated into English and all the interviews were made into transcripts for further analysis. Participants' reflective journals were also collected to complement the data obtained from the interviews. All the data were analysed using constructivist grounded theory which involves a coding process, open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

Findings

Through the data analysis process, it was found that all the participants view the nonverbal communication as an important component of human communications. Most of the participants experienced the miscommunication which is due to the unfamiliarity or inappropriate use of nonverbal behaviours in intercultural communications. In addition, most of them emphasised the necessity of incorporating nonverbal communication in foreign language classrooms since the aim of foreign language teaching is to enable learners to communicate with people from different cultures. Each element in the findings will be described in detail in the five sub-sections below.

Understandings about nonverbal communication

Most of the participants interpreted nonverbal communication as the non-speaking part in communication, such as gestures, postures, touching behaviours, facial expressions and eye contacts. One of the participants discussed that "Nonverbal communication is the non-speaking part in communication, such as body language and expressions on people's faces, and even pausing in speaking." Another participant ascribed the ability to use nonverbal communication as the "human nature". He said: "I think it is natural for people to use nonverbal behaviours to express something that they cannot express in words. It is a kind of human instincts." In addition, three of the eight participants stressed the importance of paralinguistic factors in human interactions such as pausing within the speech stream. One participant gave a comment on that: "To me, nonverbal communication is largely about the facial expressions, the eye behaviour or the voice pitch. These factors can easily affect the real meaning that the speaker trying to convey."

The functions of nonverbal communication are also discussed by the participants. The most referred one is the function of expressing people's emotions, attitudes and some implied meanings. As one of the interviewees argued that "Sometimes people may have problem communicating with the language, and then they need to use body language to help others or themselves understand." Some participants also suggested that nonverbal behaviour is often used to express the emotions of the speaker. One participant said: "Nonverbal behaviours are often used to reveal their emotions, such as anger or joy. Sometimes the person will not speak his feelings out, but the way he talks or the body languages he uses may give out the person's true feelings." Two participants related body language to the way of conveying certain attitudes toward people. One of them said: "I like observing the facial expressions and the hand gestures the speaker use because I think these nonverbal behaviour can tell you whether he/she likes talking with you."

Relationships between culture and nonverbal communication

All the participants acknowledged the indispensable role of nonverbal behaviours in intercultural communications. Many comments were given in relation to body languages. One participant said that "People in different cultures use different sets of nonverbal rules to express their feelings." Some participants discussed some specific examples of body languages in different cultures. For example, one participant commented that "The gesture of OK means totally different in America and in the Middle East. In addition, the body language of expressing the concept of suicide can be entirely different in UK and in Japan. I think body language is an indispensable part in the studies of intercultural communication." One participant also mentioned the importance of understanding the nonverbal behaviours in intercultural communications, "...people from different culture backgrounds may have different understandings about the same body language, or different behaviours in the paralinguistic aspect, and then these differences may cause misunderstandings and confusions."

Some participants held the opinion that, in order to communicate with people from different cultures, it is necessary to know some nonverbal behaviour in the target culture. Some participants argued that "People learn English in order to communicate with people from different cultures. Since nonverbal behaviour is an indispensable component of human communication, English learners should have the opportunities to acquire the information in English teaching classrooms." Some participants expressed the idea that teaching nonverbal behaviours may facilitate the learning of the target culture. One of them said: "I think nonverbal communication is important in English teaching because it has close relations with the English culture. I mean, the nonverbal behaviours function as a means for us to know the English culture."

Experiences of using and interpreting nonverbal behaviours

According to the responses, six participants have experienced the miscommunications, which are due to the unfamiliarity of body languages or paralinguistic factors. One participant said: "Australian people place two fingers on each side of their head as quotation marks when they are trying to tell you what they are saying are not really what they mean..." In another example, a participant also complained about the situation when the local people use nonverbal behaviours to replace verbal messages. He said: "They sometimes expressed their anger, frustration or sad through these behaviours, but I did not totally understand. It took me a long time to adjust to the behaviour system." Some other participants mentioned about their experiences of miscommunication which is due to the paralinguistic factors. For example, one participant said: "...local people know when they can jump in a conversation by

the pausing or listening to their sound, pitch and tone. However, it is really hard for me to tell when I can start talking, because I don't know the timing."

