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Motivating Students to Learn: Does Teacher Immediacy Matter?

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Abstract

The study looked into the possible usefulness of a counseling concept called “immediacy” in the classroom setting. Teacher immediacy refers to the verbal, non-verbal, and written behaviors of the teacher that draws the student to a close but professional relationship with him. Utilizing descriptive-correlational design, 226 students from randomly selected tertiary schools in Koronadal City, Philippines, answered a questionnaire on how preferred is teacher immediacy, what it meant, and how it relates to motivation to learn. Data showed students’ preference for the immediate teacher. Teachers who write “good luck” notes in test papers, who say “go on” during classroom discussions, and who smile were most preferred. Varied meanings were attached to the teacher immediacy behaviors, from friendly to controlling but regardless of meaning, students preferred teachers showing immediacy. Significant correlation between teacher immediacy and motivation to learn was found. The study yielded interesting cultural insights into the concept of teacher immediacy. It also recommended inclusion of teacher immediacy in teacher training, and make teacher-student relationship an important component of the learning process.

Keywords: Teaching effectiveness; Teacher Immediacy; Motivation to learn.

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1. Introduction

One important concern in the management of educational programs is ensuring teaching effectiveness. While factors like expertise of teachers and comfortable classroom structures are recognized, other factors like the value of teacher-student relationship, especially in the tertiary level classroom has remained to be a question.

Such professional but personal teacher-student connectedness is labeled in available literature as “immediacy”. It is a professional behavior that brings the teacher and the student closer in terms of perceived distance [1,2,3]. It includes a cluster of behaviors that promote communication and closeness. Immediacy as a teacher behavior has been categorized into non-verbal and verbal cues [3].

Written cues were added in this study. Non-verbal immediacy includes behaviors such as smiling, gesturing, eye contact, and having relaxed body image [3,5,6]. Verbal immediacy refers to the use of language to befriend the student, exemplified by calling the student by name, using humor, and encouraging student input and discussion, asking how students feel about assignments and exams, and conversing with students before or after classes [3].

Written immediacy, which is especially useful in the current trend on distant education where physical contact is not possible, includes the use of written notes saying “keep it up”, “good luck”, and drawing smiley pictures, like “(‘_’)” [7], as well as writing on student paper consultation schedules, and responding to text messages.

This study assessed the value of teacher immediacy in the Philippine context and among Filipino students in tertiary schools in Koronadal City, South Cotabato, The Philippines, during the School Year 2012-2013. More specifically, it sought answers to the following questions: 1) What is the extent of teacher immediacy as perceived by the students? 2) What teacher immediacy behaviors are preferred by the students? 3) What personal meaning do students attach to teacher immediacy? 4) How motivated are the students to study when teacher display immediacy? 5) What is the extent of correlation between teacher immediacy and motivation to learn?

Theoretically anchored on the theories of self-efficacy, social learning, social cognition, self-determination, and personal construct theory; the relationship between the variables is shown in the schema labelled as Figure 1 below.

Constraints and limitations of the study include the limited sample size of 226 and narrow research local covering one City. Also, the measure on motivation to learn was solely based on self-report.

Conducted in the Philippine setting, the study has a potential of providing anyone interested in improving educational outcomes with some ideas on how a teacher can utilize her person to be more effective in motivating students to learn. It will help educational program managers decide whether or not to include teacher immediacy as part of the teacher training curricula. It can also encourage educators to enhance their teacher immediacy characteristics so as to enhance the students’ motivation to learn.

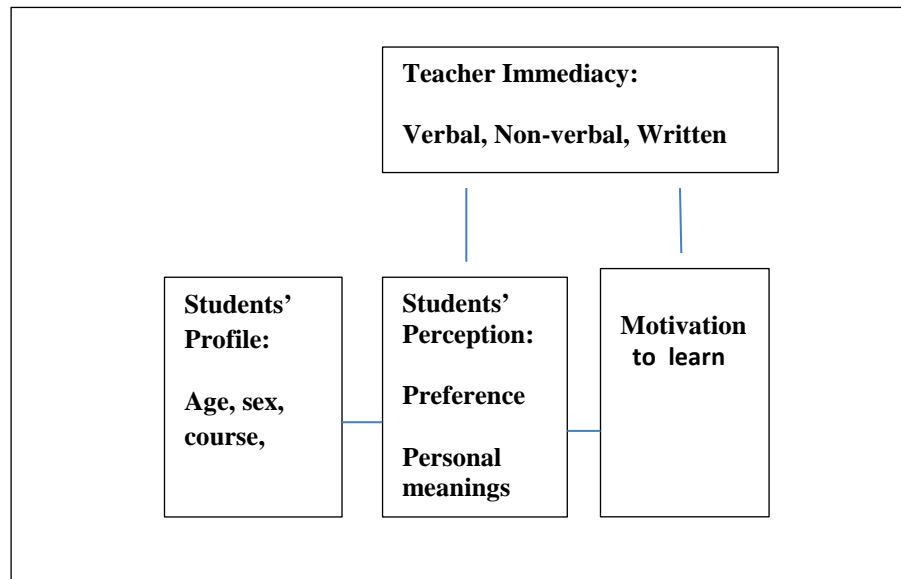


Figure 1: Schematic Diagram Showing the Conceptualization of the Study

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study utilized descriptive-correlational research design. The data collected on the profile of the respondents, their preference for verbal, non-verbal, and written immediacy cues, the personal meanings attached to teacher immediacy cues and the extent of motivation of the respondents when the teacher display immediacy cues were all described and correlated.

