Learners' Engagement in Meaning Negotiation and Classroom Interaction as a Function of Their Perceptions of Teachers' Instructional Communicative Behaviors

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Abstract

A significant share of classroom interaction occurs between teachers and language learners. Therefore, the individual characteristics of teachers could play facilitative or impeding roles thus encouraging or discouraging learners from getting engaged in interaction and meaning negotiation attempts when interacting with their teachers. Surprisingly however, this area has attracted scant attention. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring students' perceptions of their teachers' socio-communicative style and nonverbal immediacy in relation to their engagement in classroom teacher-learner interaction and frequency of meaning negotiation attempts in their interactions. To this aim, 72 students were randomly assigned to six classes of 12 taught by six teachers. Richmond, McCroskey and Johnson's (2003) nonverbal immediacy scale and McCroskey and Richmond's (1996) socio-communicative style scale were administered to students to tap into their perceptions of these two qualities of their teachers. Then the total amount of time the students were engaged in active interaction with the teachers and the number of meaning negotiation attempts employed by them were computed. The results of Correlations and Regression Analyses revealed significant relationships between teacher nonverbal immediacy, the two dimensions of socio-communicative style (Assertiveness and Responsiveness) and the students' willingness to engage in interaction and meaning negotiation with their teachers.

**Keywords:** Meaning Negotiation, Classroom Interaction, Nonverbal Immediacy, Socio-Communicative Style

1. Introduction

There is extensive evidence in second language acquisition (SLA) documenting the pivotal role played by comprehension of the input in triggering language acquisitional processes (e.g., Krashen, 1981; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Chapelle, 1998) – mostly, of course, as a potential starting point for and in association with the production of L2 forms (Gass, 1997; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Long, 1981; Swain, 1995; Xu, 2010; among others).

A significant part of this body of evidence stems from the theory of *Comprehensible Input* proposed by Krashen (1981). Arguing that mere exposure to language would not lead to acquisition, Krashen proposed comprehension of the input as the cornerstone of the acquisition process (Xu, 2010). Moreover, Chapelle (1998), in a similar way, recognizes the role of syntactic and semantic comprehension as a prerequisite for learners' integration of L2 forms into their linguistic system best shown in her modified Model of Basic Components in the SLA Process:
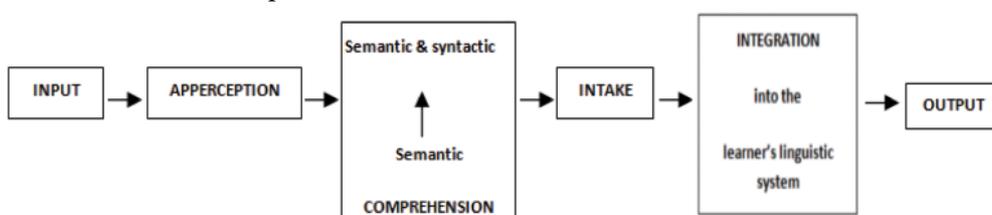
Adopted from Chapelle, (1998)

In her own words, "when comprehension takes place through a combination of semantic and syntactic processing, the linguistic characteristics of the input can become INTAKE, that is, comprehended language that holds the potential for developing the learners' linguistic system" (Chapelle, 1998, p. 23).

However, there are vast discrepancies regarding the mechanism by which comprehensibility of meaning comes by and, in fact, how comprehension of the

input and the learning of L2 forms are related is far from clear (Xu, 2010). One cogent explanation which attempts to shed light on this mechanism is put forward by Long's (1983) *Interaction Hypothesis* to which negotiation of meaning is central.

Through the study of attempts by native and non-native speakers to prevent or repair breakdowns in their communication, Long (1983) suggested that through interactional modifications between the interlocutors, input is rendered comprehensible. These interactional modifications are hypothesized to facilitate internalization and ultimately acquisition of L2 forms by providing the learners with opportunities to "notice the gap" between their command of the language and their interlocutor's command and then motivates them to improve their use of the linguistic forms to make them more target-like (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Xu, 2010).

Long (1983) posits that these interactions are not merely a source providing second language input, but are rather exchanges that allow the interlocutors to negotiate the meaning of the input which results in modifications to the complexity of the input and thus renders it more comprehensible.

