

## EFL University Students' Perceptions of the Role of Teacher Non-Verbal Communication in Enhancing Classroom Comprehension

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students regarding the role of teacher non-verbal communication (NVC) in enhancing their classroom comprehension. While the pedagogical importance of NVC is widely acknowledged, there is a lack of learner-centered data on how specific non-verbal behaviors are perceived in practice. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, with a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 100 undergraduate EFL learners at Gharian University, Libya. The instrument measured general perceptions of NVC's effectiveness and the specific helpfulness of ten distinct non-verbal cues using a 5-point Likert scale.

The results indicated that while students hold a moderately positive overall view of teacher NVC ( $M = 3.51$ ), they draw a clear distinction between different types of cues. Affective and relational behaviors, such as "smiling to show encouragement" ( $M = 3.74$ ) and "making eye contact with the whole class" ( $M = 3.54$ ), were perceived as the most beneficial. Conversely, several common instructional gestures, including "frowning slightly" ( $M = 2.84$ ) and "raising eyebrows" ( $M = 2.82$ ), were rated as neutral or slightly unhelpful. No statistically significant differences in these perceptions were found based on gender or English proficiency level.

The findings suggest that for EFL learners, the primary function of teacher NVC is to foster a supportive and affectively positive learning environment, rather than merely to transmit instructional information. This research highlights the pedagogical importance of teacher self-awareness and the need for teacher training programs to emphasize the conscious use of relational non-verbal behaviors to build rapport and reduce learner anxiety.

**Keywords:** Non-verbal communication (NVC), EFL (English as a Foreign language), Student perceptions, Classroom comprehension, Teacher-student interaction, Affective communication, Libya

## الملخص

تقصّت هذه الدراسة تصورات طلاب الجامعة الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) حول دور التواصل غير اللفظي (NVC) للمعلم في تعزيز فهمهم داخل الفصل الدراسي. في حين أن الأهمية التربوية للتواصل غير اللفظي معترف بها على نطاق واسع، إلا أن هناك نقصاً في البيانات التي ترتكز على المتعلم حول كيفية إدراك سلوكيات غير لفظية معينة في الممارسة العملية. تم استخدام تصميم مسح كمي مقطعي، مع استبيان منظم تم توزيعه على عينة من 100 من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مرحلة البكالوريوس في جامعة غريان، ليبيا. وقامت الأداة التصورات العامة لفعالية التواصل غير اللفظي، والفائدة المحددة لعشر إشارات غير لفظية مميزة باستخدام مقياس ليكرت الخماسي.

أشارت النتائج إلى أنه في حين أن الطلاب لديهم وجهة نظر إيجابية بشكل عام ومعتدل تجاه التواصل غير اللفظي للمعلم (المتوسط = 3.51)، إلا أنهم يميزون بوضوح بين أنواع مختلفة من الإشارات. فالسلوكيات العاطفية المتعلقة بالعلاقات، مثل "الابتسام لأظهار التشجيع" (المتوسط = 3.74) و "التواصل البصري مع الفصل بأكمله" (المتوسط = 3.54)، اعتُبرت الأكثر فائدة. وعلى العكس من ذلك، تم تصنيف العديد من الإيماءات التعليمية الشائعة، بما في ذلك "التجهم قليلاً" (المتوسط = 2.84) و "رفع الحاجين" (المتوسط = 2.82)، على أنها محايدة أو غير مفيدة إلى حد ما. لم يتم العثور على فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في هذه التصورات بناءً على الجنس أو مستوى الكفاءة في اللغة الإنجليزية.

تشير النتائج إلى أن الوظيفة الأساسية للتواصل غير اللفظي للمعلم بالنسبة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية هي تعزيز بيئة تعليمية داعمة وإيجابية من الناحية العاطفية، بدلاً من مجرد نقل المعلومات التعليمية. يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الأهمية التربوية للوعي الذاتي للمعلم وال الحاجة إلى برامج تدريب المعلمين للتأكيد على الاستخدام الواعي للسلوكيات غير لفظية العلاّقية لبناء الألفة وتقليل قلق المتعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التواصل غير اللفظي (NVC) ، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) ، تصورات الطلاب ، الفهم الصفي ، التفاعل بين المعلم والطالب ، التواصل العاطفي ، ليبيا.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

In the landscape of 21st-century education, the role of English as a global lingua franca is undisputed, making its effective instruction a paramount objective for educational systems worldwide. The primary goal of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is to cultivate communicative competence, enabling learners to navigate a variety of academic, professional, and social situations. However, the path to this competence is frequently impeded by challenges in learner comprehension. For many students, achieving genuine understanding that goes beyond the literal translation of words to the grasp of intended meaning remains a significant hurdle. This challenge calls for a pedagogical focus not just on *what* is taught, but on *how* the learning environment is constructed and managed.

