



Research Directions on Students' Nonverbal Communication in Higher Education

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Abstract: Objectives: This study explores recent developments in research on nonverbal communication in higher education, with particular attention to its role in students' professional formation. It examines the importance of decoding nonverbal cues for enhancing classroom interaction and student–faculty engagement. **Prior Work:** Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from psychology, education, and interpersonal communication, the study engages with foundational models (Ekman, Burgoon, Chelcea), as well as more recent research on the expressive and regulatory functions of nonverbal behavior in university teaching and learning. Key concepts addressed include proxemics, facial expressions, gestures, and paralinguistic cues. **Approach:** The study takes an interpretive stance and explores the nonverbal aspects of academic communication in line with the requirements of professional formation in higher education. It reviews key contributions from the specialized literature that describe models of nonverbal communication relevant to university contexts. **Results:** Research highlights several key factors that influence students' nonverbal behavior during oral presentations, including self-confidence, performance anxiety, and cultural background. The study also identifies the core functions of nonverbal communication such as repetition, substitution, complementation, emphasis, and contradiction, and examines how these functions manifest within instructional settings. **Implications:** The findings provide a conceptual framework for university educators to develop communication practices that are sensitive to nonverbal language. The study recommends ongoing professional development in nonverbal communication, the integration of nonverbal competence into educational quality assurance, and greater recognition of nonverbal feedback in student assessment. **Value:** Nonverbal communication plays a foundational role in shaping the educational climate in higher education. This study deepens our understanding of the implicit meanings embedded in academic nonverbal interactions and proposes an explanatory model that outlines dimensions of nonverbal

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communication with pedagogical significance and practical relevance for fostering students' communicative competencies.

Keywords: nonverbal communication; higher education; student presentations; classroom interaction; academic feedback

1. Introduction

Communication forms the foundation of social interaction and is an essential component of human development. Within the university environment, it assumes a complex role, integrating cognitive, relational, and educational dimensions that shape the quality of teaching, the effectiveness of learning, and the nature of academic relationships. Contemporary society, characterized by cultural diversity and accelerated information exchange, depends on multiple forms of communication that influence the dynamics, quality, and depth of interpersonal relationships. The study of nonverbal communication in academic settings enhances understanding of how students demonstrate engagement, establish social connections, and respond to institutional expectations. This research highlights the role of nonverbal cues, including gestures, posture, facial expressions, and proxemics, in shaping meaning and facilitating effective educational interactions in higher education.

According to statistical analyses reported in the literature, nonverbal communication accounts for approximately 53% of the overall communication process, paraverbal communication contributes 30%, and the verbal component represents only 7%. This distribution is often illustrated using the iceberg analogy, in which the visible tip – words – constitutes a small fraction of the whole, while the largely hidden nonverbal and paraverbal dimensions exert a substantial influence on interactions (Bejan, 2012).

2. Nonverbal Communication: Dimensions, Definition, and Contemporary Relevance

Nonverbal communication has emerged as a prominent area of study in educational institutions globally, including universities. Originally rooted in communication sciences, the field now intersects with psychology, psychiatry, and broader social science disciplines, reflecting its multidisciplinary relevance. In the Republic of Moldova, the pedagogical emphasis on nonverbal communication has intensified, evidenced by the proliferation of specialized workshops and training courses for both

educators and students. This shift highlights an increasing awareness among educators and administrators of nonverbal communication's role in professional practice and daily interaction (Belous, 2016). While the existing literature provides a well-established theoretical and methodological foundation, and contemporary studies have demonstrated links between bodily expression and various aspects of human functioning, the field remains difficult to systematize. The complexity and subtlety of nonverbal behaviors continue to pose challenges for precise definition and interpretation, underscoring the need for ongoing scientific investigation.

