

The Role of Verbal and Non-Verbal Language in the Teaching and Learning Process

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role of verbal and non-verbal communication in teaching practices by comparing how experienced and pre-service teachers apply these strategies in the classroom. Conducted at SMP Panca Budi Medan, the research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach using interviews, classroom observations, and video recordings as data collection methods. The study focuses on identifying communication styles, frequency of use, contextual appropriateness, and the impact on student responsiveness. The findings show that experienced teachers utilize a wide range of verbal and non-verbal techniques such as open-ended questioning, motivational feedback, gestures, and spatial movement more fluently and contextually. These strategies foster higher student engagement and more dynamic classroom interaction. Conversely, pre-service teachers demonstrate limited and less adaptive use of communication, often due to lack of confidence and practical experience, which results in more passive student behavior. The study highlights the importance of multimodal communicative competence in teaching and recommends enhanced training for pre-service teachers in both verbal and non-verbal communication to create inclusive, engaging, and student-centered learning environments.

Keywords: Multimodal Communication; Verbal and Non-verbal Communication; Teacher Experience

INTRODUCTION

Communication lies at the core of human social interaction and plays a fundamental role in various aspects of life, particularly in the field of education. In the classroom, communication is not merely about delivering subject matter it is also about

building meaningful relationships, motivating learners, and creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Teachers communicate constantly, both consciously and unconsciously, through words, tone, gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. These interactions shape students' academic experiences, influence their emotional responses, and significantly affect learning outcomes.

In educational contexts, communication can be broadly categorized into verbal and non-verbal modes. Verbal communication involves the use of spoken and written language, including strategies such as questioning, instructing, explaining, and giving feedback. According to Brown (2007), effective verbal communication enhances classroom management and student engagement by fostering interaction, guiding comprehension, and encouraging participation. However, successful teaching also requires mastery of non-verbal communication, which includes gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, and spatial positioning. These cues often convey more than words and are critical in expressing encouragement, demonstrating authority, showing empathy, and managing classroom behavior.

Sigrid Norris (2004), through her Multimodal Interaction Analysis (MIA), argues that communication in teaching is inherently multimodal, meaning that meaning is constructed not through a single mode (e.g., speech) but through the integration of various communicative modes—both embodied (such as movement, gaze, gesture) and disembodied (such as classroom layout or digital media). This multimodal approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers interact with students and manage instructional delivery. Research by Purwati et al. (2019) and Thamrin & Darsih (2023) supports the claim that integrating verbal and non-verbal elements enhances clarity, improves attention, and supports emotional connection, particularly in language classrooms.

In today's classrooms, the demand for effective multimodal communication is even more urgent. The rise of blended and online learning has redefined how teachers and students interact. In such environments, non-verbal cues may be reduced or altered, requiring teachers to adapt their strategies. Furthermore, the growth of inclusive education has introduced greater diversity in classrooms, including students with different learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and communication preferences. In such settings, teachers must be flexible and sensitive in their communication to support equity and engagement for all learners.

One group particularly challenged by these demands is pre-service teachers—those who are still in the process of professional training. While they may understand the theoretical importance of verbal and non-verbal communication, they often struggle to implement these strategies in practice due to nervousness, limited teaching experience, and lack of exposure to real classroom dynamics (Astutik & Purwati, 2021; Pakpahan, 2023). In contrast, experienced teachers generally exhibit stronger communicative competence, adapting their use of language and non-verbal cues more fluidly to meet student needs. However, while the literature highlights the importance of communication in teaching, there is a limited number of studies that

specifically compare how pre-service and experienced teachers differ in their use of verbal and non-verbal communication.

This study seeks to address that gap by exploring and comparing the communicative behaviors of pre-service and experienced teachers at SMP Panca Budi Medan. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research focuses on how these teachers define, apply, and adjust their verbal and non-verbal strategies in real classroom contexts. Data were collected through interviews, direct observations, and video recordings, and were analyzed using Brown's (2007) model of verbal communication and Norris's (2004) framework of multimodal interaction. The study examines aspects such as communication style, frequency of use, contextual responsiveness, and their effects on student engagement.