Only two participants reported the successful experiences in using and interpreting nonverbal behaviours. One participant said: "I have not met any miscommunication till now because I have learnt these nonverbal factors in the university." Another participant share the same opinion that "My landlord told me that she had a good impression on me the first time she met me because I looked in her eyes when she was talking to me." Moreover, it is revealed that there were few strategies for participants to utilise to cope with the miscommunication. According to one participant, "...At first I did not understand what they were trying to do until one time when I asked a lady who was using this body language." However, it is noted that the participants found it is still very hard to understand some paralinguistic factors, even though some of them have stayed in Australia for many years. One participant expressed his frustration in his reflective journal "I think it is hard to communicate freely with the locals because sometimes, I cannot understand the ways they talk, how they change the topics, and when they invite comments and when not. I am always guessing. I am tired of this."

Influences of nonverbal communication

From the responses of the participants, the influences of nonverbal communication can be grouped into the areas of intercultural communications and English language teaching. Some participants discussed how they felt when miscommunications happened. Many of them suggested that they would be more stressful and frustrated when the miscommunications were due to nonverbal factors. One participant wrote in his reflective journal that "I feel I can cope with the linguistic problems in the communication, because I can ask them to repeat, or explain in a simpler way, but I think it is quite strange if want them to explain their certain behaviour, because they may feel uneasy or offended sometimes." Another participant also recorded his frustrations "...I dare not ask them what they mean, when I do not know their certain nonverbal behaviour, because I would feel embarrassed to ask that... I don't feel I belong to their culture, because they act so differently from me."

Also, participants made remarks about the influences of nonverbal communication in the field of English language teaching. In this category, many participants discussed their English teachers' nonverbal behaviours and the influences of these behaviours in English learning. For example, one participant said "I don't think Chinese English teachers use many body languages in the classroom, they just stand there and move very little except writing on board. However, I remember an English class taught by a foreign teacher. He sat on the table, talking to us. His facial expression is very exaggerated and casual. In this way, we felt more relaxed and interested in his class." In addition, other participants argued that students may have the whole picture of communicating in English, if English teachers use more nonverbal factors of the English speaking countries. One participant said: "The students would not know about these (nonverbal behaviours), and they need to get the information from the teachers."

Position of nonverbal communication in English language teaching

In general, seven out of eight participants held a positive attitude towards the idea of including nonverbal communications in English language teaching. Many participants indicated that there will be less confusion and mistakes happened in the intercultural communication if nonverbal factors are included in the English language teaching. One participant argued that "I think it is necessary to teach non-verbal communication in English language teaching, because non-verbal communication is one part of cultural communication and also it reflects some features of the specific culture." Although it seems necessary for English language learners to learn nonverbal behaviours, one participant doubted the teachability of nonverbal behaviours in English teaching classrooms. She said that "If there is anything I cannot describe in language, I would turn to body language naturally ...so I think everybody use nonverbal behaviours by nature. They cannot be taught in classrooms."

Furthermore, the participants suggested some methods for teaching nonverbal behaviours in English language teaching classrooms. Some participants suggested authentic language materials to be used in language classrooms. For example, one participant suggested that "I think if teacher can bring some materials showing the nonverbal communication in English speaking countries, it will increase my motivation to learn the language." In addition, these participants who had English teaching experiences in China argued that the aim of teaching nonverbal behaviours should focus on raising students' awareness of the cultural differences in terms of nonverbal behaviours. Besides, they also mentioned the problems of the Chinese EFL curriculum. One participant commented that "I have never

taught about body languages and the paralinguistic factors when I was teaching in China. I think the importance of the nonverbal behaviours should be attached to the English language teaching. I mean in the curriculum, there should be some contents about nonverbal communication. But the English language teachers in China only focus on grammar and vocabularies, even now.”