Nonverbal communication constitutes a fundamental dimension of human interaction across all contexts, from family relationships to professional settings. Defined as the transmission of meaning through non-lexical means, it encompasses multiple expressive modalities, including body movements, vocal tone, spatial and temporal organization, as well as environmental factors, clothing, personal style, and the characteristics of an individual's surroundings (Belous, 2016, p. 363). Accordingly, it can be understood as a system of signs, codes, and symbols whose interpretation provides insight into an interlocutor's identity and dispositions. Nonverbal behavior, often spontaneous and involuntary, reflects personality traits and offers valuable information about attitudes, emotions, and intentions without relying on verbal expression (Belous, 2016). Mastery of body language enables a more nuanced understanding of an interlocutor's attitude, indicating willingness to engage in dialogue, degree of openness or reticence, expressed trust, and even the veracity of discourse. Careful observation of gestures and postures provides contextually calibrated feedback, allowing individuals to adapt their own communicative behavior appropriately (Borg, 2010). Skills in decoding nonverbal communication further optimize interactions by permitting adjustments to both message and behavior in response to the interlocutor's reactions. This behavioral regulation mechanism is particularly relevant in academic communication, especially in settings involving negotiation, collaborative work, argumentation, or the maintenance of balanced professional relationships.

Nonverbal communication, as a multifaceted system of behavioral cues and embodied signals, has been examined from various scholarly perspectives for its role in conveying meaning, regulating interactions, and reflecting individual cognitive and emotional states. S. Chelcea characterizes it as the intentional or unintentional transmission of information and the exertion of influence through an individual's behavioral and physical presence, or that of social units such as groups or collectives, as well as through the perception and use of space, time, and artifacts (Chelcea, 2005). R. Doron emphasizes that nonverbal communication differs fundamentally

from verbal communication and has long been regarded as a language in its own right, with other forms, including writing, considered secondary, derivative, or substitutive (Doron, 1999, p. 85). Similarly, L. Savca describes it as the process of conveying informational messages without words or symbols, often substituting for verbal communication and operating largely at an unconscious level, manifested through eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and posture (Savca, 2003, p. 94).

J. Burgoon identified seven distinct dimensions of nonverbal communication (Fig. 1).

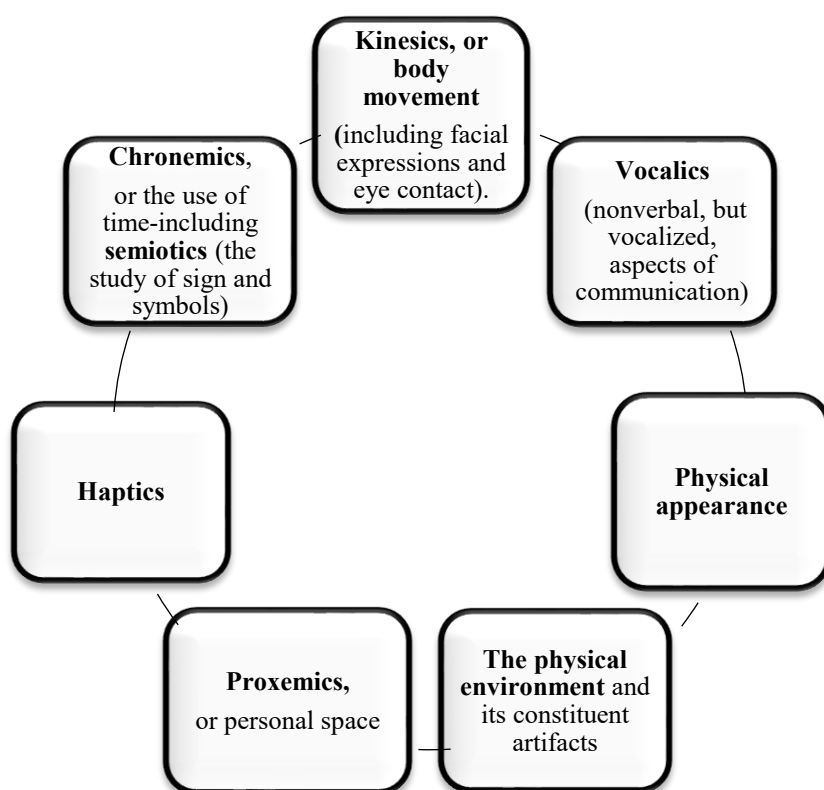


Figure 1. Types of Nonverbal Communication (adapted after J. Burgoon)

Nonverbal communication comprises behavioral expressions that are often produced without the sender's deliberate intent, yet remain observable and interpretable by others within the social environment. According to Codoban (2014), body language includes a wide range of communicative forms, such as facial expressions, eye contact, physical appearance, gestures, posture, vocal qualities, tactile interactions, and the management of space and time. The expression and interpretation of these

behaviors are influenced by a variety of sociocultural and individual factors, including gender, age, ethnicity, and social status.