Effective pedagogy recognizes that communication in the classroom is not merely a linguistic transaction but a holistic interpersonal event. Central to this event is the quality of teacher-student interaction, which is widely considered the "basis of L2 learning" (Hanum, n.d., citing Brown, 2015). A growing body of research establishes that the nature of these interactions profoundly influences the entire educational climate, impacting key student outcomes. Studies from diverse contexts consistently demonstrate a significant positive correlation between constructive teacher-student interaction and both student motivation (Rahman et

al., 2020) and academic achievement (Munir et al., 2021). This interactional dynamic, therefore, is not a peripheral aspect of teaching but a central mechanism that can either foster or inhibit the very comprehension and engagement that EFL instruction aims to build.

### 1.2 The Communicative Power of the Non-Verbal Channel

While verbal exchange forms the explicit architecture of classroom instruction, it represents only a fraction of the communicative reality. Interaction is a dual-channeled process, comprising both verbal and non-verbal messages, with the latter often carrying the greater weight of meaning (Senowarsito et al., 2012). Non-verbal communication (NVC)—a broad term encompassing kinesics (body movement and gestures), oculics (eye contact), and paralanguage (tone and intonation)—provides the essential context, emotion, and emphasis that give words their true significance. Indeed, research suggests that the vast majority of meaning in face-to-face encounters is conveyed non-verbally, with some studies estimating that as much as 93% of a message's impact comes from non-verbal cues (Pratolo, 2019; Suleiman et al., 2019).

In the EFL classroom, this non-verbal channel is a powerful pedagogical resource (Lopez & Verdugo, 2010). Teacher NVC functions to complement, regulate, and at times even replace verbal messages, serving as a vital tool for enhancing student comprehension. A simple gesture can clarify a complex vocabulary item, an encouraging smile can build student confidence, and direct eye contact can manage classroom focus more effectively than a verbal command. For the EFL learner, who is often navigating the cognitive load of a new linguistic system, these non-verbal signals offer "salient clues" and "additional information"

that can bridge comprehension gaps and make the language more accessible (Senowarsito et al., 2012). The teacher's body is, in effect, a constant source of comprehensible input.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite this well-documented communicative significance, the role of non-verbal communication is frequently an implicit, rather than explicit, component of EFL pedagogy. While teachers communicate non-verbally by necessity, this powerful channel is often employed unconsciously (Senowarsito et al., 2012) and its effective use is often neglected in teacher training and professional development (Pratolo, 2019; Ahmed, 2025). This oversight creates a critical pedagogical gap: a disconnect between the non-verbal cues teachers transmit and the messages their students ultimately receive (Suleiman et al., 2019).

When the use of body language is not deliberate or informed, it carries the potential to hinder rather than help. Ambiguous gestures, culturally misunderstood signals, or a mismatch between verbal and non-verbal messages can generate confusion and undermine a learner's confidence. Consequently, the central problem is a lack of empirical understanding regarding the perceived effectiveness of teacher NVC from the learners' perspective. It is not sufficient to assume that a teacher's body language is a beneficial aid; it is essential to investigate whether EFL students actually interpret these non-verbal cues as a clear and positive tool for enhancing their comprehension. Without this understanding, we risk overlooking a key factor in the success—or failure—of classroom communication.

#### 1.4 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this quantitative study is to investigate university-level EFL students' perceptions of the role of teacher non-verbal communication in enhancing classroom comprehension. By systematically collecting and analyzing learner perspectives, this research aims to move beyond anecdotal claims and provide empirical data on the perceived value of this communicative channel.

Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. RQ1: To what extent do university-level EFL students perceive their teachers' non-verbal communication (hand gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact) as a positive factor in their overall classroom comprehension?
2. RQ2: Which specific types of non-verbal communication are perceived by EFL students as most beneficial for enhancing their comprehension?
3. RQ3: Are there statistically significant differences in these perceptions based on key student demographic variables, such as English proficiency level or academic major?

#### 1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this research are poised to offer significant contributions on practical, pedagogical, and theoretical levels. Practically, for EFL teachers, this study will provide valuable, data-driven insights into the learner's experience. By illuminating which specific non-verbal behaviors students perceive as most helpful for comprehension, the results can empower educators to move from an unconscious use of body language to a more

conscious, intentional, and effective pedagogical practice. Understanding the student perspective can help teachers refine their non-verbal strategies to better support comprehension and build a more positive and communicative classroom atmosphere.

On a pedagogical level, this research provides empirical justification for the inclusion of NVC training in teacher education and professional development programs. The study's findings can serve as evidence to curriculum designers and teacher trainers that non-verbal competence is not merely an auxiliary "soft skill" but a core component of effective EFL instruction, as called for in the literature (Pratolo, 2019). By grounding this recommendation in learner-centered data, the study strengthens the argument for equipping pre-service and in-service teachers with the skills to use body language deliberately and effectively.

Finally, this study contributes to the scholarly literature in applied linguistics and second language acquisition by centering the learner's perspective. While much research focuses on analyzing teacher behaviors or theoretical models of communication, this study privileges the voice of the student, treating them as active interpreters of classroom interaction. It addresses the identified gap (Suleiman et al., 2019) by providing quantitative data on perception, a critical factor that mediates the relationship between a teacher's actions and a student's learning outcomes.