By understanding these differences, this research aims to contribute valuable insights into the development of communicative competence in teacher education. The findings are expected to inform the design of teacher training programs, particularly in how they prepare future educators to use multimodal communication effectively. Ultimately, this study affirms that teaching is not only about what is said, but how it is communicated—and that both experience and training play vital roles in helping teachers develop the skills necessary to create interactive, responsive, and inclusive classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication plays an essential role in the educational process, particularly in the interaction between teachers and students. The act of teaching is fundamentally communicative; therefore, a teacher's ability to communicate effectively—both verbally and non-verbally has a profound impact on classroom engagement, instructional clarity, and student learning outcomes. As such, numerous scholars have explored the elements, functions, and implications of communication in teaching and learning environments.

Verbal Communication in Education

Verbal communication in the classroom refers to the use of spoken and written language to convey information, instructions, questions, feedback, and encouragement. According to Brown (2007), effective verbal strategies such as clear directions, thoughtful questioning, and timely praise are essential components of successful teaching. These elements contribute to building rapport, clarifying concepts, and fostering student participation. Brown also emphasizes the developmental nature of verbal communicative competence, which evolves through continuous practice, reflection, and pedagogical training.

In addition, Abdikarimova et al. (2021) highlight the importance of verbal communication in shaping students' speech etiquette and engagement in English language learning. Teachers who demonstrate verbal fluency and clarity are more

likely to maintain classroom order and support students' understanding, especially when teaching complex or abstract concepts. However, the effectiveness of verbal communication often depends on the teacher's ability to adapt their language style to students' levels, classroom contexts, and learning goals.

Non-Verbal and Multimodal Communication

Beyond speech, teaching is also characterized by rich non-verbal communication, which includes gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body movement, tone of voice, and spatial positioning. These elements, although often subconscious, serve to reinforce, modify, or substitute verbal messages. Purwati et al. (2019) argue that non-verbal communication plays a critical role in enhancing classroom interaction and increasing student attention. For example, a teacher's use of hand gestures can aid comprehension of abstract vocabulary, while eye contact can foster emotional connection and student confidence.

Sigrid Norris (2004) advances this discussion through her theory of *Multimodal Interaction Analysis* (MIA), which frames classroom communication as inherently multimodal. According to Norris, meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple communicative modes—both embodied (e.g., gestures, gaze, movement) and disembodied (e.g., printed text, digital media). In her view, teachers must coordinate these semiotic resources to create coherent and engaging learning environments. MIA allows for a deeper understanding of how communication operates not in isolation but as an ensemble of modes that work together to convey meaning. Thamrin and Darsih (2023) further support this view by demonstrating that non-verbal cues such as gestures and gaze significantly affect students' speaking performance and classroom responsiveness. Similarly, Sutiayatno (2018) confirms that teachers' mastery of both verbal and non-verbal communication positively correlates with students' academic achievement in English.

Communication and Teacher Experience

The ability to effectively integrate verbal and non-verbal communication is not only a matter of training but also of teaching experience. Experienced teachers are often more adept at reading classroom dynamics, adapting their communication strategies to student needs, and coordinating multimodal resources. In contrast, pre-service teachers—who are still developing their instructional identity—may exhibit hesitation, rigidity, or underutilization of non-verbal cues. Astutik and Purwati (2021) found that pre-service teachers tend to struggle with using gestures, facial expressions, and tone effectively, especially when teaching young learners. These challenges stem from limited teaching exposure, lack of confidence, and insufficient training in communication techniques. Pakpahan (2023) emphasizes that the shift to online and hybrid learning models has further complicated this issue, requiring pre-service teachers to develop new strategies to engage students without relying on traditional non-verbal cues. In line with these findings, Prabowo and Nurdiarti (2021) highlight the importance of storytelling and expressive gestures in