3. Dimensions and Functions of Nonverbal Communication

According to the model proposed by P. Eckman, nonverbal communication fulfills five main functions, which can also be examined within the context of academic interaction, as outlined in Table 1 (apud. Codoban, 2014, p. 26).

Table 1. Functions of Nonverbal Communication (adapted from Eckman)

Function	Description
Repetition	Reinforces verbal messages through congruent nonverbal behaviors, such as verbal affirmation accompanied by nodding gestures. In academic settings, this contributes to the clarity and coherence of instructional discourse.
Substitution	Entails the replacement of verbal language with nonverbal expressions, whereby affective or cognitive states are conveyed exclusively through facial movements, gestures, or other embodied signals, particularly in moments where verbalization is either constrained or unnecessary.
Complementation	Reinforces verbal messages through visual or kinesthetic cues, facilitating a deeper understanding of content, with particular relevance in explanatory processes or evaluation.
Accentuation	Expressively marks messages to highlight certain ideas, through variations in tone or energetic gestures, influencing student motivation and attention.
Contradiction	Arises when incongruence exists between verbal and nonverbal expressions, leading to ambiguity and potentially undermining perceptions of relational authenticity in the educational context.

The analysis of nonverbal communicative behavior requires a systematic examination of codes, expressive modalities, and communicative intent. Nonverbal communication functions through structured sets of signs that, when interpreted contextually, constitute a coherent system for meaning-making. These signals act as sensory stimuli, perceived via visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory channels, and they influence both the reception and interpretation of messages (Borg, 2010). Hargie and Dickson (2004) identify several primary functions of nonverbal communication, highlighting its multifaceted role in interpersonal interactions. These include:

- Replacing verbal communication when speech is impossible or inappropriate.
- Complementing verbal communication.
- Modifying the meaning of spoken language.
- Contradicting verbal content, whether intentionally or unintentionally.
- Regulating conversational flow through turn-taking and role negotiation.
- Conveying emotions and attitudes.
- Managing relational dynamics such as influence, control, and affiliation.
- Communicating aspects of personal and social identity.
- Providing a contextual frame for social interaction (cf. Stănciugelu et al., 2014, p. 204).

The nonverbal messages conveyed by the speaker reflect an intention to be perceived as sincere, competent, and well-informed. These behaviors convey relevant information concerning the speaker's identity, attitudes, and emotional states associated with the content being communicated. Similarly, the analysis of the receiver's nonverbal behavior, particularly bodily movements, allows for inferences regarding affective and cognitive responses to the message (Sburlescu, 2005).

An essential dimension of this process is the spontaneous nonverbal feedback produced by the audience, which reflects the degree of receptivity and alignment with the content of the discourse. A speaker's lack of awareness or inability to interpret these signals can lead to distortions in communication and reduced effectiveness of the message. Within academic settings, these dynamics are particularly relevant for evaluating teacher-student interactions and for refining teaching strategies and oral presentation practices.

4. Codes of Nonverbal Communication and Their Relevance in Higher Education

Within the university environment, the quality management system serves an important function in distinguishing and monitoring both verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication. It is operationalized through two main documents: the quality policy and the quality objectives. In this respect, the policy and objectives may be viewed as forms of verbal communication, while the ways in which academic leadership enacts these principles can be interpreted as expressions of nonverbal communication (Spano, 2012).

Given the variability in students' communicative and linguistic development, the specific features of their reasoning and expression, and the recurrent difficulties observed in oral and written interactions, L. Șoitu emphasizes the need to establish a distinct domain within the educational sciences, internationally recognized as Communication Pedagogy. This field aims to examine communicative phenomena systematically and to identify, both conceptually and through applied and experimental methods, the conditions that promote effective communication across diverse personal, professional, and cultural contexts. From L. Șoitu's perspective, Communication Pedagogy should emphasize the following dimensions:

- *Developing the science and art of speech as essential competencies for students*, supporting academic success, long-term achievement, and providing aesthetic, social, and spiritual enrichment.
- *Recognizing silence as a meaningful component of communication*, fostering tolerance, understanding, creativity, and trust, while appropriately moderating the impact of verbal discourse.
- *Valuing carefully formulated questions* to clarify and refine the communicative process, stimulate reflection, and encourage attitudinal change; such questions should be logical, purposeful, and effectively framed to promote meaningful dialogue.
- *Examining the polysemy of nonverbal language*, emphasizing its pedagogical potential to convey values such as friendship, understanding, empathy, and collaboration, while consciously avoiding authoritarian forms of interaction (Șoitu, 2001, pp. 101–120).