#### 1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of this investigation is intentionally focused on the perceptions of adult learners of English within a university setting in [Your Country/Region]. The study specifically examines the role of the teacher's non-verbal communication as perceived by their students; it does

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not extend to an analysis of peer-to-peer non-verbal interaction or the teachers' self-perceptions.

While these parameters provide necessary focus, the study is subject to several methodological limitations that must be acknowledged to properly contextualize the findings.

First, this study relies on self-report data collected via a quantitative questionnaire. As such, it measures students' *perceptions* of their comprehension and the helpfulness of NVC, not an objective, externally-validated measure of their actual comprehension levels. The findings, therefore, reflect the subjective reality of the learner's experience, which is valuable in its own right, but should not be interpreted as a direct measure of learning outcomes.

Second, the findings may have limited generalizability. The sample is drawn from a specific demographic (university students) within a particular cultural and educational context. As the interpretation of non-verbal cues can be culturally specific (Pratolo, 2019), the results may not be directly applicable to other EFL populations, such as young learners, business professionals, or students in different countries.

Finally, the research design is correlational and not causal. The study can identify statistically significant relationships—for instance, between the perceived use of a certain gesture and a higher reported level of comprehension. However, it cannot establish a cause-and-effect link. A positive correlation does not prove that effective NVC causes better comprehension, only that the two variables are associated. Other confounding variables, such as a student's intrinsic motivation or prior positive experiences with a teacher, may also influence the

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results. These limitations do not invalidate the study's findings, but rather highlight promising avenues for future experimental research.

#### 1.7 Definition of Key Terms

##### Non-Verbal Communication (NVC)

Refers to the transmission of messages or signals through a non-linguistic platform. As defined within the scope of this research, NVC encompasses the observable paralinguistic and kinesic cues employed by the teacher during instruction, including gestures, posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movement (Senowarsito et al., 2012). It is the non-lexical component of classroom interaction.

##### EFL Learner

An individual studying English in a non-Anglophone country where English is not the primary language of daily life and commerce. For this study, the term specifically refers to students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs at the university level who are receiving English language instruction as part of their formal academic curriculum.

##### Classroom Comprehension

Within the context of this study, classroom comprehension is not defined as an objectively measured cognitive outcome (e.g., via test scores). Instead, it is defined operationally as a learner has self-reported perception of his or her own understanding. Which students believe or feel they have successfully grasped the meaning of instructional content, teacher explanations, and task requirements during a lesson to the degree.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework: A Sociocultural View of Learning

To adequately frame the role of interaction in the EFL classroom, this study is grounded in the principles of Sociocultural Learning Theory, a framework primarily associated with the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky. In contrast to theories that view learning as a purely individual cognitive process, Vygotsky (1978) posited that learning is fundamentally a social and dialogic activity. The core tenet of this perspective is that all higher cognitive functions originate in social interaction. Learning appears twice: first on the social level, between people (interpsychological), and later on the individual level, inside the learner (intrapsychological). This means that knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to student, but is actively co-constructed through shared experience and communication (ELIS Research Digest, 2015).

Central to Vygotsky's framework is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In the classroom, the teacher acts as the 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO), whose primary role is to provide carefully calibrated support, or "scaffolding," that enables the learner to successfully operate within their ZPD and achieve a level of understanding they could not reach alone.

From a sociocultural perspective, therefore, the quality of interaction between the MKO and the learner is of paramount importance. If learning is scaffolded through communication,

then the clarity and effectiveness of that communication directly determine the potential for learning. This communication, however, is a holistic, multi-channel phenomenon in which the non-verbal stream often carries the bulk of pragmatic and affective meaning. Thus, the teacher's body language is not merely a performance; it is a critical mediational tool that helps to co-construct knowledge and guide the learner through the ZPD. An unclear gesture, an encouraging nod, or a confusing facial expression can be as instrumental to the scaffolding process as any verbal explanation. This theoretical lens requires us to view teacher non-verbal communication not as an incidental behavior, but as a central mechanism in the co-construction of language comprehension.

## 2.2 The Primacy of the Non-Verbal Channel in Communication

While language forms the explicit content of classroom discourse, a substantial body of research in communication studies indicates that the verbal channel carries surprisingly little of the overall semantic weight in face-to-face interactions. The work of Mehrabian (1971), cited frequently in the literature (e.g., Senowarsito et al., 2012; Ahmed, 2025), famously proposed that the impact of a message is overwhelmingly non-verbal. His findings suggested that a mere 7% of meaning is derived from the words themselves, while 38% is conveyed through paralanguage (tone of voice, intonation) and 55% through kinesics (facial expressions and other body language). While the exact percentages are context-dependent, the underlying principle is widely accepted: in any interpersonal exchange, the non-verbal channel is the primary carrier of meaning, with some researchers asserting that up to 93% of communication is non-verbal (Pratolo, 2019; Suleiman et al., 2019).

