

ESL LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR AS REPRESENTED IN SILENT COMEDY

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Abstract: *In human communication, interlocutors involved in the communicative process generally practice verbal communication to relay information. A crucial aspect of information seeking that is often overlooked during interaction is the myriad of information one would be able to gain by studying interlocutors' non-verbal communication. Understanding non-verbal behaviour as part of communicative competence is a challenging task, particularly among second-language learners. This study investigates the perception of ESL learners on the non-verbal behaviours expressed through silent comedy. Analysis suggests that ESL learners are able to identify certain non-verbal channels represented in silent comedy.*

Keywords: *Non-Verbal Communication, ESL Learners, Silent Comedy*

Introduction

Numerous studies have explored the dynamics of human communication. Humans communicate with each other in a number of different modalities and the interpretation of the utterance may vary from a person to the other. Human communication occurs due to several purposes. Generally, humans communicate with each other to share information. This communication involves a series of processes, which takes place between two or more interlocutors, and this sharing of information is transferred through several channels. These channels include the paralinguistic channels, facial displays, eye behaviour and such.

In learning English as a second language (ESL), learners are required to be actively engaged in the communicative process, particularly in the verbal interaction with other learners. By applying effective communication skills, a learner would not only increase their vocabulary of the target language (Nation, 2001), but they are able to boost confidence and motivation in practicing the second language in classrooms (Derakhshan and Mirarab, 2015).

Another pivotal aspect of communication that is given little attention in ESL classrooms is the non-verbal element inherent in the communicative process. Non-verbal communication is a crucial part of language learning as without the use of words, one is able to convey more

meaning compared to the conventional method of giving verbal messages. Floyd (2009) mentioned that nonverbal behaviour is a powerful method of communicating as it is expressed naturally and unconsciously. Hence, the intention of speakers may be conveyed more successfully through this method.

It is claimed that non-verbal communication carries importance for communicative competence. However, the main challenge of studying non-verbal communication lies in interpreting the message behind these non-verbal expressions. Through the use of silent comedy, this study aims to investigate the perception of ESL learners in interpreting non-verbal behaviours, as expressed by the characters in the said narrative.

Literature Review

Non-Verbal Communication and Behaviour

There are primarily two forms of communication; verbal and non-verbal. Floyd (2009) explains that there are several characteristics of non-verbal communication. Among them is the presence of this element during interpersonal communication, when two or more parties are engaged in the interaction. Non-verbal communication conveys more information that is not present in verbal communication. It is also often believed over spoken interaction, for instance, identifying deception when someone is speaking untruthfully (Ekman, 1988). Ekman (1988) claimed that people can detect deception just by observing the smile of the person committing the act of lying. This is supported by DePaulo and Morris (2004), by which they stated that the behaviours of guilt and feigning of innocence can often be construed through facial expressions. Non-verbal behaviour refers to informal and unspoken dispositions, ones that are distinct from speech (Mehrabian, 2017). These behaviours include behaviours that make use of facial expressions, eye behaviour, bodily movements and gestures and they provide meaning in the statements uttered during the communication process (Chira,2014).

Understanding Non-Verbal Behaviour for ESL Learners

One of the characteristics of non-verbal communication, and a particularly challenging trait in its interpretation, lies in its subtlety (Bambaeroo andShokrpour, 2017). Because of this, the receiver often overlooks the implied meaning, causing the other party to become frustrated that the intended meaning does not reach the recipient quite as effectively. In the perspective of a second language learner, the interpretation of the subtle non-verbal behaviours presented by native speaker is even more challenging. Bambaeroo andShokrpour (2017), mention that non-verbal communication is highly associated with the semantic level of understanding. They also explain that these subtle signals can be interpreted correctly through socialization and cultural awareness from both parties involved with the interaction. Due to this reason, second language learners may need an in depth semantic and cultural understanding of the message.

