Designing Instruments for Observing Classroom Nonverbal Behaviors of English Teachers

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Abstract: Nonverbal behaviors have been extensively studied and have been shown to have great influence in teaching English as a foreign language. The purpose of this paper is to identify what nonverbal behaviors are widely used and effective in the classroom, and the focus is on designing observations of Chinese college English teachers' classroom nonverbal behaviors. Based on the literature review, an observation form, a classroom record sheet for special nonverbal behavior and an interview card are designed, and discussions on the implementation of these instruments are presented.

Keywords: Nonverbal behaviors; English teachers; Classroom observation; Second language teaching

1. Introduction

In recent years most researchers have reached a consensus that the classroom, an important setting for second language teaching, is a worthwhile place to look at. Nonverbal behavior is a part of teacher activities in the classroom. A teacher's non-verbal immediacy behaviors can affect students' attitudes and feelings toward a subject area [1]. In China, teachers who teach college English usually conduct the whole teaching procedure, manipulates kinds of actions in certain teaching situations in the classroom. In order to identify what nonverbal behaviors are being used and what nonverbal behaviors are effective in teaching, classroom observation is meaningful. The study focuses on designing instruments for observing classroom nonverbal behaviors. The researcher adopted video recordings of teaching, note-taking and interviews, hoping to get more first-hand classroom teaching facts.

2. Nonverbal Behaviors

2.1 Definition of Nonverbal Behaviors

Generally speaking, nonverbal behavior refers to communication without the use of words [2]. Nonverbal cues include how we say things with body posture, movement, facial expressions, gestures, touching, eye contact, space, and distance [3]. Also, Nonverbal behavior is the use of interacting sets of visual, vocal and invisible communication systems and subsystems by communicators with the systematic encoding and decoding of nonverbal symbols and signs [4]. From the above definitions, we can conclude that nonverbal behaviors are acts of communication without the use of words between individuals using body movement, space, touch, eye movement, facial expressions, the voice, and use of physical surroundings.

2.2 Classification of Nonverbal Behaviors

To better understand the range of nonverbal behaviors and find out measures to control over them, different researchers present different opinions on the classification. Seven categories were proposed to code non-verbal behaviors in Boyd's Teacher Behavior Observation System. They are classified into kinesics (body movement), proximity (personal space), haptics (perceived closeness), oculesics (eye contact), vocalics (quality and use of human voice), environmental factors, and facial expressions [5]. Classroom nonverbal behaviors are special for these non-words communication are used in the certain teaching situation in the classroom, which involves teaching, learning, students, teacher and teaching environment. Other nonverbal behaviors, therefore, including teacher's physical appearance, dressing and use of time are also displayed by the teachers in the classroom [6].

3. Designing the Observation of Nonverbal Behaviors

3.1 The Participants

3.1.1 The Observers

In observation practice, an inter-rater reliability is an index of the extent to which different observers give similar ratings to the same behavior [7]. And an inter-rater reliability coefficient of .80 or greater achieved is a prerequisite for a valid observation[8]. There is need to check whether the researcher's noting is validated. The classroom observation is expected to determine a greater inter-rater reliability between the co-observers. Two co-observers teaching college English participated in the observation by using the Observation Form of College English Teacher's Nonverbal Behaviors, each observer worked with the researcher in observation. Also, a technician was invited to do the videotape recording job. After each observation, the video clips were timely transmitted and stored, and replayed, for the observers might found the evidence for differences and exchange the ideas on problems encountered in noting.

3.1.2 The Observed Teachers

The three observed teachers with at least 10-year college English teaching experience, were from Northwest Normal University. At first, the researcher got the permission of the three to make observations in their classes, and collected their detailed teaching contents, teaching plans, class time, the number of students, as well as classroom location. The observed lessons were required to present new texts in college English textbooks. That is to say, all the teachers explained the texts in class instead of doing other activities, such as writing, oral practice or doing exercises.

3.1.3 The Observed Classes

The classes to be observed were selected by the three teachers, who offered the specific information of the students' numbers, majors, names, etc. The number of the students in each class was within 45, so that the observers might have a clear view without too many rows and lines of desks and chairs. The students were not informed of the observation, and three sets of desks and chairs were kept for the observers at the back of the classrooms.

3.1.4 The Interviewed Students

Among the interviewed students, some of them might have received the teacher's nonverbal behaviors, but some didn't notice the nonverbal behaviors though they were conveyed a kind of message by the teacher's nonverbal communication. They were interviewed immediately after class, so the researcher could get more information about what really happened in the nonverbal behavior communication between the teacher and the student in the class.