The primacy of the non-verbal channel stems from its diverse and essential functions, which run in parallel to the spoken word. Non-verbal communication serves to complement and reinforce verbal messages, such as when a teacher's encouraging smile accompanies the phrase "Good work." It can also substitute for verbal communication entirely, as a simple nod can replace the word "yes." Furthermore, NVC is critical for regulating the flow of interaction; for example, a teacher can use eye contact to manage turn-taking or hold a hand up to signal a pause. Most critically, non-verbal cues can contradict the verbal message, as when a teacher says "I'm not upset" while frowning and crossing their arms (Pratolo, 2019).

This potential for contradiction reveals the most powerful aspect of body language: its perceived authenticity. Because many non-verbal signals are generated subconsciously, they are often seen as a more reliable indicator of a person's true affective state than their carefully constructed verbal utterances (Senowarsito et al., 2012). For students, the teacher's "wordless messages" (Senowarsito et al., 2012) can therefore be more impactful than their words. This underscores the necessity of viewing NVC not as an accessory to teaching, but as a foundational element of the entire communicative and pedagogical process.

### 2.3 Teacher NVC as a Pedagogical Tool in the EFL Classroom

Within the specific context of foreign language education, the teacher's non-verbal communication (NVC) transcends its general interactive functions to become a direct pedagogical tool. For the EFL learner, who is simultaneously processing new phonology, lexis, and syntax, the non-verbal channel offers a vital stream of comprehensible input that can support and clarify verbal instruction. An effective EFL educator, therefore, is one who consciously utilizes their body as a "teaching resource" (Lopez & Verdugo, 2010) to create a

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more effective and supportive learning environment. The literature identifies several key pedagogical functions of teacher NVC in this setting.

First and foremost, NVC is instrumental in clarifying and scaffolding linguistic meaning. When faced with unfamiliar vocabulary or complex grammatical structures, learners can experience a high cognitive load. Teacher gestures are a powerful tool for bypassing the need for translation, creating a direct link between a word and its meaning. For example, a teacher can demonstrate the meaning of action verbs (e.g., "to throw," "to write"), prepositions (e.g., "above," "under"), or adjectives (e.g., indicating "large" or "small" with their hands) far more efficiently than with a verbal definition alone (Pratolo, 2019). This use of kinesics is a core principle of methodologies like Total Physical Response (TPR) and serves to make abstract linguistic concepts concrete and memorable (Lopez & Verdugo, 2010).

Second, teacher NVC is a primary mechanism for managing the classroom environment. Strategic use of eye contact can command the attention of an entire class, signal turn-taking, or gently redirect a distracted student, often more subtly and less disruptively than a verbal intervention. A teacher's posture—standing erect and moving purposefully through the space—can establish a sense of presence and control, while an open and relaxed stance can make them appear more approachable. These non-verbal cues create and maintain the orderly and focused atmosphere necessary for language learning to occur (Pratolo, 2019).

Finally, NVC is crucial for building rapport and providing affective support. The emotional climate of a classroom significantly impacts a learner's willingness to take communicative risks, a necessity for language acquisition. Teachers who employ positive facial expressions, such as smiling and nodding, convey warmth, patience, and encouragement, which can

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reduce learner anxiety (Sutji et al., 2017). This positive non-verbal feedback fosters a "motivating climate" (ELIS Research Digest, 2015) and contributes to students' overall "learning comfort" (Ahmad et al., 2017). By demonstrating through their body language that they are supportive and engaged, teachers help to lower the "affective filter," making students more receptive to learning. The conscious application of these non-verbal strategies is therefore a hallmark of a communicatively competent and effective language teacher.

#### 2.4 The Learner's Perspective and the Research Gap

Ultimately, the efficacy of any pedagogical tool, including non-verbal communication, is not determined by the teacher's intention but by the learner's reception and interpretation. The student is not a passive recipient of information but an active co-constructor of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners are constantly "reading" their teacher's non-verbal signals to gauge mood, sincerity, enthusiasm, and expectations, and these interpretations directly shape their own affective and cognitive responses, such as their sense of "learning comfort" (Ahmad et al., 2017) and their overall motivation. Studies show that students themselves employ a wide range of body language in response to teacher talk, demonstrating their active role in the non-verbal dialogue of the classroom (Sutji et al., 2017). The student's perception is, therefore, the critical mediating factor between the teacher's action and the learning outcome.

Despite the centrality of this perceptual link, a review of the literature reveals a significant gap. While many studies are descriptive or prescriptive, detailing the types of NVC teachers should use (e.g., Lopez & Verdugo, 2010; Pratolo, 2019), there is a comparative scarcity of quantitative research that systematically investigates how EFL learners *perceive* the

effectiveness of these non-verbal cues on their comprehension. This creates what Suleiman et al. (2019) identify as a "gap" between the messages teachers believe they are sending and the messages students are actually receiving. Without privileging the learner's perspective, our understanding of non-verbal pedagogy remains incomplete and overly reliant on teacher-centric assumptions.