This specific form of interaction that involves gap-noticing and repairing has come to be called *negotiation of meaning* in the literature. Given the importance this interactional negotiation of meaning has come to attract to itself in the literature, SLA researchers have been seeking to find variables likely to affect its overall incidence in the more competent/less competent learners' interactions. Task types, field of discourse, topic of discourse, language background, interlocutors' status are among the variables explored in this regard. However, as a significant part of classroom interaction occurs between teachers and language learners, the individual characteristics of

teachers –particularly instructional communicative behaviors– could play facilitative or impeding roles thus encouraging or discouraging learners from getting engaged in attempts at negotiation of meaning. Surprisingly however, this area has attracted scant attention. Therefore, the present study aimed at exploring students' perceptions of two aspects of their teachers' instructional communication, i.e., *socio-communicative style* and *nonverbal immediacy* in relation to their engagement in classroom teacher-learner interaction and meaning negotiation. The reason why these two characteristics have been selected is that they have been widely researched in relation to different aspects of students' learning in mainstream education but have not received a fair amount of attention in ELT contexts and still whether their effects are "differentially effective for different subject matters is not fully known" (McCluskey, 2009, p. 56).

Specifically, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1) Is there any significant relationship between EFL teachers' socio-communicative style (Assertiveness-Responsiveness), nonverbal immediacy and EFL learners' overall engagement in teacher-learner classroom interaction?

2) Is there any significant relationship between EFL teachers' socio-communicative style (Assertiveness-Responsiveness), nonverbal immediacy and the overall incidence of meaning negotiation attempts in teacher-learner interaction?

2. Teacher Instructional Communication

Instructional researchers have recognized the significance of communication in classroom contexts. While there have been some focus on both student-student communication, a considerable share of the research attention has been drawn

on how teachers communicate with their students and what effects their way of communication exerts on the students' motivation, cognitive learning, affective learning, empowerment, etc. Researchers have also attempted at factorizing Teacher Instructional Communication into various dimensions which are thought to affect their communication with their clientele – the students – in varying degrees. Teachers' socio-communicative style and nonverbal immediacy, which are the focus of investigation in the present study, are two of these dimensions which have received a fair share of treatment in instructional research in mainstream education but, as pointed out earlier, to a large extent ignored in ELT contexts.

2.1. Teacher Nonverbal Immediacy

An individual's nonverbal communication can exercise a significant impact on various affective dimensions of his/her communication with other people, including power, synchrony, and immediacy. Despite the first two components, immediacy has come to be recognized as the most influential aspect of nonverbal communication and has come to receive its fair share of investigation (Slane & Leak, 1979).

The construct of immediacy was originally advanced by Mehrabian (1971) in his early research on interpersonal aspects of communication. The concept has its roots in the approach-avoidance theory of social psychology which has as its principal tenet the principal conviction that "people approach what they like and avoid what they don't like" (Mehrabian, 1981, p. 22). Specifically, the concept refers to those nonverbal aspects of communication such as appropriate "eye contact, the use of gestures, movement about the classroom, smiling, vocal varieties, the use of humor" (Hsu, 2010, p. 2), tonality, positive head nods, close physical distances, vocal pace, tenseness of the body, relaxed

body position, proximity and trunk and limb movements (Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990).

The introduction of the concept into instructional communication and with reference to the teachers' communication with students was first pioneered by Anderson (1979). Anderson defined nonverbal immediacy as teacher behaviors that enhance warmth, closeness, and availability for communication and accordingly reduce psychological distance between the teachers and the students. Additionally, she hypothesized that the teacher immediacy promotes student affect, behavioral commitment and cognitive learning.

After Anderson's introduction of the concept into teaching/learning contexts, it has come to be recognized as associated with a number of important educational variables including student classroom attendance (Rocca, 2004), students' increased motivation (Christophel, 1990; Hsu, 2010, Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990), end-of-term motivation (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006), affective and cognitive aspects of learning (McCluskey, 2009; Tabasco, 2007), students' degree of satisfaction (Shu-Fang & Aust, 2008) as well as student perceptions of teacher power (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986) and clarity (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001).

