

THE USE OF VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO EFL LEARNERS

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Abstrak - Komunikasi yang efektif antara guru dan siswa merupakan salah satu faktor penting dalam keberhasilan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan bentuk dan fungsi komunikasi verbal serta nonverbal yang digunakan oleh guru bahasa Inggris dalam proses pembelajaran di SMA Negeri 22 Palembang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan subjek penelitian terdiri atas dua guru bahasa Inggris dan empat puluh siswa kelas XI. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru menggunakan berbagai strategi komunikasi verbal, seperti pemberian instruksi, penjelasan materi dengan code-switching, umpan balik positif, serta motivasi verbal untuk meningkatkan partisipasi siswa. Sementara itu, strategi komunikasi nonverbal yang ditemukan meliputi penggunaan gerak tubuh, ekspresi wajah, kontak mata, intonasi suara, dan jarak fisik yang mendukung pemahaman siswa terhadap pesan yang disampaikan. Integrasi antara komunikasi verbal dan nonverbal terbukti mampu menciptakan suasana belajar yang interaktif, hangat, dan komunikatif, sehingga meningkatkan kepercayaan diri dan motivasi siswa dalam berpartisipasi aktif.

Kata kunci: Komunikasi dokter-pasien; Bahasa verbal; Bahasa nonverbal; Empati; Layanan kesehatan.

Abstract - Effective communication between teachers and students plays a crucial role in the success of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This study aims to describe the forms and functions of verbal and nonverbal communication used by English teachers during classroom instruction at SMA Negeri 22 Palembang. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach involving two English teachers and forty eleventh-grade students as participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that teachers employed various verbal communication strategies, such as giving instructions, explaining materials using code-switching, providing positive feedback, and offering motivational remarks to encourage active participation. Meanwhile, nonverbal communication strategies included gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, vocal intonation, and proxemics, all of which supported students' comprehension of the messages delivered. The integration of verbal and nonverbal communication proved effective in creating an interactive, warm, and communicative classroom atmosphere that increased students' confidence and motivation to participate actively.

Keywords: Doctor-patient communication; Verbal language; Nonverbal language; Empathy; Healthcare services.

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is a fundamental element in successful English language teaching, particularly in classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Beyond linguistic knowledge and pedagogical expertise, teachers must be able to deliver messages clearly and meaningfully to enhance student comprehension and engagement. Verbal communication, when adjusted to learners' language proficiency and cultural background, ensures that classroom instructions, explanations, and feedback are easily understood (Sitio et al., 2023; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2025; Haq, 2024). Conversely, the excessive use of complex

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vocabulary or unexplained linguistic terminology can lead to confusion and hinder the learning process. Such miscommunication may lower motivation, cause task misunderstanding, and reduce classroom participation (Muluk et al., 2021; Taembo, 2023; Wulandari, 2020). Therefore, language in the EFL context functions not only as an instructional tool but also as a bridge for interaction and collaboration. Teachers who prioritize clarity and inclusiveness in their communication foster trust and active participation, thereby enhancing the quality of learning (Sari & Wardhani, 2020; Redjeki & Muhajir, 2020; Hamka et al., 2021).

In addition to spoken language, nonverbal communication also plays an essential role in supporting effective teaching and learning. Nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and eye contact often help teachers express meaning, manage classroom dynamics, and demonstrate empathy toward students (Ekman & Friesen, 2019; Maru'ao, 2020; Daflizar, 2021). A teacher's smile, nod, or supportive tone can motivate students and create a positive classroom atmosphere, while a lack of expression or eye contact may discourage participation. Research shows that students often perceive nonverbal behaviors as more authentic than verbal feedback, particularly in EFL contexts where linguistic comprehension is still developing (Nayeem et al., 2025; Tanaka, 2023; Almelhi, 2021). Thus, verbal and nonverbal communication work together to build rapport and facilitate understanding. This highlights the importance of training English teachers not only in linguistic and methodological competence but also in communication skills (Suryana et al., 2020).

The integration of verbal and nonverbal strategies aligns closely with communicative and learner-centered teaching approaches. These approaches emphasize interaction, empathy, and engagement, encouraging learners to take an active role in constructing meaning. Through clear verbal instruction supported by appropriate nonverbal signals, teachers can make lessons more comprehensible and meaningful, thereby enhancing learners' confidence and performance (Ouyang et al., 2024; Sidik & Fahmi, 2021; Merris & Sari, 2019). When students feel understood and supported, they are more likely to participate actively, take linguistic risks, and persist in their learning. Therefore, the combination of linguistic clarity and expressive nonverbal communication not only improves classroom interaction but also contributes to a more positive and motivating learning experience.

