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DECODING TEACHER MOVEMENT: INVESTIGATING NON-VERBAL ENTHUSIASM AS COGNITIVE SCAFFOLDING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: While general teacher enthusiasm is known to increase student motivation and participation, research often treats it as a single, broad behavior. This action research study isolates specific non-verbal enthusiasm cues—vocal variation, purposeful physical movement, and facial expressiveness—to determine which specific non-verbal signals most effectively support English as a Foreign Language (EFL) production. Over a four-week period, 28 pre-intermediate secondary students participated in Task-Based Learning (TBL) activities where specific non-verbal behaviors were systemically varied. Using timed observation logs and frequency counts of student verbal responses, findings reveal that vocal modulation (pitch and pauses) had the highest immediate impact on initiating speech, while physical proximity (circulating and leaning in) sustained longer interaction during group tasks. The study concludes that non-verbal enthusiasm should be viewed as targeted multimodal scaffolding rather than general performance.

Keywords: Non-verbal communication, teacher enthusiasm, multimodal scaffolding, EFL fluency, gesture analysis, action research.

Introduction.

In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL), instructors rely heavily on instructions and verbal prompts to guide learners (Willis & Willis, 2007). However, spoken language is only one component of classroom instruction. A significant portion of pedagogical communication relies on non-verbal delivery—gestures, posture, eye contact, and vocal tone (Knapp et al., 2013).

Previous studies established that high overall teacher vitality increases Student Talking Time (STT) and lowers speaking anxiety (Jo'raxonova, forthcoming). Yet, treating enthusiasm as a single, uniform concept makes it difficult for pre-service and in-service teachers to train and apply effectively. Is it the teacher's voice, physical movement, or smiling that drives student participation?

This study breaks down teacher enthusiasm into its specific non-verbal components. By isolating vocal, spatial, and facial cues, this research aims to identify which non-verbal behaviors serve as the most effective "cognitive scaffolding" for language learners when attempting complex communicative tasks.

Theoretical Framework

Multimodal Teaching and Embodied Cognition

According to Embodied Cognition Theory, human thinking is deeply connected to physical action and perception (Gibbs, 2006). In language teaching, **multimodal pedagogy** suggests that learners process information through a combination of auditory, visual, and



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spatial inputs (Morell, 2018). When a teacher uses hand gestures, strategic pauses, and movement alongside spoken instructions, these physical actions reduce the learner's cognitive load, making the language easier to process.

Non-Verbal Behaviors as Scaffolding

Scaffolding typically refers to verbal hints, simplified questions, or structural templates (Ellis, 2003). However, non-verbal cues function as implicit scaffolding. For instance, leaning forward toward a student creates a low-anxiety invitation to speak, while an open-hand gesture signals an open-ended question. Based on the observational criteria established by Rosenshine and Furst (1973), this study analyzes three specific non-verbal categories:

1. **Prosodic Cues:** Vocal pitch variation, pacing, and strategic pauses.
2. **Proxemic Cues:** Spatial proximity, classroom circulation, and posture.
3. **Kinesic Cues:** Facial expressions, eye contact, and hand gesturing.

Methodology

Participants and Context

The study was conducted with 28 secondary EFL students (aged 14–16, pre-intermediate proficiency) at an academic lyceum in Tashkent over a four-week period.

Experimental Design

Four parallel task-based lessons were designed using Willis and Willis's (2007) Task Cycle framework. In each lesson, one specific non-verbal enthusiasm cue was intentionally emphasized while keeping verbal instructions identical across sessions:

- **Session 1 (Focus on Prosody):** High vocal variation, dramatic pauses, dynamic pitch; minimal movement.
- **Session 2 (Focus on Proxemics):** Continuous circulation, leaning into group spaces, varied physical distance; neutral vocal tone.
- **Session 3 (Focus on Kinesics):** High facial expressiveness, animated gesturing, head nodding; stationary position and neutral tone.
- **Session 4 (Combined Control):** Standard baseline (neutral delivery across all cues).

Data Collection

1. **Response Frequency Tracker:** A peer observer recorded the total number of voluntary student turns initiated immediately following each type of teacher cue.
2. **Turn Duration Log:** Student utterance length (measured in seconds) was recorded following teacher interventions during group work.

Findings

The data showed clear differences in how specific non-verbal cues influenced student output:

Isolated Teacher Non-Verbal Cue	Voluntary Student Responses Initiated	Average Utterance Duration (Seconds)	Primary Impact Observed

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Isolated Teacher Non-Verbal Cue	Voluntary Student Responses Initiated	Average Utterance Duration (Seconds)	Primary Impact Observed
Prosody (Voice Pitch & Pauses)	42	6.8 seconds	High immediate attention; fastest initiation of speech.
Proxemics (Circulation & Proximity)	21	14.2 seconds	Extended speech duration; sustained group discussion.
Kinesics (Gestures & Facial Cues)	29	8.5 seconds	Reduced hesitation/anxiety; visible quick approval-seeking.
Baseline Neutral Control	12	4.1 seconds	Slow response time; brief, single-word answers.

Key Observations

1. **Voice Drives Initiation:** Changes in vocal pitch and strategic silence served as an immediate signal for attention. Students responded fastest when questions were delivered with varied vocal inflection.
2. **Proximity Sustains Output:** While vocal pitch got students started, spatial movement kept them going. When the instructor moved closer to group clusters and leaned in, students spoke for longer periods (averaging 14.2 seconds per turn).
3. **Gestures Reduce Fear:** Smiles and open hand gestures caused an immediate reduction in non-verbal anxiety signals (such as students looking down or avoiding eye contact).

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that teacher enthusiasm is not an all-or-nothing trait, but a toolkit of specific non-verbal techniques that serve distinct instructional functions.

When teachers vary their vocal tone (**Prosody**), they help learners focus cognitive resources on the key parts of a task. The strategic pause, in particular, acts as a non-verbal "wait time" that gives students time to process information.

When teachers move purposefully through the classroom (**Proxemics**), they alter the power dynamic of the room. Rather than delivering a lecture from the front, the circulating teacher becomes a participant in the group space, providing an encouraging presence that sustains conversation.

Finally, gesturing and facial expressions (**Kinesics**) act as emotional validation. In language learning, students frequently pause to ask, "Is this correct?" Positive facial expressions provide instant feedback, allowing the learner to continue speaking without stopping to check for correctness.



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Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

This study shows that non-verbal enthusiasm functions as physical and vocal scaffolding in the EFL classroom. Instead of viewing enthusiasm as a vague personality trait, teacher training programs should teach specific non-verbal techniques:

- **For Task Initiation:** Use vocal variety and strategic pauses to highlight key task instructions and signal when it is time for students to speak.
- **For Sustained Fluency:** Walk away from the board and enter student group spaces during discussion tasks to support longer conversations.
- **For Reducing Speaking Anxiety:** Use open-hand gestures and positive facial expressions to offer quick reassurance without interrupting student speech.

By mastering these non-verbal cues, language teachers can intentionally guide, support, and increase student speech in the EFL classroom.

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