

Investigating the Attitudes of Third-Year English-Majored Students towards Using Non-Verbal Communication to the Audience Engagement in A Presentation at Sai Gon University

Nguyen Hoang Bao Tram*, Hoang Pham Thanh Truc, Nguyen Thanh Thu, Ngo Thi Anh Thu

Department of Foreign Languages, Saigon University, Vietnam

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Giving a presentation can be considered to be pivotal in modern education with an ultimate aim is to help students be active in absorbing information and then learn to deliver the knowledge they gained by themselves to other counterparts. Admittedly, verbal communication is indispensable for learners to deliver a speech, but to optimize the effectiveness of the presentation, they need to master the art of non-verbal communication as well. Indeed, there has been an abundance of research attempting to shed light on the impact of non-verbal cues on the success of a public speech so far. However, the question of how the use of non-verbal communication influences the audience engagement during presentations in an EFL context remains underexplored. This study aims to investigate the attitudes of EFL undergraduates towards applying non-verbal communication in presentations to keep the audience engaged. A descriptive quantitative design was employed which involved 100 third-year EFL students selected by using the convenience sampling technique. Subsequently, a questionnaire was administered to collect data on the attitudes of the students, and descriptive quantitative analysis was then conducted to gain valuable insights. The results indicate that the students tend to adopt a favourable attitude towards incorporating non-verbal communication into presentations to engage the audience. In detail, the three out of five most common non-verbal cues, namely facial expressions, eye contact and gestures, seem to be considered as predominantly favored and frequently used by the junior presenters compared to other types. Although the remaining cues including postures and movements are not quite popular among the students, their crucial roles in reinforcing the effectiveness of the speech should not be underestimated. In the end, these findings suggest that the students should pay more attention to their non-verbal signals during presentations to captivate their audiences.

Keywords: English-majored students, non-verbal communication, engaging the audience, presentation.

INTRODUCTION

In our current globalized environment, the capacity to communicate effectively can be considered a critical skill across many disciplines. Tripathi and Reddy (2012) as cited in Baroona (2019) stated that communication means the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another. For students who are in their preparation for entering the professional world, the ability to articulate ideas persuasively necessitates a strategic blend of skills, including proficient presentation delivery. In other words, a presentation is a vital practice of communication that helps provide individuals with abundant opportunities to learn how to convey their ideas effectively to attract and maintain the audience's attention. In essence, it should be etched in mind that the effectiveness of communication goes beyond the spoken word. As a result, to deliver a successful presentation, the orator necessitates to balance both verbal and non-verbal communication. While the significance of verbal communication is undeniable, non-verbal cues should not be underestimated in terms of keeping the audience engaged in correlation with optimizing the impact of the speech. Considering the significant influence of non-verbal language in presentations across academic, professional, and personal contexts, it seems that such cues contribute substantially to improving the effectiveness of communication, impressing the audience, and then leading the presenter to obtain desired outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Attitude

Various definitions have been provided by numerous scholars in the disciplines of psychology and education in an attempt to elaborate on the concept of “Attitude”. Adopting a psychological approach to “Attitude”, attitudes are believed to be linguistically encoded within the brain, suggesting that individuals articulate their feelings about something by verbalizing pre-existing internalized words (Sawyer & Simpson, 2001). Furthermore, referring to the evaluative aspect of attitude, Ajzen (2001) dictated that “Attitude imply evaluation, which is usually done a bipolar continuum from favorable to unfavorable, or from positive to negative, that could comprise attributes such as good-bad, harmful-beneficial, pleasant-unpleasant, and likeable-dislikeable” (p.126). In a bid to support Ajzen's work, Eiser (2004) as cited in Haddock and Maio (2004) asserted that these evaluations are intrinsically linked to particular objects; they are not arbitrary or detached but possess a characteristic of being directed towards something specific. In a summary, attitudes can be acknowledged as inferences or dispositions grounded on subjective experiences coupled with their complex of beliefs. Besides, the aforementioned authors appear to concur that attitudes are oriented towards specific entities, reinforcing that they are not abstract but tied to particular objects or situations. Moreover, expressing an attitude involves making a decision concerning liking or disliking, approving or disapproving, or endorsing or opposing a distinct subject matter, entity, or individual. The concept of attitude has no longer been bounded in the field of psychology, it has potentially served as a pivotal factor within the realm of education. Choy and Troudi (2006) stated that “Attitude could help the learners to express whether they liked or disliked the objects or surrounding situations” (p.48). In addition, Kara (2009) added that “Positive attitude could lead to the exhibition of positive behaviors towards courses of study. Participants absorbed themselves in courses and strived to learn more” (p.48). Inherent in those studies, a probe into the attitude of undergraduates towards the application of non-verbal communication in promoting the audience engagement can benefit students themselves to be more active and highly aware of their non-verbal cues to arrest the audience’s attention and capture their heart in a presentation.