Discussion

Non-verbal communication is viewed by the participant in this study as an important part in human interactions. Body languages and paralinguistic factors were considered to be important in language input and output, which supports the findings from Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1989) and Allen (1999). Nonverbal behaviours are used by the participants in this study to express implied meanings, emotions and attitudes. This manifests the results of Argyle's (1988) study which identifies the four primary functions of nonverbal behaviour, conveying emotion, showing interpersonal attitudes, exhibiting one's personality to others and playing auxiliary role in the process of speaking, such as managing turn taking, feedback, attention, etc.

In this study, much discussion has been made about the function of body language. Firstly, body languages are seen as a semiotic system by the participants in this study. Antes (1996) describes this unique function of body language as being able to stand alone and replace the spoken language. According to Antes (1996), body language is one of the important semiotic systems that people use in their lives. Furthermore, the study also indicates the culture-specific properties of body languages. According to Birdwhistell (1970, p. 81), it is very unlikely “to discover any single facial expression, stance, or body position which conveys an identical meaning in all societies.” From this perspective, the body language system should be presented with verbal system to the learners so as to enable them to be really competent in that language (Antes, 1996).

Another point worth discussing is the participants' experiences of using and interpreting nonverbal behaviours in intercultural communications. This is supported by the findings of Gao (2000) and Xiao and Petraki (2007) which indicates that nonverbal behaviour is one of the biggest obstacles in intercultural communications. In this study, all the participants suggested the importance of understanding and using nonverbal behaviours in intercultural communication. It is difficult for students from other cultural backgrounds to achieve successful non-verbal communication in English speaking countries. In addition, the study indicates the miscommunications caused by inappropriate use or interpreting nonverbal behaviours take more time and efforts for students to overcome. This finding echoes the assumption put forward by Hurley (1992) which posits that learners might be more likely to experience difficulties in acquiring socio-pragmatic rules such as prosody and nonverbal communication, if their native language and culture are sharply distinguished from the target language and culture.

The role of nonverbal communication in the field of EFL teaching is also an important aspect of this study. It is generally agreed that language learners have to acquire not only linguistic knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary, but also appropriate language use in different social contexts in order to be communicatively competent in a new language (Canale, 1983). When answering the question about the role of nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms, most of the interviewees considered that the skills of using nonverbal behaviours should play a more significant role in English language teaching in China. Nonverbal behaviours have close relationships with intercultural communicative competence, and knowing the skills of nonverbal communication enables them to communicate with people from different cultures in a better way.

Further research is called for an exploration in teaching nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms. Firstly, it should be explored the possibility of incorporating the knowledge of nonverbal communication into the EFL curriculum. It is especially needed for the education institutions which intend to send their students abroad for study or work, because the students would need a better preparation to survive and function adequately in the new cultural environment. The other issue that should be explored is the learnability and the teachability of nonverbal behaviours. It is necessary to investigate whether and how learners can acquire nonverbal behaviours, and to tackle pedagogical challenges such as teaching and assessment methods.

Conclusion

In the past centuries, researchers have learnt a great deal about nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is considered as an indispensable component of human interaction and it bears close relationship with culture. Each culture has a set of norms regarding the appropriateness of different types of body language and paralinguistic factors. However, the nonverbal communication is often overlooked in second language teaching programs. The results of the study has a potential to help EFL teachers in China to better understand the current difficulties encountered by Chinese background students in intercultural communications. This study also suggests including knowledge of nonverbal communication into EFL teaching so as to enable English learners to become fully competent in the targeted language, because nonverbal communication is used in everyday communication, and it is one of the prerequisites to acquire intercultural communicative competence.

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