

Nonverbal Cues in Teaching Foreign Language for Vietnamese Higher Education Learners


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ABSTRACT

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This research focuses on how nonverbal signals affect engagement in university English classrooms in Vietnam. The major obstacles that Vietnamese colleges still need to overcome include large class sizes with plenty of students with different English proficiency levels, inadequate teacher preparation, and outdated teaching methods that lower students' engagement. Qualitative data was gathered via document analysis, student interviews, and classroom observations of two classes comprising 40 non-English major students who come from different regions of Vietnam and their instructors at the Foreign Language Center of Nong Lam University. The results indicate that nonverbal cues significantly improve student comprehension and involvement, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic educational atmosphere. Enhancing non-verbal communication provides Vietnamese instructors with an efficient means to impart English and intercultural communication knowledge. This work adds to the domain of foreign language instruction, specifically the English language, and underscores the significance of non-verbal communication in improving pedagogical approaches.

Introduction

Background of the study

English - the most common language around the world - is crucial in many fields, especially education in Vietnam. In a period of global integration and rapid technological development, having a workforce fluent in English is an important basis for the socio-economic development of each country (Rassool, 2013). English has become Vietnam's most popular foreign language (Nguyen, 2017). This is a mandatory subject in the general education program starting from grade 6 nationwide and is applied in teaching from grade 3. It can be seen that the importance of learning English cannot be denied in Vietnam – where this language has greatly contributed

to the country's development (Tran & Ngo, 2024). There is no official document on the emergence of the English language in Vietnam. (Hoang, 2011).

Despite the significant efforts of the Vietnamese Government and the Ministry of Education and Training, English language teaching in Vietnam has still not met the expectations of experts and learners (Mai & Nguyen, 2020). Moreover, teaching English at all levels in Vietnam faces many challenges and is a top government concern. One of the challenges is the class size. Sometimes, it is up to 65 students per class. Therefore, the classroom is noisy, and many students sitting in the back cannot see the teacher clearly and also the knowledge on the board or screen. Some of the other problems include limited time, teacher qualifications, and ineffective teaching methods. These are factors that contribute to hindering students's English skills (Gonen & Saglam, 2012). Students still have limited English skills after 7 years of school (4 years of middle school and 3 years of high school) (Le, 2012). Vietnamese students are still afraid to communicate with foreigners (Nguyen, 2011).

Mastering vocabulary and grammar is not the only goal of learning English. It must be included with understanding and using nonverbal cues to communicate effectively. Nonverbal behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body language are essential in conveying meaning and emotion because they can replace spoken words. Language learners who can pay attention to these nonverbal cues can bridge the gap between learning English in the classroom and using it in real-life situations (Gregersen, 2007). By observing the teachers using this body language, students can improve their communication skills, express themselves more naturally, and understand others better, which makes their interactions more engaging and effective.

Communicative Language Teaching has been applied in English classrooms in Vietnam, but there is not much research on the effectiveness of this method. Even less attention is paid to the bilateral interaction between teacher and learner, especially as expressed through the nonverbal language of both parties. Teachers must understand the importance of nonverbal communication in the teaching process, because it is very important to generations of students, specifically as follows. Firstly, to capture messages from students, teachers need to create a positive learning environment and collect students' opinions and feedback to strengthen the learning process. Next, nonverbal communication skills help teachers avoid negative communication situations that can affect student learning. This study aims to apply non-verbal communication techniques such as eye contact, smiles, facial expressions, gestures, intimacy, and clothing to reinforce and direct students' learning process. in teaching activities at universities in Vietnam.

An instructor's verbal and nonverbal actions might influence certain aspects of student motivation. Educators must recognize, articulate, and exemplify these aspects directly to teacher interns. Velez and Cano (2008) clarified that by congratulating students on their efforts, employing humor in the classroom, fostering open dialogue, and engaging with students, educators can demonstrate behaviors that facilitate the development of verbal and nonverbal intimacy skills in candidates. There are five categories of nonverbal behaviors shown by instructors in the classroom. These include hand gestures, head movements, facial expressions, eye contact, and symbols.

In English lessons, when students possess a restricted vocabulary, nonverbal communication aids in comprehending professors' spoken instructions. Bambaerrou and Shokrpour (2017) said that instructors' increased verbal and nonverbal communication enhances teaching effectiveness and improves students' academic performance.