Non-verbal Communication

In regards to non-verbal cues, numerous researchers have defined this form of communication in various ways. Non-verbal communication (NVC) has been identified as a critical factor influencing engagement and communication effectiveness in the context of oral presentations (Okon, 2011; Bambaerero & Shokrpour, 2017; Lawrence, 2017; Batty, 2018). According to Heitzman et al. (2023), NVC is broadly defined as the way we exchange information or ideas using tools other than spoken language. In addition, Hans et al. (2015) stated that NVC is the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless (mostly visual) cues between people. It includes those important but unspoken signals that individuals exhibit, specifically: body language (encompassing carriage/posture, appearance, listening, and eye contact), hand gestures, and facial expressions.

Facial Expressions

Most audiences become captivated by the facial expressions during the presentation. Facial expressions serve as a form of non-verbal communication that can assist presenters in emphasizing verbal messages and achieving their oral presentation objectives. Ekman (1993) claimed that facial expressions have not only served to convince everyone, but it also has sharpened the argument during the presentation. Serious and smiling facial expressions were predominantly utilized throughout the presentation by the high-performing presenter (Lee, 2023). Thus, it has been studied that with 24 muscles in the human face, you have 24 opportunities to convey your message during the presentation. Unfortunately, not many speakers activate all the muscles on their faces, as a consequence in their speeches appearing lackluster and falling a little bit flat. While the energy in the speakers' voices was similar, utilizing facial expressions makes the message more complete.

Eye Contact

It is commonly comprehended that eye contact involves looking directly into someone’s eyes as they also gaze back at you. This kind of nonverbal communication can greatly influence social interactions. Eye contact serves multiple functions; for instance, from infancy to adulthood, eye contact plays a crucial role in nonverbal

communication and social interaction (Kleinke, 1986); additionally, it is essential for building interpersonal relationships (MacDonald, 2009). During presentations, eye contact with an audience can have a considerable effect on the speaker. Recent research has revealed that noticing another person's direct gaze while presenting significantly influences a variety of attentional and cognitive processes. We identified a total of 109 studies on eye contact dating back to 1965.

Gestures

Some researchers have found that a gesture involves a movement of the body, particularly the hands or arms, to convey or highlight the speaker's thoughts. It is a form of nonverbal communication that can express feelings, concepts, or directives without the use of words. Alibali and Goldin-Meadow (2012) have noted that Nonverbal cues, particularly hand gestures, are essential components of effective communication, especially when conveying spatial information, regardless of age or cultural background. Gestures serve as a strong instrument to reinforce your points, engage your listeners, and improve your overall performance. Consequently, gestures can function as a tool for research, providing insights into the speaker's unexpressed thoughts.

Postures

In presentations, Bull (1987) stated that posture is typically understood as the position of the body, distinguishable from physical movements known as gestures; maintaining good posture is crucial for effective presentations. It can greatly improve a speaker's credibility, audience engagement, and the overall performance. Research consistently indicates that speakers who adopt upright, open postures are seen as more confident and credible by their listeners. Numerous studies have explored various types of postures, including power poses, open dynamic stances, and relaxed stances,...

Movements

The nervous system's ability to produce movements has been formally examined for approximately 150 years (Schwartz, 2016). Movements can be defined as the act or process of transitioning from one location to another or altering position. It may also denote a change in state or condition, or refer to a trend or development. In addition, physical movements can be deemed as crucial for delivering an effective presentation today. During a presentation, physical movements can assist presenters to highlight their messages, engage the audience, boost the confidence, and support verbal communication.

Previous Studies

Thamrin and Darsin (2023) conducted a study entitled "An Analysis of Non-Verbal Communication in Students' Speaking Performance" to clarify the reasons for the use of non-verbal communication in students' speaking class at the English Department, University of Kuninganto. Assistance was provided by three selected students of the English education department who took a course on public speaking in the fourth semester. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach with the employment of a plying case study design, and these two techniques (observation and interview) were used to gain the data needed. Observation field notes were used to find out the types of non-verbal communication in students' speech, while an interview was conducted to pinpoint the rationale behind the application of non-verbal communication in students' speeches. The data analysis showed that the most commonly used non-verbal communication was gestures. Based on the findings, students prefer to use gestures and eye contact to help them convey messages more effectively; also, these serve as a complement to make their speeches more interesting. It can be concluded that non-verbal communication can contribute significantly to optimizing students' capabilities of delivering messages to the audience during their talks. In addition, students appear to be more confident when presenting in public with the support of non-verbal communication. The study of Apriliyanti (2023), "Analysis of the Use of Non-Verbal Communication in Class Presentation", aimed to prove that nonverbal communication can potentially amplify the influence of the messages delivered by presenters, and thus increasing the chance of the audience's absorption of information in class presentations in Indonesia. The researcher collected data through qualitative research methods by literature study and direct observation of class presentations conducted by various presenters. Based on the findings, the use of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, hand gestures, posture, and eye contact can exert a