2.2 Description of samples

The respondents of the study were college level students enrolled in the different colleges in the City of Koronadal, Philippines, during the SY 2012-2013. A total of 226 students responded to the questionnaire. The respondents were taken from eight randomly picked colleges, out of the fourteen colleges in Koronadal City. From each college, 10 % of students from randomly picked courses were taken.

2.3 Sampling Procedure

Schools in Koronadal City were listed down. Eight schools were taken by random sampling. Permissions to gather data were sought from the heads of each randomly picked school. After approval, three courses were picked, and in each course, 10% of students were again randomly picked.

Students selected were requested to sign an informed consent which was attached to the survey form.

Only those who consented were taken as respondents.

2.4 Data gathering procedure

The researcher personally gathered the data. Data gathering was done on November and December of 2012. Data gathering was undertaken on days preferred by the administrators of schools identified.

Respondents were requested to sign an informed consent which was attached to the survey form. They were told that they have the right to refuse participation if they so desire. To protect confidentiality, participants were not identified in the data collection materials or in the reporting of the findings. Each respondent was assigned a number code. All data were identified only by the assigned number. Each participant was informed about the time required to participate and that this loss of time would be minimal. In addition, each participant was assured that there would be no penalty for refusal to participate or for withdrawal from participation.

3. Statistical treatment of data

Data generated in the study were scored and statistically treated using descriptive statistics and simple correlation methods. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was utilized in the statistical treatment and analysis and alpha level of .05 was set *a priori*.

4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

The two hundred twenty-six (226) respondents had ages that ranged from 16-25. Most respondents were female (71.6%). Technology courses had the highest percentage of enrollment (39.4%), followed by Education courses (29.2%), Business courses (25.2%), and those from the Health Sciences (6.2%). Majority of the respondents (70%) resided outside the city proper. The respondents observed the teachers where they garnered their highest grade as almost always smiling, as almost always gesturing while teaching, almost always making eye contact with them, almost always displaying relaxed body, and almost always talking to the class at close distance. Also, the teachers almost always call them by their first name, almost always use humor, as in making students laugh without demoralizing other people, almost always encourage input and discussion saying "go on", almost always ask how students feel about assignments or exams, and almost always converse with students before and after class. The teachers also almost always write "good luck" notes in exams and assignments. The teacher oftentimes write "keep it up" notes in exams with passing marks, oftentimes writes "smiley" marks beside his/her signature, oftentimes write on student papers her willingness to be consulted, and oftentimes gives his/her phone number and answers text messages related to class matters. Surprisingly, the respondents also recalled the presence of the same behaviors in the teacher where they got their lowest grade. While the immediacy behaviors were not always seen, still the behaviors were oftentimes seen, This means that the teachers where the students earned their lowest grades were also immediate. The students noticed their teacher smiling oftentimes, gesturing hands and walking while talking oftentimes, and making eye contact with them almost always. Their teachers oftentimes have relaxed body, and talked to the class at close distance. The teacher also still oftentimes call the student by their first name, oftentimes use humor to make students laugh without demoralizing other people, oftentimes say "go on" to encourage discussion, oftentimes ask the students how they feel about assignments and exams, and oftentimes talk with the students before and after class. The

teachers also almost always write “good luck” notes in exams and assignments. The teacher oftentimes write “keep it up” notes in exams with passing marks. Rarely, however, do they write smiley marks beside their signature, rarely do they write on student papers their willingness to be consulted, and rarely do they give their cell phone numbers and answer text messages. As a whole, the teachers whom the students got highest grade, as well as those that gave the lowest grade, displayed immediate behaviors. This is interesting as this shows that Filipino teachers are immediate. On measuring the preference for teacher immediacy behaviors, a likert scale of 1- 5 was used, where: 1= totally dislike and 5= totally like. Table 1 below shows a ranked list of said behaviors.