Given these considerations, this study investigates how English teachers employ verbal and nonverbal communication strategies in EFL classrooms at SMA Negeri 22 Palembang. The research aims to reveal how these strategies influence students' comprehension, engagement, and overall language development. By analyzing the interplay between verbal and nonverbal communication, this study seeks to provide valuable insights and pedagogical recommendations for improving communicative effectiveness in English teaching. Ultimately, understanding these communication processes contributes to more empathetic, interactive, and effective English instruction—demonstrating that language, in all its verbal and nonverbal forms, lies at the heart of successful language education.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design, aiming to describe in detail how English teachers use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies during teaching

(Sugiyono, 2021; Tarigan, 2021). This approach was chosen to allow a comprehensive understanding of classroom interactions and the meanings embedded in teacher–student communication.

2.2 Instrument

The main research instrument was the researcher, supported by several tools:

1. **Observation Sheet** – to record verbal (instructions, explanations, feedback) and nonverbal behaviors (gestures, facial expressions, tone, eye contact) used by teachers during lessons.
2. **Semi-Structured Interview Guide** – to obtain in-depth information from teachers and students about their perceptions of classroom communication.
3. **Documentation** – including classroom videos and photos to reinforce observational data.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered using three main techniques:

- 1) Classroom Observation – conducted across multiple lessons to observe real-time verbal and nonverbal interactions.
- 2) Interviews – with teachers and students to explore their perspectives on the use and impact of communication strategies.
- 3) Documentation – such as field notes, recordings, and photographs, to support triangulation and verification.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles & Huberman (2019), interactive model, consisting of:

- 1) Data Reduction – selecting, organizing, and simplifying raw data from observations and interviews.
- 2) Data Display – presenting data descriptively to illustrate verbal and nonverbal communication patterns.
- 3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification – interpreting findings and confirming conclusions against the data.

2.5 Data Validity

To ensure data validity, source and technique triangulation were applied. Source triangulation compared findings from teachers, students, and documentation, while technique triangulation checked consistency across observation, interview, and documentation results.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The study conducted at SMA Negeri 22 Palembang revealed a complex and dynamic interaction between teachers and students, characterized by the use of both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies during English language instruction. Data from classroom observations, interviews, and documentation indicated that these communication forms played complementary roles in facilitating understanding, maintaining engagement, and shaping a positive learning atmosphere.

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3.1.1 Verbal Communication Strategies

The verbal communication strategies employed by teachers included instructional talk, explanatory talk, feedback, motivational talk, and classroom management language.

- **Instructional Talk:**
Teachers frequently used concise and structured commands such as —Please open your textbook on page fifty-five,|| or —Work in pairs and discuss the dialogue.|| These utterances were short, clear, and delivered at a moderate pace to accommodate students’ proficiency levels. The teachers also repeated instructions when students appeared confused, indicating sensitivity to learners’ comprehension levels.
- **Explanatory Talk:**
During explanation sessions, teachers often switched codes between English and Indonesian. For instance, while teaching grammar points or vocabulary meaning, the teachers alternated between both languages to ensure clarity. Code-switching served as a pedagogical tool to bridge linguistic gaps. Teachers also used simplified English and paraphrasing techniques to restate complex terms.
- **Feedback and Reinforcement:**
Teachers provided both formative feedback and affective reinforcement. Expressions such as —Good job,|| —Excellent answer,|| and —You almost got it, let’s try again,|| were common during lessons. This type of feedback not only corrected errors but also encouraged student confidence. The use of positive tone and encouraging language helped reduce student anxiety during English-speaking activities.
- **Motivational Talk:**
Teachers frequently reminded students that making mistakes was part of the learning process. Utterances like —Don’t be afraid to speak English, mistakes are normal,|| demonstrated empathy and support. Such messages fostered an environment where students felt safe to participate without fear of ridicule.
- **Classroom Management Language:**
Language was also used strategically to maintain discipline and classroom order. Teachers employed polite but firm phrases such as —Please focus,|| or —Let’s pay attention, everyone,|| to redirect student behavior without causing discomfort.

Overall, verbal communication played a key role in structuring classroom interactions and guiding student learning.

3.1.2 Nonverbal Communication Strategies

Nonverbal communication was equally essential in conveying meaning, maintaining attention, and creating emotional connection. Five dominant types were identified: gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, vocal intonation, and proxemics (spatial behavior).