In addition to being referred to as sign language or silent language, nonverbal communication skills include any activities carried out in the presence of other people or recognized consciously or subconsciously. By the end of this research, English instructors will be able to enhance their communication skills by efficiently using verbal and nonverbal communication to encourage students enrolled in English programs at universities.

The Aims of the Study

This paper's two main aims are to evaluate the importance of nonverbal signals in teaching foreign languages to university students in Vietnam and analyze the role of nonverbal communication in the learning process.

The Significance of the Study

This paper helps understand the effects of nonverbal signals in language learning at university. It can also propose teaching methods to facilitate effective communication in a multicultural environment.

Literature review

Definition of Nonverbal Communication

From the perspective of cultural language, author Nguyen Quang (2008) commented: "Nonverbal communication is all the components of communication that are not part of the verbal code, meaning that they are not encoded in words". It includes para verbal elements such as speed, intensity, and flow. Moreover, extravertal elements of body language include posture, gestures, facial expressions, clothes, jewelry, perfume, gifts, etc. It also belongs to the environmental language, such as the language of dialogue and the place of communication. In particular, body language accounts for a large amount of non-verbal communication.

Nonverbal communication plays an important role in human communication. There are many concepts of nonverbal communication from different perspectives. Author Nguyen Thien Giap (2005) believes that "Nonverbal communication is communication that uses the entire body and senses". According to the author, communication includes verbal means and non-verbal factors such as context, appearance, clothing, posture, gestures, and distance. Research has analyzed a conversation that requires non-verbal elements, and one can truly understand language usage when non-verbal elements are closely examined.

Mehrabian (1981) suggests that only 7% of information exchange occurs through speech, 38% through vocal elements (such as tone, voice, intonation, and sound), and a significant 55% through non-verbal elements (including gestures, body language, images, etc.). Obviously, this factor significantly affects human communication effectiveness.

Western scholars believe that the role of nonverbal communication in classroom teaching is greater than the role of formal teaching in student learning. Research has shown that teachers need to learn how to use nonverbal communication to improve classroom teaching (Huang, 2011). Teachers, especially college English teachers, as international communication bridges and information transmitters, should be well aware of the importance of nonverbal communication. Because nonverbal behavior conveys many messages in the classroom, it becomes extremely helpful for teachers to convey their thoughts to the class and understand the caring or confrontational messages students send. Their positive nonverbal signals can also affect the teacher's mental state and classroom atmosphere (Huang, 2011). Students' engagement and interest in the subject can be seen through their relaxed faces and smiles.

Gestures, postures, tactile, kinesthetic, and visual communication are essential components of interaction between instructors and students in the classroom, collaboratively constructing meaning via the encoding and decoding of signals beyond spoken language. The proper usage of these components is often regarded as beneficial for teaching and learning during class time. They intentionally assist instructors and students in articulating their messages, facilitating communication and the conveyance of information, while also promoting language acquisition.

Definition of Terms

Definition of Body Language in Foreign Language Teaching

Cohen et al. (2009) mention that nonverbal behaviors positively influence teaching and interaction between teachers and students, including the use of space interaction, eye contact, smiles, nodding, gestures, and body relaxation. The body language that instructors use in the classroom is challenging due to complex cultural differences and potential cross-cultural misunderstandings. It is argued that a common problem for both teachers in public schools and English centers is that some of them may not be competent in intercultural nonverbal communication, and just a few of them have received the appropriate training related to their job role even though their verbal communication skills are very good. (Ping Yang, 2015)

The role of nonverbal communication in foreign language classes is very important. However, most lecturers and students still ignore this factor in communication or foreign language lessons. It is necessary to use nonverbal behaviors in actual teaching and to research students' attitudes about the effectiveness of these lessons.

Definition of Facial Expression in Foreign Language Teaching

Facial expressions of basic emotions include distinct facial muscle movements (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005). Facial expressions are used to express each person's emotions, expressing both the form and the level of emotions the person is communicating. In addition, facial expressions are also a part of expressing personality, and human nature in the communication process (Phan, 2022). Ekman and Friesen (1978) claimed that the "6 basic emotions" are happiness, sadness, surprise, disgust, anger, and fear, which are believed to be present in everyday emotions and are felt by humans in different ways, regardless of cultural differences.