maintaining student attention, suggesting that the integration of multimodal elements is particularly valuable in interactive and creative learning tasks.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how experienced and pre-service teachers use verbal and non-verbal communication in the classroom. The qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of teaching practices and multimodal classroom interaction in real contexts. The research was conducted at SMP Panca Budi Medan and involved two participants selected through purposive sampling. The first was an experienced teacher who had more than ten years of teaching experience and was known for actively engaging students through both verbal and non-verbal techniques. Her inclusion was based on her professional background, reputation among school leaders, and consistent demonstration of classroom communication skills. The second participant was a pre-service teacher from a local teacher education program who was currently completing her teaching practicum at the school. She was selected to represent the developmental stage of pre-service educators who are still acquiring classroom management and communication competencies. Including both participants allowed the researcher to conduct a comparative analysis between different levels of teaching experience in the application of multimodal communication strategies.

Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected through three instruments: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and video recordings. Interviews were conducted to explore each teacher's understanding of communication, their use of verbal and non-verbal strategies, and the challenges they encountered during classroom interaction. The open-ended format encouraged participants to share detailed reflections and provided insights into their beliefs and intentions behind communicative behavior. Classroom observations were used to record actual teaching behavior, focusing on the use of verbal strategies (e.g., questioning, explaining, giving praise) and non-verbal cues (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, movement, and proximity). An observation checklist was used to document behaviors systematically and to ensure consistency across sessions. Video recordings supported the observations and enabled a more detailed analysis of both teachers' multimodal communication practices. This included the ability to review interactions multiple times, capture subtle non-verbal elements, and triangulate findings from interviews and field notes. The data collection was conducted with prior consent from participants and the school. To preserve natural behavior, the

researcher maintained a passive, non-intrusive presence during all observation sessions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method appropriate for identifying patterns and constructing meaning in qualitative data. The process involved several stages: (1) transcribing interviews and organizing observation notes; (2) conducting data reduction to filter content relevant to verbal and non-verbal communication; and (3) coding and categorizing recurring behaviors into thematic clusters such as verbal instruction, questioning style, praise, gesture, gaze, and body movement. The analysis was guided by two theoretical frameworks. First, Brown's (2007) model was used to assess the pedagogical effectiveness of verbal communication strategies. Second, Norris's (2004) Multimodal Interaction Analysis (MIA) provided a lens to examine how multiple communicative modes both embodied (e.g., movement, posture, facial expression) and disembodied (e.g., printed text, layout) interacted to support meaning-making in classroom instruction. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing insights from interviews, live observations, and video recordings. This multi-source approach enabled a more robust analysis and helped confirm the consistency of communication patterns. The comparison between the pre-service and experienced teacher offered a comprehensive understanding of how teaching experience influences the use and coordination of multimodal communication in real classroom settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated how teachers interpret and apply verbal and non-verbal communication in the classroom, with a specific focus on the comparative practices of a pre-service teacher and an experienced teacher at SMP Panca Budi Medan. The findings, derived from interviews, classroom observations, and video analysis, are presented in relation to the two research objectives.

Teachers' Interpretation and Application of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

The interview data revealed notable differences in how the two teachers interpreted and implemented verbal and non-verbal communication. The pre-service teacher defined verbal communication as "the use of language, either spoken or written, to explain the material or ask students questions," while non-verbal communication was described as "body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice." Although she recognized the importance of both modes, she expressed hesitation in applying non-verbal communication. She admitted, "*I still feel nervous, so I don't use gestures much or even facial expressions—I just try to focus on explaining the material clearly.*" This statement reflects her early stage of

professional development, where content delivery is prioritized over dynamic interaction. She acknowledged that non-verbal communication such as smiling or making eye contact could make students feel more comfortable, but she had not yet mastered those elements.

In contrast, the experienced teacher described verbal and non-verbal communication as “inseparable parts of teaching.” She explained that verbal language is crucial for instruction, while non-verbal cues help reinforce understanding and build emotional connections. She stated, *“Sometimes, a simple smile or nod can motivate students more than words. I adjust my tone, gesture, and even where I stand depending on how students are reacting.”* Her statements demonstrated a deeper pedagogical awareness, developed through years of classroom experience and reflective practice. She also mentioned adapting communication styles based on the emotional and behavioral needs of students, particularly those with special needs or lower confidence, highlighting a more inclusive and student-centered approach.