Table 1: Teacher Immediacy Behaviors Preferred by Respondents

Rank	BEHAVIORS	MEAN (Scale= 1-5): 1= totally dislike 5= totally like
1	Writing “Good luck” notes in exams and assignments (written)	4.41
2	Saying “go on”, as in encouraging input and discussion (verbal)	4.31
3	Smiling (non-verbal)	4.27
4	Asking how students feel about assignments or exams (verbal)	4.20
5	Relaxed body, as in unhurried talk, no evidence of stress (non-verbal)	4.18
6	Making eye contact with students (non-verbal)	4.12
7	Using humor, as in making students laugh without demoralizing other people (verbal)	4.03
8	Writing “Keep it up” notes in exams with passing marks (written)	3.99
9	Gesturing, as in walking while talking and moves hands (non-verbal)	3.96
10	Conversing with individual students before or after class (verbal)	3.82
11	Talking to the class at close distance (non-verbal)	3.80
12	Calling student by first name (verbal)	3.79
13	Giving his/her cell number and responds to text messages related to class matters (written)	3.54
14	Writing on test papers or on other student papers his/her willingness to be consulted, e.g “ you can see me in the office on Monday” for consultation (written)	3.49
15	Writing Smiley marks beside his/her signature (written)	3.16

Group means showed that teacher immediacy behaviors are preferred by the students. Non-verbal teacher behaviors had the highest group mean of 4.07, followed by verbal immediacy with a group mean of 4.03 and that written teacher immediacy cues had the lowest group mean of 3.72.

In terms of personal meanings, non-verbal immediacy elicited mixed meanings. Smiling though was dominantly seen as a friendly. Gesturing (as in walking while talking and moving hands) was seen more as a controlling behavior, although some saw it as caring and friendly. Making eye contact with students was also seen both as controlling and friendly and caring. A relaxed body (as in unhurried talk and no evidence of stress) was also perceived as controlling, although it was also considered as caring by a little less number of respondents. Also, talking to the class at close distance was more considered as caring and friendly, even though it was also considered as controlling by some respondents.

All verbal immediacy behaviors were perceived somewhat positively. Calling student by name was regarded as friendly. Using humor without demoralizing other people was also perceived as friendly. Saying “go on” to encourage input and discussion was regarded as caring. Asking how students feel about assignments and exams was deemed caring and friendly. Conversing with students before and after class was also perceived as friendly.

All written behaviors were also positively perceived. These include writing “Good luck” notes in exams and assignments, writing “Keep it up” notes written in exams with passing marks, drawing “Smiley” marks beside the teacher’s signature, writing on test papers or on other student papers the teacher’s willingness to be consulted, e.g “ you can see me in the office on Monday” for consultation. Likewise, giving the teacher’s cell number and responding to text messages related to class matters.

While some behaviors were perceived as controlling, like gesturing while teaching and making eye contact with students, they were preferred teacher behaviors. This may be explained as cultural, where authority in our country is esteemed such that the teacher’s behavior showing authority in the classroom is something which students like, so long as there are some indication of friendliness in the teacher. Filipinos like order, they prefer the teacher to have control, to ensure orderliness in the classroom. Also, Filipinos have deep respect for parents [8,9]. This respect is carried over to the classrooms, thus the high esteem bestowed to teachers. This may explain the preference for controlling but friendly behaviors of teachers.

In terms of motivation to study when teacher is immediate, majority (or 81%) of the respondents likes to study when the teacher is immediate, 6 % neither like nor dislike to study, 2% does not like to study, and 10 % gave no response. It is possible that the highly intelligent may not care whether the teacher is immediate or not. They may even dislike the immediate teacher. But they comprise the minority. The majority belong to the mediocre group and they need the immediate teacher.

When simple correlation was done to determine the relationship between immediacy and motivation to learn, the study showed that the more immediate the teacher, the more motivated to study the student becomes. There was a significant positive correlation between non-verbal teacher immediacy and motivation ($r = .138$; $p=.049$), between verbal immediacy and motivation ($r = .251$; $p= .000$), and between written immediacy and motivation

($r = .169$; $p = .016$). This result is parallel to the findings of Christophel [10] and Mahmud and Yaacob [2].

Table 2: Correlation Between Teacher Immediacy and Motivation

Teacher Immediacy	Correlation Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Non-verbal	.138*	.049	Significant
Verbal	.251*	.000	Significant
Written	.169*	.016	Significant

(* means significant at $\alpha = .05$)

Since it clearly motivates the student to learn, immediacy can be utilized as a potential tool to enhance learning. While it cannot replace the teacher’s knowledge of course content, it should take an important part in the instructional environment since it enhances motivation to learn.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Teacher immediacy matters. Students prefer verbal, non-verbal and written immediacy behaviors in teachers. In the study, the students claimed they were more motivated to learn when the teacher display immediacy behaviors.

It is recommended that in teacher training, teacher immediacy development be included. Also, teachers in active service are encouraged to evaluate selves on extent of own immediacy, and work on the enhancement of immediacy in themselves. It is also recommended that supervisors regularly check the teachers under their care not only on knowledge of subject-matter taught, but also on how the teachers utilize teacher immediacy as a part of the classroom environment. It is also recommended that further research be conducted on teacher immediacy, especially on correlations between teacher immediacy and caring behavior of students in the health care professions.

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