Huang (2011) suggested that facial signals are the first information we receive from others. People recognize the opposite's personality trait information from their faces. Therefore, facial expressions between instructors and students are one of the important types of nonverbal signals in the classroom. In the English foreign language classroom, animated facial expressions promote an atmosphere that helps students have positive attitudes and achieve higher levels of learning foreign languages. When teachers ask questions, their nonverbal cues of expectation can encourage students to think carefully and respond proactively during class time. Sometimes a frown of the teacher can cause a sensitive student to immediately change their answer. It is much better to say "I don't think so" than "You're wrong", which can protect the student's pride in front of his/her classmates. Besides, teachers should often smile in class because a happy teacher is said to convey warmth and encouragement to their students in all cultures. Also, that teacher will be considered friendly, warmer and more approachable with students.

Definition of Eye Contact in Foreign Language Teaching

According to Bancroft (1995), the importance of eye contact when talking to convey human emotions is undeniable because looking at someone's eyes can be seen as a statement, a threat, or fear to the other. The importance of the eyes varies across cultures. In America, eye contact

is considered a gesture of respect and appreciation for the value of others. However, in Korea, a glance or even not looking at the other people's eyes directly is preferred (Hişmanoglu, 2008).

Eye contact most clearly reveals human emotions during communication. Because the eyes support spoken language, we can understand other people's emotions through their eyes and behave appropriately. Therefore, when communicating, we should always turn our eyes towards a friendly and polite look and avoid scrutiny, contempt, staring, looking away, or around the subject (Phan, 2022).

Andersen (2002) and Huang (2011) found that good eye contact teachers have more effective ways of transmitting lesson information to their students. The eyes capture a lot of meanings more than other parts of the body. Because of this, the author believes that eye movements are a very important nonverbal communication channel. There are two types of eye contact that college English instructors often use. Firstly, looking around can attract students' attention and encourage them to give out the answer. The second way is to focus on the triangle on the student's face. This style of looking can help preserve the teachers' seriousness, care, and honesty when criticizing a student's bad behavior. Teachers need to closely monitor students for signs of fatigue, boredom, confusion, or interest because all of these will be communicated to the teacher through their eyes during the lesson. English classes will be more special than other classes because they require students to talk and interact more with teachers, especially in English. When the teacher asks students to answer a question or a certain topic during class, the message conveyed through the eyes should be more encouraging and gentler, with a strong, direct, and trustworthy look from the teacher. At that time, students can feel more comfortable and confident, and then they are motivated to practice speaking English more freely and proactively. Therefore, a cozy atmosphere can appear, and students' English speaking levels can improve markedly over time.

According to Huang (2011), the instructing and learning of English within the college classroom, as a social interaction between instructors and understudies, is carried out by verbal implies and non-verbal implies including facial expression, eye contact, gestures, posture, and touch. Classroom instruction's viability depends to a degree on the suitable utilization of nonverbal behaviors. As a college English instructor, teaching English in college points to advance students' cross-cultural communication competence, counting both verbal and non-verbal. Not only professors of foreign languages at university have to be prepared with nonverbal communication, but also the understudies - the ones that need to be energized to make strides in their nonverbal communication capacities.

Husaini (2021) conducted research at a university in Indonesia, arguing that teachers interacting with students during the teaching process is necessary to create and affect the closeness between teachers and young students. Therefore, physical expressions such as eye contact, gestures, touch, facial expressions, and body posture can enhance student participation and engagement.

Review of Previous Studies

Husaini (2021) studied how teachers' nonverbal teaching affects students' motivation to learn. The participants in this study were 2 English teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Meureudu. Teachers use nonverbal communication as a way of communication, emphasizing verbal communication during the teaching process. In the end, nonverbal communication can create a strong bond between teachers and students, making it easier for teachers to engage students in the learning process.

According to Huang (2011), human communication is separated into two sorts: verbal communication and non-verbal communication, in which discourse is regularly considered the

foremost vital, viable, and capable implies of communication. One of the reasons is that nonverbal communication is ignored in everyday classroom instruction. Teachers' nonverbal communication plays a vital part in college English instruction. Numerous considerations make that instructors ought to learn to utilize nonverbal communication to make strides in the quality of classroom instruction. The relationship between instructors and understudies will make strides, and students' cognitive capacities and learning productivity will moreover be created.