Furthermore, observational and video data supported these interpretations. The pre-service teacher used basic verbal strategies such as simple instructions (*“Read this,” “Write it down”*) and minimal questioning (e.g., *“Do you understand?”*). She rarely offered verbal praise or encouragement, and her tone of voice remained monotonous. Non-verbal communication was limited; she stood in one place, avoided eye contact, and displayed a stiff posture, indicating discomfort or nervousness. In contrast, the experienced teacher utilized a wide range of verbal techniques, including open-ended questioning, personalized praise (*“You did a great job explaining that!”*), and motivational comments (*“You guys are getting better!”*). Her non-verbal communication was active and expressive—she made regular eye contact, smiled warmly, used hand gestures to clarify points, and moved around the classroom to maintain engagement.

Differences Between Pre-Service and Experienced Teachers in Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

A central focus of this study was to analyze the communication differences between pre-service and experienced teachers, particularly in terms of communication style, frequency of use, contextual appropriateness, and impact on student responsiveness.

Communication Style

The experienced teacher demonstrated a dynamic and interactive style. She posed reflective and open-ended questions (e.g., *“What does that mean?”* or *“Can anyone give another example?”*), provided tailored praise (*“You’re doing a great job!”*), and encouraged collaboration. Her speech was rich with variation in tone and rhythm, helping to emphasize key points and retain student interest. In contrast, the pre-service teacher’s verbal style was more rigid and limited to factual delivery. Her questions were mostly yes/no types or confirmation checks (e.g., *“Do you*

understand?”), and praise was minimal and generic (e.g., “Good” or “Okay”), often lacking emotional warmth or elaboration.

Frequency of Use

The experienced teacher used both verbal and non-verbal strategies with greater frequency and consistency. She transitioned fluidly between giving directions, asking questions, offering encouragement, and using gestures and movement to maintain interaction. The pre-service teacher, on the other hand, demonstrated infrequent and inconsistent use of both communication types, especially non-verbal cues, which appeared sporadic and mostly unintentional.

Contextual Appropriateness

The experienced teacher adapted her communication based on the classroom situation. For example, she used softer tones and smiles for shy students and firm gestures to manage group behavior. She also strategically used physical proximity to engage students in different parts of the room. In contrast, the pre-service teacher stood in a fixed position at the front, rarely shifting her body orientation or adjusting her tone, which limited her ability to respond effectively to different student needs.

Impact on Student Responsiveness

These differences significantly affected student engagement. In the experienced teacher’s class, students were noticeably more active asking questions, responding eagerly, and maintaining attention throughout the lesson. The multimodal communication used by the teacher fostered a sense of inclusion, motivation, and trust. Conversely, in the pre-service teacher’s class, students were generally passive. They responded only when directly called upon and showed minimal initiative in participating. The teacher’s limited use of verbal encouragement and lack of expressive non-verbal cues contributed to a less interactive and emotionally distant learning environment.

The findings of this study highlight the essential role that both verbal and non-verbal communication play in shaping effective teaching and learning experiences. As demonstrated through interviews, classroom observations, and video recordings, significant differences exist between pre-service and experienced teachers in their use of communication strategies differences that are closely tied to their level of teaching experience, confidence, and classroom awareness.

In line with Brown’s (2007) framework on verbal communication, the experienced teacher in this study exhibited a more varied and intentional use of language. Her frequent use of open-ended questions, praise, and encouragement helped foster classroom interaction and student participation. These findings support Brown’s view that effective verbal strategies—such as providing constructive feedback and engaging students in meaningful dialogue—enhance students’ confidence and

learning outcomes. In contrast, the pre-service teacher's use of verbal communication was limited, often consisting of short, closed questions and generic praise. This reflects the early stage of communicative competence where teachers tend to focus more on content delivery than on fostering interaction (Astutik & Purwati, 2021).