positive influence on the understanding of the message among the audience and the delivery of the message as well. Furthermore, these forms of non-verbal communication are able to reinforce the audience engagement in the presentation, which creates a more engaging atmosphere as well as directing the audience to pay more attention to the message being delivered.

In Vietnamese context, Ho et al. (2021) carried out the study called "Understanding Student Attitudes towards Delivering English Oral Presentations" with the desire to examine the attitude of 153 third-year and fourth-year students enrolled in English major at the Department of Foreign Languages at a university in the Southern of Vietnam towards delivering English presentations. The researchers used both quantitative and qualitative methods in gathering and analyzing the data. Based on the findings, students' language proficiency, learning styles, and other factors related to teachers, among those, audience can be considered to be the key element that is instrumental in students' attitudes towards delivering their oral presentations. Given a similar context, Nguyen (2024) initiated the research named "The importance of Non-Verbal elements in English Communication" to investigate the comprehension of the 3rd-year English-majored undergraduates at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education of such elements. Questionnaires and interviews were utilized to assemble the data for the analysis of 45 undergraduates. Based on the findings, the role of common non-verbal elements, under the view of cognitive aspect, has significant influence on the conveyance of messages in English of the English-majored undergraduates in their third year at university.

Gap statement

In spite of the fact that there has been a number of studies conducted to shed light on the vital role of non-verbal cues, little research has been carried out with the aim to investigate how university students view the interplay between the employment of non-verbal communication and the audience engagement in a presentation. In addition, some of the relevant work is deemed to fall behind the times since research related to communication aspects should be updated consecutively as the human civilization evolves.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a descriptive quantitative design, utilizing a survey method to collect numerical data on students' attitudes toward using non-verbal communication to enhance audience engagement. The study was conducted within the Department of Foreign Languages at Saigon University, involving 100 third-year English-major undergraduates. Participants were selected via convenience sampling based on their academic networks and their performance in the Public Speaking Course. This criterion ensured that all informants possessed a baseline understanding of presentation dynamics and practical experience in incorporating non-verbal cues into their speeches. While convenience sampling simplified data collection, it represents an acknowledged limitation regarding statistical generalizability compared to probability sampling.

The survey questionnaire was subsequently distributed through a social networking site named Google Forms as we value your time invested in the survey, and this online data-gathering tool is indeed convenient and time-saving. The participants would first get access to the Google Forms link by scanning the QR code or via the social media app, and then they had to answer 25 questions divided in 2 sections respectively. In the first section, the respondents were asked to provide some personal information. After that, within the second part, they were continually instructed to express their views on the effectiveness of some types of non-verbal communication in a presentation based on their own experience. This stage of filling the form was estimated to take each participant approximately 3 to 5 minutes. Finally, it should be borne in mind that prior to answering the questions, respondents were explicitly informed that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and all information collected would serve only research purposes. By assuring the anonymity and confidentiality of this survey, students were encouraged to show their perspectives openly as well as to be as honest as possible. The test instrument employed in this research was a questionnaire adapted from questions in the studies of Luu and Nguyen (2023) to collect data. Nevertheless, by virtue of a few disparities in the scope of these two studies as our research aims to emphasize the audience's reactions directed by the use of non-verbal communication in oral presentations, some modifications were made to ensure that the questionnaire will be applicable to our work and thus, possibly gauging the undergraduates' attitude towards utilizing body language to influence the listeners. The questionnaire consisted of 25 close-ended questions divided into two main sections. The first section