The overall conclusions drawn from studies investigating the link between teacher immediacy and the educational variables point to the positive impact of the construct in instructional contexts.

2.2. Teacher Socio-communicative Style

Socio-communicative style is considered one of the two basic components of communication competence, the other component being socio-communicative orientation (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Socio-communicative style is

defined as others' perceptions of a communicator which lead observers to "gain insight into the personality of individuals by taking note of their characteristic communication behaviors" (p. 109) as opposed to socio-communicative orientation which reflects one's own perceptions of these communication-related behaviors.

Socio-communicative style has two major components: assertiveness and responsiveness. Assertiveness, as one of the components of SCS, refers to a person's ability to employ appropriate communication to expresses himself or herself in ways that do not compromise others' rights and to stand up for and defend his/her rights and positions without necessarily suppressing others' (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). It is indeed defined basically in terms of dispositional social insight in the field of social psychology, meaning that, in interpersonal communicative encounters, assertive individuals often tend to communicate their intent, thoughts, ideas, and feelings effectively and in a way that respects and regards the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of others (Elliott & Gramling, 1990).

Responsiveness, as the other aspect of SCS, refers to "sensitivity to the communication of others and a willingness to adapt one's own communication accordingly" (Brewster, 2004, p. 6). A series of attributes are usually associated with individuals characterized as responsive interlocutors which include empathy, friendliness, gentleness and warmth (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992; Rubin & Martin, 1994; Thomas, 1994). These people often tend to care about others, to be sincere in their communication efforts (Thomas, 1994), and tend to employ empathetic communication behaviors. In sharp contrast to these people, individuals who are perceived to be nonresponsive communicators often fail to effectively communicate their care and concern for others and may, therefore, communicate aggressively (Brewster, 2004).

Like teacher immediacy, teacher socio-communicative style has also received its fair share of investigation in educational psychology and instructional communication. Teacher immediacy (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994), teacher clarity (Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997), teacher credibility (Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997), students' trust in the teacher (Wooten & McCroskey, 1996), students' interpersonal motives for communicating (Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002), are, among others, some of the variables investigated with reference to students' perceptions of their teachers' socio-communicative style.

3. The Present Study

Given that teachers' personal variables have not been adequately probed in relation to the amount of interaction students choose to engage in with them and the overall incidence of negotiation attempts students engage in upon interacting with their teachers, the present study aims to investigate how students' perceptions of their teachers' nonverbal immediacy and socio-communicative style may affect the rate at which students get involved in interaction and meaning negotiation attempts with their teachers.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants of the study were a total of 72 intermediate students randomly assigned to six groups of 12 taught by six different teachers with varying degrees of self-reported nonverbal immediacy and assertiveness/responsiveness as the two dimensions of socio-communicative style. The students were both male and female and their age ranged from 13 to 24 with an average of 19.5 years. The

teachers were approximately equal in terms of age, length of service and were all male.

4.2. Instrumentation

4.2.1. Nonverbal Immediacy Scale – Observer Report (NIS-O)

Students' perceptions of their teacher's nonverbal immediacy behaviors were assessed through the administration of the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale–Observer Report (NIS-O) designed by Richmond, McCroskey, and Johnson (2003). The measure includes 26 items, 13 positively worded and 13 negatively worded, presented with a 5-point Likert-type response format by which the students are required to report the frequency of certain immediacy behaviors on behalf of their instructor (1=never, 5=very often). The scale yields a range from 26 to 130, with lower scores showing lower degrees of nonverbal immediacy and higher scores indicating stronger degrees of nonverbal immediacy. The Cronbach Alpha reliability of the measure with the present sample was calculated to be .79 which is an acceptable index of reliability.

4.2.2. Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure

Students' perceptions of their teacher's socio-communicative style encompassing the two dimensions of assertiveness and responsiveness were determined using Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure developed by Richmond & McCroskey (1990). The instrument includes twenty items ten items of which measure assertiveness and ten other items measure responsiveness. On the scale the items are mixed, but they have been found to generate two separate, uncorrelated factors (Martin & Anderson, 1996;

Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). The present study yielded Cronbach alphas of .86 for assertiveness and .89 for responsiveness.