Therefore, this review has established that learning is fundamentally interactional, that interaction is predominantly non-verbal, and that teacher NVC functions as a key pedagogical tool. However, it has also revealed a critical need for empirical, learner-centered research to bridge the gap between teacher action and student perception. To move beyond theory and prescription, it is essential to ask the learners themselves what they find helpful. The present study is designed to address this gap by systematically investigating EFL students' perceptions of how their teachers' body language enhances their classroom comprehension.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

To address the research questions concerning the extent and nature of student perceptions, this study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This approach was deliberately chosen for its suitability in measuring attitudes and identifying perceptual patterns across a defined population at a single point in time. A quantitative methodology is essential for answering research questions related to the extent to which students find NVC beneficial (RQ1) and for statistically comparing the relative importance of different non-verbal cues (RQ2). By collecting numerical data via a structured questionnaire, this design

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allows for the identification of generalizable trends that extend beyond qualitative or anecdotal insights.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional survey framework is the most direct and efficient method for capturing a "snapshot" of current student perceptions. As the study is focused on the subjective, self-reported experiences of learners, a survey instrument is the ideal tool for accessing these internal states. This non-experimental design is therefore precisely aligned with the study's purpose: to describe the phenomenon of perceived NVC effectiveness as it currently exists and to explore correlational relationships between variables (RQ3) without experimental manipulation.

### 3.2 Participants

The target population for this study was comprised of undergraduate students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses at Gharian University in Gharian, Libya. This population was selected as it represents a key demographic of adult learners engaged in formal English language instruction within a higher education context.

A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed for participant recruitment. Intact EFL classes, representing various academic departments and proficiency levels, were invited to participate based on their availability and the instructor's willingness to grant access for data collection. This strategy was chosen for its feasibility and for its ability to provide access to a concentrated group of the target population within the logistical constraints of the research project. All participants were provided with a consent form

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detailing the study's purpose and assuring them of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

The final sample consisted of  $N = 100$  undergraduate students who voluntarily returned a valid and complete questionnaire. The demographic profile of the participant sample is detailed in Table 3.1.

The sample was predominantly female, composed of 78 female participants (78%) and 22 male participants (22%). In terms of self-reported English proficiency, the majority of students identified as Intermediate ( $n = 68$ , 68%), with smaller cohorts identifying as Advanced ( $n = 18$ , 18%) and Beginner ( $n = 14$ , 14%). The participants were drawn from a diverse range of academic disciplines, with the largest contingent consisting of students from the Faculties of Arts, Humanities, and Education (70%), followed by students from Sciences and Engineering (17%), and Business and Economics (13%). This sample was deemed appropriate and sufficiently diverse to address the research questions of the study.

**Table 3.1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Participant Sample (N=100)*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subgroup</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	22	22%
	Female	78	78%
<b>Proficiency Level</b>	Beginner	14	14%
	Intermediate	68	68%
	Advanced	18	18%
<b>Field of Study</b>	Arts, Humanities & Education*	70	70%
	Sciences & Engineering**	17	17%
	Business & Economics***	13	13%

*Note: The "Field of Study" categories were consolidated for clarity.*

*\* Includes English Language (n=52), Humanities (n=2), and Teaching (n=16).*

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*\*\* Includes Dentistry (n=4), Engineering (n=11), and Chemistry (n=2).*

*\*\*\* Includes Business (n=7) and Economics (n=6).*

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### 3.3 Research Instrument

The sole instrument used for data collection in this study was a structured, self-administered questionnaire titled "Student Perceptions of Teacher Non-Verbal Communication in the EFL Classroom" (see Appendix A). The instrument was specifically developed for this study to gather quantitative data directly related to the research questions. The questionnaire was designed in English, the language of instruction for the participants, and pilot-tested with a small group of non-participating EFL students to ensure the clarity, readability, and face validity of all items. The instrument is divided into three distinct sections.

**Section A: Demographic Information.** The first section was designed to gather essential demographic data to profile the sample and to serve as independent variables for the third research question (RQ3). This section included closed-ended questions soliciting information on participants' gender, self-assessed English proficiency level (Intermediate or Advanced), and primary field of study.

**Section B: General Perceptions of Teacher NVC.** The second and core section of the questionnaire was designed to address the primary research question (RQ1) regarding the overall perceived impact of teacher NVC on comprehension. This section consisted of eight statements about the general utility of teacher body language (e.g., "In general, when my teacher uses body language, it helps me understand the lesson better."). Participants were

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asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. A composite score for this section provides a quantitative measure of each student's overall perception of NVC's effectiveness.

**Section C: Helpfulness of Specific Non-Verbal Cues.** The final section was designed to gather data for the second research question (RQ2) concerning which specific types of NVC are perceived as most beneficial. This section provided a list of ten specific teacher actions, categorized by type (Hand Gestures, Facial Expressions, Eye Contact & Body Movement). Participants were asked to rate the helpfulness of each specific action for their own comprehension using a 5-point scale, where 1 = Not at all helpful, 2 = Slightly helpful, 3 = Moderately helpful, 4 = Very helpful, and 5 = Extremely helpful. This design allows for a direct quantitative comparison of the perceived value of different non-verbal behaviors.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data for this study were collected following a systematic, multi-step procedure designed to ensure ethical conduct and the integrity of the data. Prior to any interaction with participants, formal approval for the research was sought and obtained from the relevant academic authorities at Gharian University, including the Head of the English Department. Following institutional approval, individual course instructors were contacted to request permission to administer the questionnaire during a portion of their regular class time.