Di's (2014) research shows that nonverbal communication is an important aspect of English teaching. These strategies and techniques have significantly improved the nonverbal communication abilities of teachers and students, contributing to their academic records.

Omar Mousa and Qadoori Yahya (2023) explore Iraqi teachers' and students' attitudes towards "nonverbal communication in the classroom" at a women's educational college in Tikrit. Teachers can use a variety of verbal and nonverbal strategies to assist students in mastering difficult topics. This research has demonstrated nonverbal communication's importance for teachers and students learning English. According to research outcomes, "nonverbal communication" between instructors and students increased students' awareness and participation in learning, resulting in better learning outcomes for both parties.

Research Gaps

The research results of Husaini (2021) are not completely accurate due to the small number of participants. It is necessary to interview students to understand their views on teachers using nonverbal closeness to encourage them in the learning process. Nonverbal communication changes under different cultural conditions. However, in Di's (2014) study, this is only discussed in a limited way, so further research in this area will put in more and greater effort because it is an important aspect. Important and beneficial for research. The limitation of Omar Mousa's (2023) research is that it only studied at girls' schools, and there were no male survey subjects. Research results will not be accurate because of this reason. Moreover, most of the studies were conducted during the period affected by Covid-19, the findings of the studies may be limited. Moreover, one of the major problems is the limited vocabulary range of higher education students. This leads to difficulty in finding appropriate terms or synonyms when the students forget the exact word or need to expand their answers. Furthermore, many learners have to deal with how to expand their vocabulary because it affects their Fluency and comprehension in conversations. In addition, pronunciation errors, which often arise due to limited vocabulary, make it speaker's intention become more complicated and hard for listeners to hear and understand (Nguyen et al., 2024). This shortage leads to a lack of confidence in systematizing and applying knowledge into practice. This study analyzes the impact of an online intercultural exchange program; intercultural competence plays an important role in 21st-century education.

Implications for the Current Study

This research boost implicit nonverbal communication strategies in hopes of enhancing the efficacy of the process in teaching English to Vietnamese college students.

Firstly, the findings underscore the necessity of promoting body language use in Vietnamese EFL students' language learning progress. Another key component of becoming more communicative is the improvement of students' ability to read subtle signals that cannot be sent verbally (Brown, 2004). These signs also encourage the more intuitive understanding in students needed to help them overcome language barriers and improve their ability to follow spoken explanations when teachers specifically monitor for students who might have trouble following these instructions due to language barriers.

The study also emphasizes the importance of being aware of nonverbal cues to bring improvement to communication and learning settings, which help college students become less shy to participate in class and communicate more through their body language. This is perhaps an opportunity for teachers to promote a more vibrant and supportive learning environment. Based on the Vietnamese context in a classroom where students are typically passive and quiet, nonverbal communication can help ease their anxiety, promote a sense of community, and motivate them to participate more in the classes. Through strategic use of nonverbal techniques, teachers can create a warm atmosphere in which students feel more comfortable communicating in English.

Additionally, these results underscore the need to develop research-based enhancements associated with verbal and nonverbal teaching features. A portion of an ideal teacher training program should focus on nonverbal skills, as a teacher needs to use his/her body language, which will support the language taught. The consideration of these pragmatic markers is compatible with the Vietnamese communicative style, and therefore, they can contribute to making English learning culturally relevant and more beneficial to Vietnamese learners.

Finally, conducting this study also contributes to an initial study in a Vietnamese context on the role of nonverbal behaviors in language learning, thus enriching the broader fields of educational linguistics, especially in the language-related issues. The results obtained from this study can help educational policymakers and institutions of higher education, in general, to produce syllabi for the purpose of teaching that integrate both verbal and nonverbal language elements with a view to improving the quality of English language teaching in Vietnamese higher education.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted at the foreign language center for forty non-English major students, ages 19 to 21, from Nong Lam University.