3.2 Designing the Instruments

3.2.1 The Observation Form

The observation form lists seven categories, and in order to make marking conveniently, 17 variables are given to help the observers distinguish the nonverbal behaviors quickly. The nonverbal behavior categories and variables are designed on the basis of the classification of Boyd, Yu Huai, Keith et al.[9], and Browers et al.[10]. The seven categories are head movement, facial expression, eye contact, hand movement, teach movement, accent and proxemics. The seventeen variables are head nodding, heading shaking, heading turning, smiling, frowning, staring at students, looking around, making eye contact, board pointing, material pointing, hand waving, finger gesture, near the platform, walking/standing in classroom, changing voice inflection, using pause in speech pattern, close to students. In the form, the observation date, observer, teacher, observation frequency, start time, stop time and total minutes were recorded and noted.

As for the length of the observation noting time, with more highly inferential methods researchers have used time-sampling techniques to categorize the teacher nonverbal behavior occurring within a specified time period (usually 3 to 10 seconds)[11]. However, 3 seconds is a too short period for the observer to note down these nonverbal cues, while 10 seconds is rather too long, so the researcher adopted the period of 5 seconds. It is relatively enough and proper for the researcher to judge and note down the nonverbal behavior segments in such a period. One class usually lasts for 50 minutes, which is divided into 10 small periods, and each period lasts for 5 minutes.

3.2.2 The English Classroom Record Sheet for Special NVBs

There are some nonverbal behaviors, by which the teacher tends to facilitate his or her teaching or stop the students' improper behaviors or attitudes. These behaviors were "special", and the researcher noted them down by some marks in the sheet. In the Special NVBS Classroom Record Sheet, the first part is mainly about the class information including class date and time, class, number present, absentees and teacher. The second part covers teaching contents. The record sheet with 17 behavior categories is used to note down teachers' special nonverbal behaviors used for students.

3.2.3 The Interview Card

The interview card for students is divided into two parts. The first part is about the general evaluation on teacher's nonverbal behaviors in class. It was designed on base of the evaluation form used by Zhou Pengsheng[12]. And the second part is about the student's responses to the recorded special nonverbal behaviors, which was designed on base of an interview outline by Wallace[13]

3.3 Implementation Description

Before the observation, some preparations were made. Firstly, the theory of nonverbal behaviors and the observation design were explained to the collaborators. The videotaping skills and requirements were also discussed. Secondly, two observers learned the nonverbal behaviors, the observation form and categories and discussed the noting skills.

Three classes were observed and videotaped respectively. In each observation, the observation forms and special NVBs record sheets were prepared for two observers. Two observers were identified by the observer one (O1) and observer two (O2). When one completed the observation form, the other would finish the record sheet. The observed teachers were noted down by T1, T2 and T3. In the form the specific variables were coded by abbreviations. The researcher used the time-unit code, by which the researcher put a tick under the time axis by a vertical short bar "|", which stands for "once". If the note is like "||", it means twice..

Meanwhile, abbreviations were used in the classroom record sheets. The NVB category is the same as the 17 variables in the observation form. When "special" NVBs happened, the observers noted in the column "student", by shortened forms of words, such as, S(student), M(male), F(female), LL1(line one on the left), R(row), etc., in the related the time period blanks. In the "codes" column, some signs are used to note the effect of the nonverbal behaviors, such as "↑√"(positive behavior and good effect), " →＜" (neutral behavior and poor effect), "↑√∞" (positive behavior and good effect, but the student is nervous), and so on.

The researcher interviewed the students in the classroom or teacher's lounge. One student at a time was interviewed. The interviews began after the class or at the time close to the class hours, which could not be delayed too long.

4. Outcomes and Limitations

Through the observation, we find that to observe class by well-designed observation forms is feasible. However, questions remain in many aspects. Firstly, clear and reasonable definitions of the nonverbal behavior category and variables could not be given, unless more practice in observing class is operated to provide clearer distinctions. Secondly, observations on novice and expert teacher can be conducted. The comparison between the data might push the training program of nonverbal behaviors a step further. Thirdly, study on the functions of certain nonverbal behaviors might promote the positive effect. Lastly, other types of English teachers, such as teachers in middle school, primary school, kindergarten, private training center, tutor, etc., may also become the study subjects.

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