Building on these principles, R. Tudorică (2007) provides a complementary analysis of communicative interactions in the university environment, revealing a complex structure within the teacher-student relationship. These interactions can be classified as follows:

- *Interpersonal relationships, differentiated by*: (a) The psychological needs of the individuals involved, including communicative, sympathetic, and cognitively oriented connections; (b) The dynamics of the relational process, which may take the form of cooperation, competition, conflict, accommodation, assimilation, stratification, or alienation.

- *Relationships related to the responsibilities of academic staff, including: transmitting scientific content; providing educational guidance; enforcing norms and rules; assessing performance; coordinating tasks; organizing activities.*
- *Relationships defined by their psychological content, which may be informational–cognitive or affective.*
- *Influence relationships, which may operate directly or indirectly (Tudorică, 2007).*

As pedagogical paradigms have evolved in recent years, the traditional perception of educators as mere transmitters of knowledge has shifted toward expectations that they become what M. Minder terms “education engineers,” professionals responsible not only for organizing learning contingencies but also for guiding cognitive development and systematically regulating behavioral change. This redefined professional identity requires, as a fundamental precondition, the cultivation of a broad repertoire of professional competencies, among which communicative competence is highlighted as preeminent by M. Călin, particularly within the dynamic context of university environments where pedagogical efficacy relies fundamentally on effective communication. In this context, communicative competence refers to a coordinated set of personal skills systematically applied throughout the communication process (Călin, as cited in Jianu, 2013, p. 165).

Nonverbal communication in the university environment reflects students’ psychological states, particularly during periods of personal and professional development. At this stage, nonverbal language serves both a complementary and diagnostic function in expressing motivation and engagement. According to Albu’s needs gratification theory (2008), several theoretical principles can guide the interpretation of nonverbal behaviors in educational contexts:

- Students exhibit higher receptivity and performance in a secure, low-stress learning environment, where educators’ nonverbal behaviors such as warm vocal tone, open gestures, and positive facial expressions contribute to fulfilling students’ psychological needs for safety and social belonging.
- Negative experiences, such as humiliation or uncertainty conveyed through rigid facial expressions, an aggressive tone, or dismissive gestures, can inhibit cognitive curiosity and reduce motivation for collaboration.

- The need for safety and predictability is also manifested nonverbally, with students favoring a coherent communicative environment in which expressions, gestures, and postures convey clarity, stability, and respect.
- Recognition of student achievements through nonverbal signals, such as smiles, nods, and encouraging gestures, reinforces self-efficacy and promotes intrinsic motivation for self-improvement.
- Educators can support developmental motivation through theoretically informed nonverbal strategies that complement challenging tasks while reducing emotional pressure, thereby aligning instructional practices with students' psychological needs (Albu, 2008).

The author highlights university teachers' perceptions of the younger generation, which are sometimes characterized as disoriented, vulnerable to destructive influences, and particularly responsive to negative stimuli. In this context, analyzing teachers' attitudes and representations is highly relevant, as they shape the communicative and relational climate within the academic environment. Nonverbal language, whether employed consciously or spontaneously by teachers, can convey either openness and support or disapproval and distance, thereby influencing students' receptivity and trust (Albu, 2008).

5. Conclusion

Within the context of university communication, nonverbal language assumes a complementary and revealing function, reflecting the affective dispositions and attitudinal stances of interlocutors as well as the quality of educational relationships. Analyzing the nonverbal dimensions of interactions between students and faculty, or among students themselves, facilitates a deeper understanding of the educational process, in which messages conveyed through gestures, facial expressions, posture, or proxemics complement or, at times, contradict verbal communication.

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