Procedures

First, the author asked the teachers' permission to observe the 2 classes of EE1 (English Exam preparation) for 2 lessons of each class. Before the observation, the author and the lecturer met to discuss the purpose of the study and the teaching methods for the two classes. Class 1 applied the nonverbal cues approach while the teacher in class 2 wore a mask to teach and sat on the podium only. Then, after the observation, the author would interview random students from each class to get the insights of them. Finally, the author synthesizes the information for the study.

Qualitative methods

The author uses qualitative methods to investigate the subject. The author first observes foreign language courses in the Foreign Language Center at the University of Agriculture and Forestry. The author then interviews some random students to investigate their thoughts on nonverbal cues that influence the efficacy of foreign language instruction at this place. After that, the author synthesizes overarching theoretical concerns about non-verbal communication and explores body language, facial expressions, and eye contact within the framework of foreign language instruction. The author has established a theoretical foundation for the significance of these aspects in the educational process.

Research Context

Using two distinct pedagogical approaches, the author conducted teaching observations in two classrooms of twenty students, each who was not majoring in English and came from different regions in Vietnam. Class 1 is taught by nonverbal teaching methods, which means the teacher will often use gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact during class time. Class 2 isn't taught by this method; it is only communicated through words. The teacher of class 2 also wears masks and sits on the podium because of his illness.

Classroom observation and student interview

The objective of this observation method is to evaluate the use of nonverbal cues in classroom instruction. Observational instruments will be used to analyze the teachers' gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. The procedure includes conducting two sessions across two different classrooms, with an observation form for systematic data collection and analysis.

Conducting interviews to gather student's insights throughout their involvement in the study's experimental procedure.

Results and Findings

Knowledge retention and Fluency in communication

Table 1. Comparison of Retention and Fluency between Class 1 and Class 2

	Knowledge retention	Fluency in communication
Class 1	90%	60%
Class 2	85%	50%

The research findings and student interviews of 02 classes indicate that non-verbal communication is essential in teaching Vietnamese learners foreign languages at the university level. In Class 1, nonverbal teaching methods were implemented; prophets of up to 90% of students recalled knowledge better, and on the other hand, 60% felt fluent in their communication. This predictably appeared in the student's responses as they highlighted that non-verbal cues assisted them to retain knowledge longer. For instance, a Class 1 student said: "Khi cô diễn tả từ vựng đó bằng hành động ... Tôi thấy dễ nhớ hơn rất nhiều". In the same way, student 4 indicated the example of "Air pollution" with the teacher's body language and hand gestures, making it more memorable for him/her.

Furthermore, the use of non-verbal cues further enhanced students' interest and participation in class. Student 2, Class 1, said he/she were impressed with how the teacher used non-verbal cues: "Điều này khiến em bị ấn tượng khá mạnh vì như thể cô thực sự đưa em vào một cuộc trò chuyện chân thực với người bản xứ." Student 5, Class 1 said that during the same time though non-verbal activities "không bị nhàm chán và buồn ngủ... làm tôi cảm thấy phấn khích hơn trong môn học." Not only did these nonverbal cues contribute to a positive climate for learning, but they also helped students become more natural communicators. Class 1, Student 3 mentioned it was also that the teacher smiled a lot and did a great job with gestures to make connections, entice feelings, help students feel confident in speaking during lessons, and bring happiness back into the classroom.

In contrast, where no non-verbal approaches were used in Class 2, only 85% said they retained knowledge well and just 50% felt fluent in communication. A few students seemed uninterested and had trouble focusing in class. Student 1, Class 2 said: "Thầy giáo chỉ ngồi tại bục giảng và giảng bài từ đầu đến cuối ... khiến mình cảm thấy khó tập trung và buồn ngủ." Student 2, Class 2 a level bored when the teacher quietly sat down and did not make lively gestures. That attacking passive voice in the course will kind of make them less casual. The lesson can be less effective or enthusiastic since we lack non-verbal skills and enthusiasm is reduced.

The interview results are reviewed, and it concludes that non-verbal expression helps students both to remember and communicate with more confidence; besides, it helps create better energy in the classroom. Such non-verbal ways bring students a richer learning experience and enhance the motivation and interaction from teachers, which in turn proves to be a breakthrough factor affecting significantly the efficacy and learning of interest in the foreign language process.