included questions from 1 to 7, chiefly dealing with background information which allowed researchers to gain a basic understanding of their participants. The second section comprised 18 statements from 1 to 15 separated into 5 groups: Group 1 to 5 addressed predominant types of non-verbal cues frequently used by undergraduate presenters in their speeches which involve facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, postures and movements with the ultimate goal was to draw some conclusions about to which extent that students consider the application of those listed non-verbal cues can make a difference to their presentations. The remaining group, including questions from 16 to 18, attempted to survey respondents' perceptions of the importance of non-verbal communication. Furthermore, a five-point Likert scale was used in this last part to measure students' perceptions as well as enable participants to express their views on these varied cues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that applying nonverbal cues to presentations can significantly assist presenters to captivate their listeners, thus receiving positive responses from these audiences. The final results yielded following the process of administering questionnaires and data treatment demonstrated that the top five prevalent types of communication cues including facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, postures and movements greatly engage the audience during a speech, of which eye contact and gestures were recorded to be frequently used by these undergraduate orators and both exerted a profound impact on the audiences' reactions to the talk compared to other types of non-verbal communication. In the light of these conclusions, our findings are consistent with previous research, which also suggest that hand gestures and eye contact are preferred non-verbal communication types among the presenters and can simultaneously help to cultivate deep emotional responses of the audience during the speech as well. These five listed nonverbal cues may bring positive impacts to the presentation of junior speakers, which can contribute significantly to captivating the audience. Additionally, nonverbal communication can provide learners with opportunities to bolster the credibility of their speeches and establish communicative connections. Notably, among the identified non-verbal cues, facial expressions, eye contact and gestures emerge as pivotal factors influencing audience attention. These cues are simple to use and can be included in our presentations effortlessly; moreover, they serve to amplify the clarity of messages delivered through the speech; for instance, a smile or a slight nod will support the presenter to highlight the key points, while raising eyebrows can show a sense of confusion. By providing additional contextual information, these cues aid the audience to grasp the orator's intentions coupled with fostering a deeper connection between the two parties. On the other hand, movements and postures should not be undervalued as open postures and deliberate movements can play a crucial role in building trust and credibility of the presentation, thus increasing the persuasion of the speech. Nevertheless, both of these cues may be new to some, thereby requiring frequent practice and conscious planning in order to be used more smoothly and appropriately. In the light of these potential explanations, it may become more reasonable to figure out why the percentage of the students who believed that incorporating postures and movements into their presentations could help them engage the audience effectively is fairly lower than the other non-verbal cues. Overall, irregardless of participants' different views on the use of non-verbal communication in a presentation, it seems hard to deny the fact that the aforementioned five factors, namely facial expressions, gestures, postures, eye contact and movements can underscore key points in speeches as well as keep the audience feel involved and stay focused. In the end, it is widely believed that only through dedicated practice and major efforts that undergraduates can master the use non-verbal communication and thus optimizing the ability to engage the audience and deliver compelling presentations.

Although this paper can provide invaluable insights into using non-verbal communication to capture the audience's attention during presentations, it should be noted that our research report may be subject to some limitations that need to be addressed in the following research. Firstly, the sample size was fairly moderate, focusing solely on the English-majored third-year students of Sai Gon University as participants; as a result, this may limit the generalizability and validity of our findings. Secondly, the research methodology adopted in our research should be noted as well. Due to the time constraint, the study had no options but had to base on questionnaires to get details of the participants' perspectives. The lack of deeper explanations behind each choice of respondents in the questionnaire which can only be gained through interview or observation may affect the final results of this study. Lastly, we noticed that some students seemed not to pay much attention to their non-verbal cues together with the listeners' reactions during the speech. This may lead participants to have difficulty

with responding to questions about the impact of non-verbal communication on the audience's attitudes as respondents cannot recall those details precisely, which will probably affect the validity of the empirical results obtained.

CONCLUSION

First and foremost, the results of this study can lead us to believe that there may be a significant interplay between effective presentations and non-verbal communication. In addition, there are certain implications taken from this research for undergraduate presenters. Students can make an effort to include appropriate non-verbal communication, especially facial expressions, eye contact and hand gestures, in their presentations since those cues can be considered as the easiest to master but their effectiveness should not be undervalued. Providing students with numerous opportunities to make the full use of non-verbal communication during their speeches can prompt an increase in the persuasion of their presentations and the audience engagement, which is a key to any successful public speech.

In the light of the limitations identified in this study, it is advisable that more similar research is needed to be undertaken in a bid to replicate our findings in a more adequate and holistic approach. It is suggested that future research should be conducted in diverse settings and participants as well as expand the sample size to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Moreover, a more rigorous sampling technique, such as random sampling methods, should be employed to ensure the objectivity of the data and increase the generalizability of the results. Lastly, by allocating the time more appropriately, researchers are highly recommended to adopt other types of methodology with higher levels of complexity, including interviews, observations, experiments or the mixed methodology such as carrying out in-depth interviews after collecting data through questionnaires in order to gain deeper insights into the use of non-verbal communication to promote the audience engagement in presentations, thereby increasing the credibility of the final results and providing more reasonable conclusions of the study.

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