Data were collected in person by the researcher from the participating EFL classes at pre-arranged times. At the beginning of each session, the course instructor briefly introduced the

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researcher. The researcher then provided a standardized verbal overview of the study's purpose, the estimated time for completion (approximately 15-20 minutes), and the procedures involved. The voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation was stressed, and it was made clear that their decision to participate or not would have no bearing on their course standing.

To minimize potential response bias and ensure participant comfort, instructors were respectfully requested to either leave the classroom or remain in a location separate from the students while the questionnaires were being completed. Consent forms were distributed first, followed by the questionnaire itself. The researcher remained present throughout the session to answer any procedural questions but did not interfere with the students' responses. Upon completion, the questionnaires were collected directly by the researcher to maintain the confidentiality of the data. The entire data collection phase was completed over a two-week period during the [e.g., Spring 2024] academic semester.

### 3.5 Data Analysis Plan

The data collected from the questionnaires will be analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 27 (or later). The analysis will proceed in three distinct phases: data preparation, descriptive analysis, and inferential analysis to address the specific research questions.

**Phase 1: Data Preparation.** Initially, all responses from the paper-based questionnaires will be coded and entered into the SPSS data file. The dataset will then be rigorously screened for

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entry errors and missing values. Any questionnaires that are substantially incomplete will be excluded from the analysis to ensure the integrity of the dataset.

**Phase 2: Descriptive Analysis.** To summarize the characteristics of the sample and the overall response patterns, descriptive statistics will be calculated. Frequencies and percentages will be used to describe the demographic profile of the participants (gender, proficiency level, field of study). For the main research variables in Sections B and C of the questionnaire, means (M) and standard deviations (SD) will be calculated to provide a central tendency and measure of dispersion for student perceptions.

**Phase 3: Inferential Analysis.** To answer the research questions, specific inferential statistical tests will be employed, with the alpha level for determining statistical significance set at  $p < .05$  for all tests.

- To answer RQ1 ("To what extent do students perceive NVC as a positive factor?"), the mean composite score and standard deviation for Section B ("General Perceptions of Teacher NVC") will be analyzed. The mean score will indicate the average level of agreement on the positive role of NVC in comprehension.
- To answer RQ2 ("Which specific types of NVC are most beneficial?"), the mean scores for each of the ten individual items in Section C ("Helpfulness of Specific Non-Verbal Cues") will be calculated and ranked. This ranking will create a clear hierarchy of the non-verbal behaviors perceived by students as most to least helpful.
- To answer RQ3 ("Are there differences based on demographics?"), a series of independent-samples t-tests will be conducted. These tests will compare the mean

composite scores on NVC perception (from Section B) between male and female students, and separately, between students with intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. This will determine if any statistically significant differences in perception exist between these groups.

#### 4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative data analysis conducted to answer the study's three research questions. The data were derived from the  $N = 100$  completed questionnaires from undergraduate EFL students at Gharian University. The results are organized sequentially according to each research question. The significance level (alpha) for all inferential tests was set at  $p < .05$ .

##### 4.1 RQ1: Overall Perception of Teacher NVC

The first research question sought to determine the extent to which students perceive their teachers' non-verbal communication as a positive factor in their overall classroom comprehension. This was addressed by analyzing the composite scores from Section B of the questionnaire ("General Perceptions of Teacher NVC").

The overall mean score for general perceptions across all 100 participants was ( $M = 3.51$ ), with a standard deviation of ( $SD = 1.06$ ). On a 5-point Likert scale where 3 represents a neutral stance and 5 represents "Strongly Agree," this mean score indicates that, on average, students' perceptions of the helpfulness of their teachers' non-verbal communication were moderately positive.

#### 4.2 RQ2: Perceived Helpfulness of Specific Non-Verbal Cues

The second research question aimed to identify which specific types of non-verbal communication are perceived by EFL students as most beneficial for their comprehension. This was determined by calculating and ranking the mean scores for each of the ten specific NVC actions listed in Section C of the questionnaire.

Table 4.1 presents the descriptive statistics for these ten cues, ranked in descending order of their mean helpfulness score.