The impact of Nonverbal cues on learning outcomes

By observation, Class 1 learners exhibited more attention and excitement throughout the teacher's lectures than Class 2. 80% of the interviewed students said that nonverbal cues, including gestures and facial expressions from instructors, enhanced their comprehension of the lecture and significantly benefited their English learning. Specifically, 85% of Class 1 students demonstrated Fluency in communication, but just 20% of Class 2 students reached similar proficiency.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusions Drawn from the Research

Teaching English is the main goal of university education. Of course, body language plays an important role in students' foreign language acquisition. Body language accounts for 50% of daily conversations because our bodies are constantly sending us messages without even realizing it (Hua, 2018).

Nonverbal communication takes place in the classroom. Body language is a popular method for teaching and learning foreign languages. Foreign language teachers use body language for a number of purposes.

Using nonverbal cues in teaching a foreign language has a positive impact on communication during the foreign language learning process. It helps increase understanding between teachers and students. To take advantage of the full potential of nonverbal cues in teaching foreign languages, there needs to be a teacher training program on how to integrate and use nonverbal cues e proactively and creatively in the classroom.

Summarize the key findings

This paper has found that nonverbal communication is an effective means of communication and plays an important role in creating a positive learning environment and promoting cultural understanding. Using nonverbal cues is not only a means of conveying messages but also a factor in creating cultural connections, helping college students gain deeper insight into the language and culture they are studying, which avoids boredom. However, to maximize the role of nonverbal signals, teachers need training so they can use nonverbal cues most effectively in teaching foreign languages.

Recommendation to enhance teaching skills

Educators in Vietnam need training in the use of nonverbal communication in the classroom. Without that, they could perpetuate the old-fashioned belief that students only attend classes to listen while only professors are allowed to make gestures and glances.

Furthermore, educators should position themselves at the podium to enhance student engagement. Additionally, instructors can walk between groups during class activities to promote interaction. This will improve communication in the classroom, foster a more friendly mood, and motivate students to integrate into the learning environment.

The Ministry of Education and Training should prioritize the creation of a new book on speaking skills that fully explores and illustrates the concept of nonverbal communication within a multicultural context. If that happens, it will foster a good learning atmosphere, promote communication, and help students acquire language skills. Based on the analysis presented above, this essay expects that the Vietnamese government will increase its investment in education and training. Additionally, educators should modify their instructional techniques.

Students' participation

A shared cultural background in Vietnam often reinforces the bond between instructors and students. As a result, both instructors and students can accurately interpret each other's gestures and facial expressions and keep eye contact within the classroom setting. Since students often look up to their professors as role models, their influence will expand when teachers take responsibility in this area. Therefore, students' engagement in the presentation will enhance educational results.

Improving classroom management

Recently, many talented learners have liked to occupy the front row of the classroom since this is where the teacher often focuses their attention, resulting in their interactions being frequently acknowledged by the instructors. To foster a varied atmosphere and promote interaction, educators should contemplate arranging children to ensure a blend of varying talents and capabilities.

The class should be divided into groups to alternate participation in activities. After that, students will independently choose their seats, facilitating more interaction with the instructor. Teachers should also position themselves in the middle of the classroom to improve students' engagement. Besides, teachers can walk around the class to interact more with different kinds of students. These things can enhance communication in the classroom by fostering a more friendly atmosphere.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

In addition to the benefits of the research, we faced various limitations during the process. A notable limitation of this study is that it only focuses on students from one university. This may undermine the integrity and objectivity of the research results, making the overall model weak in several aspects. Secondly, the author of this study encountered difficulties in the allocation of research time. The limitation of time might hinder the ability to do comprehensive research and a more objective assessment of the study matter. Temporal limitations restrict the ability to observe the progression and modification of research variables throughout time.

The current study indicates several opportunities for more research. This study used a qualitative research methodology focused on collecting and analyzing data mostly based on the author's perspectives, experiences, and opinions of a select group of students, thus decreasing

the objectivity and accuracy of the research outcomes. A prospective direction for future study is to include quantitative approaches, which would provide a more thorough perspective and assess the sample's representativeness. Furthermore, future research should dedicate more resources to thorough studies, including additional data phases and expanding the study's scope. Research must be conducted across many countries and cultures to improve our understanding of how geography and culture influence the efficacy of nonverbal cues in foreign language education, as well as the generalizability of research results to other contexts.

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