- **Gestures:**
Teachers used illustrative gestures (e.g., pointing to objects, mimicking actions, or drawing shapes in the air) to support explanations. For instance, when explaining the verb —fly,|| the teacher mimicked the motion of wings, helping students visualize

meaning. Gestures were also used to signal transitions, such as moving from one activity to another.

- **Facial Expressions:**
Teachers' facial expressions—especially smiles, nods, and raised eyebrows—played an important role in building rapport and expressing approval. A smile after a correct answer motivated students, while nodding encouraged continued participation. Conversely, neutral or serious expressions were used to indicate correction or focus.
- **Eye Contact:**
Sustained and balanced eye contact was observed throughout lessons. Teachers made deliberate efforts to look at all students equally, avoiding the impression of favoritism. Eye contact was also used to manage classroom behavior, signaling when a student should pay attention or stop talking.
- **Vocal Intonation:**
Teachers modulated their voice to emphasize key points. Rising intonation was used to express enthusiasm or highlight important vocabulary, while a softer tone was used during reflective or emotional discussions. The variety in vocal delivery prevented monotony and helped maintain attention.
- **Proxemics (Spatial Movement):**
Teachers moved around the classroom rather than remaining static at the front. This approach reduced physical distance, increased engagement, and made students feel more connected. Proximity was particularly important when assisting individuals or small groups during discussions.

In summary, nonverbal communication functioned as a visual and emotional extension of verbal messages, ensuring that meaning was reinforced through multiple sensory channels.

3.1.3 Integration of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

The most striking finding was the interdependence between verbal and nonverbal strategies. When teachers provided verbal feedback such as —Good job, it was often accompanied by a smile or a thumbs-up gesture. Similarly, when clarifying difficult concepts, verbal explanations were reinforced through gestures or diagrams. This synchronization created a multimodal form of communication that increased clarity and engagement.

Students reported during interviews that they could understand lessons more easily when teachers combined spoken language with gestures or expressions. Several students mentioned that nonverbal cues helped them infer meaning even when they did not fully understand the English words.

3.2 Discussion

The findings support previous research indicating that effective communication in EFL classrooms involves both linguistic and paralinguistic elements (Anggraini, 2020; Apoko et al., 2023). Verbal language alone is insufficient in facilitating comprehension; instead, it must be complemented by expressive nonverbal behavior that provides contextual and emotional support.

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3.2.1 Verbal Communication as Pedagogical Scaffolding

Verbal communication served as scaffolding—a structured framework that helped students build linguistic competence gradually. Teachers' use of simple, repetitive, and contextualized language facilitated understanding and reduced anxiety. The practice of code-switching, often perceived as a deviation from pure English instruction, in fact demonstrated pedagogical flexibility. In line controlled code-switching enhances comprehension and encourages learners to connect new English knowledge with their existing linguistic schema.

Furthermore, feedback and motivational talk reflect the humanistic approach to language teaching. Positive verbal reinforcement not only enhances performance but also influences learners' affective domain—encouraging persistence, reducing fear of error, and increasing willingness to communicate.

3.2.2 Nonverbal Communication as Emotional and Cognitive Support

Nonverbal cues complemented verbal explanations by visualizing meaning and regulating interaction. As found in this study, gestures and facial expressions acted as semiotic resources that made abstract language tangible. Communication theory, nonverbal elements account for a large proportion of message interpretation—particularly in emotionally charged interactions.

In the context of SMA Negeri 22 Palembang, students exhibited diverse English proficiency levels, making nonverbal reinforcement essential. Teachers' smiles and gestures created a psychologically safe environment that promoted classroom engagement. These findings who argue that teacher immediacy behaviors—eye contact, movement, and expressiveness—significantly enhance student motivation and participation.

3.2.3 The Synergy of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

The integration of both communication forms supported Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, emphasizing authentic interaction and meaningful use of language. Rather than relying solely on lecture-style teaching, the teachers' multimodal approach created an interactive environment where learners negotiated meaning dynamically.

From a sociocultural perspective, based on Vygotsky & Cole (1978), theory, communication acts as a mediational tool that shapes cognitive development. In this study, both verbal and nonverbal signals mediated understanding between teacher and students. For example, when teachers gestured while explaining grammar, students internalized meaning through visual and auditory channels simultaneously—enhancing retention.

3.2.4 Implications for Teaching Practice

The findings underline that effective English teaching requires communication competence beyond linguistic knowledge. Teachers must develop sensitivity to students' responses and adapt their communication style accordingly. Professional training should therefore emphasize not only linguistic accuracy but also classroom communication literacy—including tone management, gesture awareness, and emotional expressiveness.