5. Data Collection, Procedure and Data Analysis

The study aimed to follow two purposes: the amount of time students spend on classroom interaction with their teachers and the number of meaning negotiation attempts they got involved in in their interaction with the teachers. To meet the first purpose of the study, three one-hour class sessions were video-recorded. The main activity carried out in these sessions was speaking based on opinion exchange tasks around three topics familiar to the students: *the main problems of their city, their future dreams and prospective plans, the importance of nutrition in one's health.* To analyze the data, the videos were watched and each student's turns of talk with the teacher were calculated and summed up to obtain the total amount of time of each student's interaction. To probe the second purpose of the study, each student got involved in a 15-minute conversation with his teacher in which the teacher narrated a recently watched movie (*The Pacifier by Adam Shankman*) to him/her and he/she was told that he would have to retell it to other classmates of his in full details including the events of the films, description of the personality of the characters, their relation to each other, etc. The students were told that they could make any endeavor to understand the teachers' narrative account of the film. These conversations were audiotaped. To analyze the data for this part, the students' parts of audiotaped conversations were thoroughly transcribed and separated into utterances. The students' utterances which initiated negotiation of meaning with the teacher were identified. Following earlier studies in this stream of research, the researcher, specifically looked for utterances containing *comprehension checks, clarification requests,*

confirmation checks, feedback requests and misunderstanding remarks. At the end of the entire term, the two measures of teacher Nonverbal Immediacy Scale – Observer Report (NIS-O) and Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure were administered to the students to fill out. The reason for this was that the researcher intended to avoid the students' over-reporting their perceptions of their teachers while they were teaching them for fear that they might get to see their students' perceptions of them.

6. Results

As mentioned earlier, the purpose behind the study was two-fold: investigating the relationship between EFL teachers' socio-communicative style, nonverbal immediacy and EFL learners' engagement in classroom interaction and the relationship of these constructs with EFL learners' negotiation attempts. Prior to embarking on the actual analysis of the relationship between the variables mentioned, the descriptive statistics for them are presented below:

Table 1. The descriptive statistics for the variables of the study

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Amount of Interaction (in minutes)	72	9.45	6.08
Number of Negotiation Attempts	72	8.08	2.82
Nonverbal Immediacy	72	78.84	25.40
Responsiveness	72	31.88	11.51
Assertiveness	72	30.27	10.58

After computing the descriptive statistics for the variables of the study, a multiple regression analysis was run to analyze the link between the teachers' socio-communicative style, nonverbal immediacy and the overall amount of interaction EFL student participants chose to engage in with their teachers in their classrooms. The results follow:

Table 2. The Regression results (Overall Classroom Interaction)
Variables Entered/Removed [b]

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
	Assertiveness		
	Responsiveness		Enter
	Nonverbal Immediacy		

a. All requested variables entered
b. Dependent Variable: Amount of Interaction (in minutes)

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Deviation of Estimate
1	.939 [a]	.882	.877	2.13551

a) Predictors (Constant): Assertiveness, Responsiveness, Non-verbal Immediacy

Table 4. Correlations of the Variables with EFL Learners' Interaction

	Variables	EFL Learners' Interaction
Pearson	Assertiveness	.798
Correlation	Responsiveness	.936
	Non-Verbal immediacy	.886

As revealed by the results reported in table 3 (Adjusted R Square = .877), the two dimensions of socio-communicative style (Assertiveness and Responsiveness) and nonverbal immediacy can significantly predict the amount of interaction EFL students choose to engage in with their teachers. Also, when looked at it from a correlational perspective, there are robust correlations – as reported in table 4 – between each of the dimensions of socio-communicative style and nonverbal immediacy and EFL learners' amount of interaction.