Table 4.1

*Ranked Helpfulness of Specific Non-Verbal Cues (N=100)*

Rank	Non-Verbal Cue	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1	Smiling to show encouragement or approval	3.74	1.43
2	The teacher making eye contact with the whole class	3.54	1.47
3	The teacher moving around the classroom	3.44	1.44
4	Pointing to objects or words on the board	3.34	1.23
5	The teacher nodding their head to signal	3.28	1.24

"yes"

<b>6</b>	Using hands to show size, shape, or action	3.22	1.21
7	The teacher leaning forward to emphasize a	3.00	1.26
	point		
<b>8</b>	Using fingers to count or list points	2.88	1.23
<b>9</b>	Frowning slightly to indicate something is	2.84	1.13
	incorrect		
<b>10</b>	Raising eyebrows to ask a question or show	2.82	1.27
	surprise		

The results show a clear hierarchy in the perceived utility of different NVC actions. Affective and relational cues, such as "Smiling to show encouragement" ( $M = 3.74$ ) and "Making eye contact with the whole class" ( $M = 3.54$ ), were rated as the most beneficial. In contrast, several instructional or regulatory cues, such as "Using fingers to count or list points" ( $M = 2.88$ ), "Frowning slightly" ( $M = 2.84$ ), and "Raising eyebrows" ( $M = 2.82$ ), received mean scores below the neutral midpoint of 3.0, indicating they were perceived as slightly unhelpful on average.

#### 4.3 RQ3: Analysis of Group Differences in Perception

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The third research question explored whether statistically significant differences in the general perception of NVC existed based on gender or English proficiency level.

#### 4.3.1 Gender

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the general perception scores between male and female students. The mean score for male participants ( $M = 3.70$ ) was slightly higher than for female participants ( $M = 3.46$ ). However, this difference was not found to be statistically significant,  $t(31.84) = 0.92$ ,  $p = .364$ . These results indicate that there is no evidence of a significant difference in how male and female students perceive the helpfulness of their teachers' NVC.

#### 4.3.2 Proficiency Level

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the general perception scores among the three proficiency groups: Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. Beginners reported the highest mean perception score ( $M = 3.82$ ), followed by Advanced students ( $M = 3.69$ ), and then Intermediate students ( $M = 3.40$ ). The ANOVA revealed that these differences among the three proficiency groups were not statistically significant,  $F(2, 97) = 1.24$ ,  $p = .293$ . This result suggests that English proficiency level did not have a significant effect on students' overall perception of the utility of teacher NVC.

### 5. Discussion

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The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL university students' perceptions of the role of teacher non-verbal communication in enhancing their classroom comprehension. The

findings reveal a nuanced and insightful picture of the learner's experience. Overall, the results indicate that students hold a moderately positive view of their teachers' NVC as a tool for comprehension. However, a more detailed analysis reveals a clear and significant distinction in the types of non-verbal cues that learners find most valuable. The central finding of this research is that students perceive affective and relational NVC as considerably more beneficial to their learning than many common instructional or regulatory gestures. Cues that build rapport and manage the classroom atmosphere, such as smiling and making eye contact, were rated highest in helpfulness. Conversely, several specific gestures often used to convey information, like frowning or raising eyebrows, were perceived as neutral or even slightly unhelpful. Interestingly, these overall perceptions did not vary significantly by gender or by the students' self-reported English proficiency level, suggesting a broadly shared perspective among this learner population.

The most compelling finding of this study is the clear preference learners showed for affective and relational non-verbal communication over more direct instructional or regulatory cues. The high value placed on teacher smiles, eye contact, and movement around the room suggests that for these EFL learners, the primary function of NVC is not simply to transmit information, but to create a positive, safe, and engaging learning environment. This aligns strongly with the literature that emphasizes the importance of the affective domain in language acquisition. Actions like smiling and offering encouragement are powerful tools for lowering the "affective filter," reducing the anxiety that can inhibit a learner's willingness to take communicative risks (Sutji et al., 2017). The high ranking of these relational cues indicates that students value a teacher's non-verbal ability to foster a supportive atmosphere,

which directly contributes to their sense of "learning comfort" (Ahmad et al., 2017). From a sociocultural perspective, this implies that the role of the 'More Knowledgeable Other' is not just to provide cognitive scaffolding, but also to establish the social and emotional trust that makes the learner feel secure enough to engage within their Zone of Proximal Development.

Conversely, the notably lower ratings for cues like "frowning slightly" and "raising eyebrows" are equally instructive. While a teacher might intend these gestures as neutral signals of correction or questioning, it is plausible that students perceive them as indicators of impatience, disapproval, or judgment. For an EFL learner already grappling with potential linguistic uncertainty, such gestures can increase anxiety and be interpreted as negative feedback, thereby discouraging further participation. The perceived authenticity of non-verbal signals (Senowarsito et al., 2012) means that a slight frown may carry more weight than a verbal reassurance like "it's okay to make mistakes." This finding suggests that for learners, non-verbal cues that introduce emotional ambiguity or the potential for negative judgment are seen as counterproductive to the learning process.

Another significant finding of this study is the absence of statistically significant differences in perception across key demographic groups. Neither gender nor English proficiency level had a discernible impact on students' overall assessment of their teachers' NVC. The lack of a gender-based difference suggests that the need for a clear, supportive, and emotionally positive learning environment is a universal factor in this academic context, transcending any potential variations in male or female communication styles.