Furthermore, schools should promote reflective teaching practices where educators analyze their communication patterns through video observation or peer feedback. This helps teachers become more aware of how their verbal and nonverbal behaviors influence classroom dynamics.

3.2.5 Pedagogical and Cultural Dimensions

An interesting observation in this study was the cultural adaptation of communication styles. Teachers balanced Indonesian cultural norms of politeness and respect with the interactive style encouraged in communicative English teaching. This hybrid approach reflects the localization of CLT, making it more relevant and effective within the Indonesian EFL context.

By combining politeness strategies (e.g., indirect requests, soft intonation) with Western-influenced interactive methods (e.g., open questioning, humor), teachers successfully created a classroom climate that respected local values while fostering communicative confidence.

Aspect	Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
Function	Instruction, explanation, feedback, motivation	Support, emphasize, regulate interaction
Dominant Forms	Code-switching, simplified language, encouragement	Gestures, facial expressions, tone, movement
Impact	Increased clarity and participation	Improved engagement and emotional connection
Integration	Complementary use enhanced comprehension and confidence	Multimodal delivery improved classroom interaction

The overall results affirm that effective EFL teaching is a multimodal communicative process. Teachers at SMA Negeri 22 Palembang demonstrated that the harmonious blend of verbal clarity and expressive nonverbal cues fosters a learning atmosphere that is both cognitively stimulating and emotionally supportive. These findings contribute to a broader understanding that in language education, communication is not merely about transmitting words—but about connecting minds and emotions through interaction (Lawrence, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that effective English language teaching in an EFL context is inseparable from the integration of both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies. At SMA Negeri 22 Palembang, teachers were found to combine these two modes of communication in ways that enhanced understanding, engagement, and emotional connection between teacher and students. Verbal communication served as the foundation for linguistic instruction, where teachers employed clear explanations, simplified vocabulary, repetition, and code-switching between English and Indonesian to ensure that students comprehended key concepts. This verbal scaffolding not only facilitated the acquisition of linguistic knowledge but also provided psychological support, reducing students' anxiety when learning a foreign language. Positive verbal feedback such as praise, encouragement, and motivational statements played a vital role in maintaining students' confidence and willingness to participate actively in class discussions.

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Nonverbal communication, on the other hand, complemented verbal expressions and enriched the overall teaching process. Teachers' use of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, tone variation, and spatial movement helped students interpret meanings beyond the spoken words. Smiles and nods reinforced verbal praise, gestures illustrated abstract vocabulary, and tone variation maintained students' attention and emotional involvement. These nonverbal behaviors projected warmth, empathy, and approachability, which are essential for building trust and rapport in the classroom. The data suggest that students were highly responsive to these visual and emotional cues, particularly when their linguistic proficiency limited full comprehension of English instructions. Thus, nonverbal elements acted as a universal bridge, transcending linguistic boundaries and fostering a deeper level of connection between teacher and learners.

The synergy between verbal and nonverbal communication was the most significant discovery in this research. Rather than functioning independently, both forms interacted dynamically to create a multimodal communicative environment. When teachers provided explanations accompanied by gestures or expressive intonation, students' comprehension improved significantly. Likewise, when verbal feedback was aligned with positive facial expressions or supportive gestures, students perceived it as more genuine and encouraging. This integration underscores that effective teaching is not merely the transmission of linguistic knowledge but the orchestration of multiple communicative modes that engage both cognitive and affective domains of learning.

Furthermore, the study highlights that communication in EFL teaching is not a one-way process but a reciprocal exchange of meaning shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Teachers at SMA Negeri 22 Palembang demonstrated sensitivity to Indonesian cultural norms of politeness and respect, while still adopting communicative, interactive, and student-centered techniques aligned with modern pedagogical approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This cultural adaptation illustrates how teachers negotiate between local values and global teaching practices to create a balanced, contextually relevant pedagogy.

In essence, this study concludes that effective communication in the EFL classroom is not confined to the accuracy of grammar or vocabulary, but lies in the teacher's ability to harmonize verbal and nonverbal channels to build understanding, motivation, and emotional engagement. The teacher's communicative competence—encompassing linguistic clarity, empathetic delivery, and expressive interaction—serves as a crucial mediator in transforming classroom instruction into meaningful language learning experiences. The implications of this research suggest that teacher education and professional development programs should place greater emphasis on communication training, equipping teachers with both verbal and nonverbal skills to manage classroom dynamics effectively. Ultimately, by mastering the art of holistic communication, teachers can bridge the gap between linguistic instruction and human connection, creating EFL classrooms that are not only informative but also inspiring, inclusive, and emotionally supportive learning spaces.

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