The application of non-verbal communication further distinguished the two teachers. The experienced teacher demonstrated strong command of non-verbal cues such as body movement, facial expressions, eye contact, and posture. These elements were not used randomly, but rather strategically to complement verbal messages and sustain student attention. This aligns with Norris's (2004) theory of Multimodal Interaction Analysis (MIA), which emphasizes that meaning in communication is co-constructed through the coordination of various semiotic modes—both embodied (e.g., gesture, gaze, movement) and disembodied (e.g., text, space, layout). The experienced teacher's ability to engage multiple communicative modes created a dynamic and responsive learning environment, consistent with the findings of Purwati et al. (2019), who asserted that multimodal integration enhances students' comprehension and engagement.

By contrast, the pre-service teacher's non-verbal communication was noticeably limited. She often avoided eye contact, maintained a rigid posture, and showed minimal use of gestures, which contributed to a passive and less interactive classroom atmosphere. These behaviors support the findings of Pakpahan (2023), who noted that pre-service teachers commonly struggle with the practical application of non-verbal strategies, particularly under pressure or due to lack of experience. As a result, students in her classroom were less engaged, responding only when directly addressed and demonstrating little voluntary participation.

The results of this study also reaffirm findings from Thamrin and Darsih (2023), who found that non-verbal cues such as gestures and gaze significantly influence students' speaking performance and motivation. In the experienced teacher's classroom, students responded more actively, asked questions, and participated in learning activities more confidently. This shows how multimodal competence directly impacts student responsiveness, a key component of effective pedagogy that is often overlooked in traditional teacher training programs.

Another critical dimension identified in this study is contextual appropriateness—the ability to adjust communicative strategies based on classroom dynamics. The experienced teacher modified her tone, proximity, and expressions depending on the students' mood and engagement level. This finding is supported by Donkoh and Mensah (2023), who argue that skilled teachers constantly assess student reactions and adapt their communication in real time to maintain interaction. Meanwhile, the pre-service teacher used a one-size-fits-all approach, which limited her effectiveness in responding to diverse classroom situations.

These findings collectively suggest that the development of verbal and non-verbal communication skills is a gradual process, cultivated through sustained classroom practice, reflection, and targeted training. As shown by Adila (2022), the mastery of communicative strategies including motivation, clarity, and emotional expression plays a vital role in increasing student engagement and comprehension. The experienced teacher in this study exemplifies how teaching experience, combined with an awareness of multimodal communication, leads to more adaptive, inclusive, and effective instructional practices.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results emphasize the need for teacher education programs to place greater emphasis on multimodal communication training. Pre-service teachers must be equipped not only with subject knowledge but also with the tools to manage classroom interactions, read non-verbal cues, and respond to students' emotional and cognitive needs. As suggested by Vivek et al. (2023), effective teacher preparation should integrate observational practice, video analysis, and reflective dialogue to help novice teachers develop communication awareness and classroom presence.

This study reinforces the view that communication in teaching is far more than the transmission of content. It is a dynamic, multimodal process that constructs relationships, motivates learners, and creates space for active learning. The contrast between the pre-service and experienced teacher serves as a reminder of the importance of experience, reflection, and professional support in developing the full range of communicative competencies essential for effective teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the crucial role of both verbal and non-verbal communication in shaping effective teaching and learning. The findings underscore that experienced teachers are better equipped to use a range of multimodal strategies to engage students, while pre-service teachers often struggle with confidence and classroom presence due to limited experience. The key takeaway is that communicative competence is not just about delivering content but involves the coordinated use of language, body language, and contextual awareness. These abilities are developed over time through reflective practice and real teaching exposure. To support the development of these skills, teacher education programs should integrate communication-focused training, including opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe experienced educators, engage in video-based reflection, and receive feedback on their use of verbal and non-verbal strategies. In addition, simulation-based microteaching or classroom role-play can help build confidence in using multimodal communication before entering actual classroom settings. By equipping future teachers with these skills, teacher preparation programs can help ensure that classrooms become more interactive, inclusive, and responsive to students' academic and emotional needs.

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