As a second step in analyzing the data, the link between the teachers' socio-communicative style, nonverbal immediacy and the overall incidence of

meaning negotiation attempts by EFL student participants upon interacting with their teachers was probed. The results follow:

Table 5. The Regression results (Overall Incidence of Meaning Negotiation)
Variables Entered/Removed [(b)]

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
	Assertiveness		
	Responsiveness		Enter
	Nonverbal Immediacy		
	c. All requested variables entered		
	d. Dependent Variable: Frequency of Negotiation Attempts		

Table 6. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Deviation of Estimate
1	.918 [(a)]	.843	.836	1.14272

b) Predictors (Constant): Assertiveness, Responsiveness, Non-verbal Immediacy

Table 7. Correlations of the Variables with EFL Learners' Interaction

	Variables	EFL Learners' Interaction
Pearson	Assertiveness	.764
Correlation	Responsiveness	.915
	Non-Verbal immediacy	.881

Again as revealed by the results reported in table 6 (Adjusted R Square = .836), the two dimensions of socio-communicative style (Assertiveness and Responsiveness) and nonverbal immediacy can significantly predict the overall incidence of meaning negotiation attempts EFL students choose to engage in upon interacting with their teachers. Also, when correlations between each of the dimensions of socio-communicative style and nonverbal immediacy and EFL learners' frequency of meaning negotiation attempts is looked at it from a

correlational perspective, there are robust correlations between them– as reported in table 4.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

The principal objective of the present study was to probe if there is a significant association between EFL teachers' instructional communicative behaviors – nonverbal immediacy and socio-communicative style (assertiveness and responsiveness)– and their students' engagement in overall classroom interaction with their teachers and the number of meaning negotiation attempts displayed by the students in interacting with their teachers.

The results of the study, as reported earlier, attest to the significant potential of these teacher-related characteristics in predicting meaning negotiation attempts and overall interaction of the students. These results are in line with the body of research studies carried out outside ELT contexts which indicate a positive effect of these teacher-related characteristics on the students' overall affective and cognitive learning, increased motivation to learn, level of satisfaction, etc. (Wooten & McCroskey, 1996; Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002, Rocca, 2004; Christophel, 1990; Hsu, 2010, Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990; McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006; McCluskey, 2009; Tabasco, 2007; Shu-Fang & Aust, 2008, among others).

The findings of the study could offer implications for EFL teaching programs. First, given the importance attached to classroom interaction in promoting EFL students' language learning and the importance of meaning negotiation attempts in rendering the input comprehensible and, in this way, facilitating language acquisitional process (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Xu, 2010, Tuan & Nhu, 2010), the issue of providing every language classroom with a teacher possessing adequate levels of nonverbal immediacy and appropriate

socio-communicative style seems reasonably urgent. When interacting with more competent interlocutors, EFL learners can check on their comprehension of their interlocutor's speech. Being less proficient, they usually come to face comprehension difficulties which become "an impetus for learners to recognize the inadequacy of their inter-language system" (Xu, 2010, p. 69) and allow them to notice that linguistic modifications of the message are required on the part of their interlocutors (Varonis & Gass, 1985). These linguistic modifications draw the learners' attention to the form of the message which might otherwise go unnoticed. In this way, interaction and modification play a central role in enhancing the pace of language acquisition for the learners who ask for modifications of the message on the part of their more competent interlocutors.

But, as mentioned earlier, not all learners negotiate meaning by asking for modifications of the message on behalf of their interlocutors. There are always impeding factors involved ranging from personal inhibitions to task characteristics and the interlocutors' status and characteristics. The results of this study thus show that an immediate, responsive and assertive EFL teacher can encourage students' engagement in both overall interaction with the teacher –as the more competent interlocutor– and motivates the learners to negotiate meaning and ask for clarification, confirmation, or reiteration of what their interlocutors have expressed, so they can adjust their message by modifying the their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary choice toward greater comprehensibility. These opportunities may not be available in a non-immediate, nonresponsive and nonassertive teachers' class and therefore students may not find as many opportunities for advancing their acquisition of the language as in an immediate, responsive and assertive teacher's class.

Promoting teacher characteristics such as immediacy and socio-communicative style should be a top priority in EFL teacher educational programs alongside other more profession-oriented and educational priorities. As Thomas et al. (1994) stated, "...it is theoretically justified to teach pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in immediate behaviors which will increase their basic communication competence and can be expected to result in more student affective and cognitive learning" (p. 1). What is missing in ELT teacher education programs is focus on "personhood" variables at the expense of exclusive focus on teaching techniques, strategies, professional development initiatives, etc. The results of the present study suggest that variables which stem from the integrity of a teacher – first and foremost as a person not as an educator – could possibly be as important as the skills, strategies, techniques which they are usually taught in pre-service and in-service teacher preparation and development programs.

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