Perhaps more unexpectedly, proficiency level also showed no significant effect on NVC perception. One might hypothesize that beginner learners would be more reliant on non-

verbal cues for basic comprehension and thus rate them more highly. The data, however, do not support this. This suggests two plausible interpretations. First, the function of NVC may shift as proficiency increases, but its importance remains constant. Beginners may rely on denotative gestures (e.g., pointing) to understand concrete vocabulary, while advanced learners may rely more on NVC to interpret pragmatic nuance, tone, and the teacher's attitude toward complex ideas. Second, and in line with the study's primary finding, if the most valued NVC cues are affective and relational, then the need for this emotional support and rapport does not diminish with linguistic skill. A beginner requires encouragement to overcome initial hurdles, while an advanced learner requires it to confidently engage with more challenging and abstract material. This null result, therefore, powerfully suggests that effective non-verbal communication is a pedagogical constant, essential for all learners at all stages of their language journey

#### Implications of the Study

The findings of this research offer several practical and pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, teacher trainers, and curriculum designers, particularly within the context of Gharian University and similar higher education institutions.

First, the study strongly implies that EFL teachers should consciously prioritize and cultivate affective and relational non-verbal communication. Given that students rated cues like smiling and eye contact as the most beneficial for their learning, teachers should view these behaviors not as incidental social niceties, but as deliberate pedagogical strategies. A conscious effort to build rapport through warm, open, and encouraging body language can be instrumental in lowering the affective filter, fostering a safe classroom environment

where students feel comfortable taking risks, and enhancing their overall learning comfort. The data suggest that the teacher's non-verbal role as a supportive facilitator is perceived as more critical to comprehension than their role as a non-verbal information transmitter.

Second, the low ratings for certain common instructional gestures, such as frowning or raising eyebrows, necessitate a call for greater teacher self-awareness and reflective practice. The findings indicate a potential disconnect between a teacher's intent and a student's perception. A teacher may frown in concentration, but a learner may interpret it as disapproval, which can increase anxiety and hinder learning. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to reflect on how their habitual non-verbal cues might be perceived by students, especially in a cross-cultural context where interpretations can vary. This does not mean teachers should eliminate these gestures, but rather that they should be mindful of their potential for creating emotional ambiguity.

Finally, the findings provide a strong justification for the formal inclusion of non-verbal communicative competence in EFL teacher training programs. The fact that these perceptual patterns were consistent across proficiency levels and genders suggests that effective NVC is a fundamental and universal component of good teaching, not a niche skill. Teacher education curricula should therefore include explicit instruction and practical training on the pedagogical functions of body language. Such training would equip future educators with the awareness and skills to use NVC consciously and effectively, bridging the identified gap between teacher action and student perception and ultimately leading to more effective classroom communication.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered in light of several methodological limitations. First, the reliance on self-report data means the results capture students' perceptions of comprehension rather than an objective measure of it. Second, the use of a convenience sample from a single university in Libya limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations, such as younger learners or those in different cultural contexts. Finally, the study's correlational design identifies associations between variables but cannot establish causality.

These limitations, however, illuminate several promising avenues for future research. A crucial next step would be to conduct an experimental study to test for causality. Such a design could involve two groups of students receiving the same verbal lesson, but with one teacher employing deliberate, positive non-verbal cues (the experimental group) and another maintaining a neutral demeanor (the control group). A post-lesson comprehension test could then provide objective data on whether specific NVC strategies directly cause an increase in learning outcomes.

Furthermore, future research should aim to test the generalizability of the current findings by replicating this study with different populations. Investigating the perceptions of primary or secondary school learners, or conducting cross-cultural comparative studies, would reveal whether the observed preference for affective NVC is a universal phenomenon in language learning or specific to the adult, university-level context.

Finally, while this study provides a valuable quantitative snapshot, qualitative or mixed-methods research could provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

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Classroom observations combined with in-depth student and teacher interviews could explore the moment-to-moment dynamics of non-verbal interaction, uncovering why certain gestures are perceived as helpful or unhelpful and providing a deeper texture to the "what" that this study has identified.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was undertaken to investigate how university-level EFL learners in a Libyan context perceive the role of their teachers' non-verbal communication in enhancing classroom comprehension. The findings provide compelling, learner-centered evidence that while students generally view teacher NVC as a positive component of instruction, they place the highest value on its affective and relational dimensions. The non-verbal cues that build rapport, convey encouragement, and create a supportive classroom atmosphere—such as smiling and direct eye contact—were perceived as significantly more beneficial to learning than many common instructional or regulatory gestures. This preference was found to be consistent across both gender and English proficiency levels, suggesting its fundamental importance to the learner experience.

The primary contribution of this research is its empirical confirmation that the teacher's non-verbal role as an emotional and relational facilitator is perceived by students as being paramount to their comprehension. It shifts the focus from a teacher-centric view of NVC as a set of techniques for transmitting information to a learner-centric view where NVC is a vital tool for creating the psychological safety necessary for language acquisition. For educators and teacher trainers, the message is clear: the path to enhancing student comprehension is paved not only with clear verbal instruction but also with a conscious and deliberate practice

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of positive, supportive non-verbal communication. Ultimately, this study reinforces that in the EFL classroom, the teacher's most powerful communicative tool is not merely what they say, but the entire unspoken message of support, encouragement, and presence they convey.

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