Silent Comedy

As suggested by Panayotakis (2005), comic acting applies numerous patterns of non-verbal behaviour that include telling facial expressions, meaningful postures, changes in the voice sounds and others. These non-verbal behaviours commonly expressed in comedic genres are prevalent when acted in silence. He further elaborated that these non-verbal gestures expressed in silent comedy serve a number of functions, namely as an expression of the characters to communicate to their audience about their thoughts, feelings and attitudes about the topic or issue. Apart from that, non-verbal behaviour expressed in this type of narrative may become a strategy to invoke laughter as part of the comic scene (Panayotakis, 2005). Hence, this type of narrative is particularly relevant to the present study in further understanding audience

perception of non-verbal behaviours and traits, as represented by the characters in selected comedic scenes.

10 Non-Verbal Channels

There are several channels, or, signals that are expressed non-verbally during the communication process. This study adopts the working framework of Floyd (2009) in describing the non-verbal channels primarily used by interlocutors in their interaction. Table 1 lists these non-verbal channels:

Table 1: 10 Non-Verbal Channels (Floyd,2009)

Channels	
Eye Behaviour	Facial Display
Physical Appearance	Movement and Gesture
Touch Behaviour	Vocal behaviour
Use of smell	Use of space
Use of time	Use of artifacts

Methodology

Research Method

This study applied the thematic analysis in the qualitative method of research. This method is applied to identify and describe patterns found in the dataset (Braun, 2006). Specific themes were derived from the instrumentation to recognise respondents' perception of non-verbal behaviours, as represented in the short sketches of Charlie Chaplin and Mr. Bean. These sketches were selected as they are notorious for their colourful expressions in the silent comedy narrative. These scenes were presented to the respondents in the form of a video, available on YouTube* with a 4 to 5-minute duration. This specific genre of narrative was selected so that respondents would be able to pay attention to the non-verbal behaviours of the characters, without having the assistance of verbal contexts influencing their understanding of the story. Respondents involved with the study were 20 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from a public institution, aged between 19-20 years old.

Data Collection

Respondents were presented with two videos, relatively five minutes in duration, by which a video was selected from a sketch by Charlie Chaplin and Mr. Bean (see Figure 1). The videos were obtained from a popular social website, *YouTube. While watching the video, respondents were required to complete a questionnaire form containing open-ended questions with relation to specific scenes. They were required to identify the non-verbal channels, based on the 10 non-verbal channels described by Floyd (2009), as portrayed by the characters. They were also required to elaborate on their observations. Based on their observation, respondents were not necessarily required to select all the 10 channels (see Table 1) as they were free to select the channels whenever relevant. They are then required to justify their choice of channels based on their interpretation of the characters' non-verbal expressions.

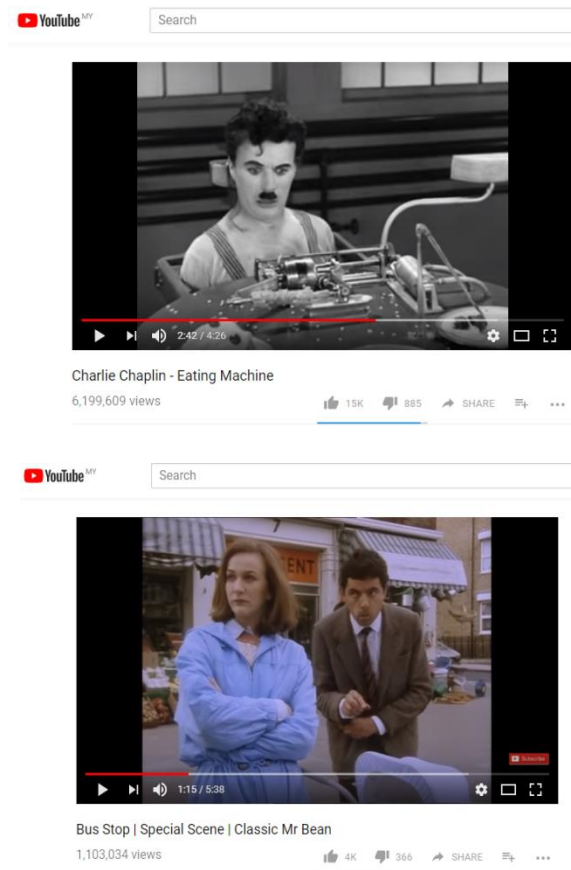


Figure 1: Video clips of silent comedies acted by Charlie Chaplin and Mr. Bean

*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_1apYo6-Ow
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WKmOmqC57Q>

Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

Multimodalities: Respondents were able to recognise dynamic use of several non-verbal channels such as facial expressions and eye behaviour. From their analysis of both Charlie Chaplin and Mr.Bean’s sketch, there was a difference in the use of non-verbal channels between the two sketches. Respondents identified the dominant and dynamic use of facial display and eye behaviour channels in Charlie Chaplin’s sketch, whereas in Mr.Bean’s sketch, respondents identified that the bodily gesture and vocalic channels were frequently expressed (see Table 2).

Table 2: Description of the characters’ use of multimodalities

ESL Learner	Details
S5	In this video, he frequently used both of his eyes and his facial expressions to convey the message.
S8	He does these expressions with a combination of facial expressions, followed by sounds as well as body movements.

Importance: In understanding the importance of non-verbal expressions in communication, respondents showed mixed responses. Some of them feel that non-verbal communication is important. They mentioned that non-verbal behaviours are simple to convey particularly in relation to proximity and timing of both interlocutors. Whereas, a small number of respondents

feel that non-verbal communication is not easily identifiable, no straight-forward to interpret. According to them, people can use the same gesture but different receivers of the information may decode the information subjectively, causing confusion for both parties. This will disrupt the entire communicative process to happen successfully (see Table 3).

Table 3: Description of the importance of Non-Verbal Communication

ESL Learner	Details
S3	Every face expression and non-verbal communication forms applied make everything look realistic and also easy to understand for the audience.
S12	People can misunderstand your message. A smile can either be interpreted as you are happy or you are trying to hide something.

Emotion: Respondents observed a crucial purpose of non-verbal expression, which is the conveyance of emotion. From the sketches, they were able to associate the non-verbal behaviours to the emotions that the characters implied. For instance, some respondents mention that Mr. Bean had his eyebrows furrowed and he pouted his mouth, which shows that he was feeling annoyed. Other emotions described by respondents of the study include disgust, anger and surprise (see Table 4).

Table 4: Description of display of emotions in Non-Verbal Communication

ESL Learner	Details
S11	The character knows how to use expressive elements to perfectly convey emotions such as satisfaction, happiness, shock, surprise and disgust.
S16	Mr. Bean let out an angry voice to show that he's angry with the blind man. Also, his eyebrows are close together to show that he is annoyed.

Discussion

The outcome of the study has shed light to some interesting observations. The first observation is that respondents recognise the dynamics of non-verbal behaviour and how these channels are not typically used in isolation when communicating. For instance, the characters' action of portraying the state of being curious is expressed by using a combination of facial expressions, eye behaviours and hand gestures. This dynamic use of multiple non-verbal channels (or in other terms, multimodalities), agrees with researchers in non-verbal communication, whereby non-verbal channels are used concurrently with each other in order to convey the message more effectively to receivers. This is supported by Allwood et al (2014), by which they state that presentation of information using multimodalities is often easier to interpret than by applying just one modality. Meanwhile, in this study, it is found that there is a predominant channel frequently observed by the respondents of the study, which is facial expression. This is in agreement with the current findings by Bambaeroo and Shokrpour (2017), whereby they state that facial expression is more effective in relaying information than other non-verbal channels. This is particularly true within this silent comedic genre, as with the absence of vocal behaviour, particular attention is given towards the facial expressions of the characters in conveying the message.

Apart from that, respondents recognised the importance of non-verbal communication in the communication process. They acknowledged that non-verbal communication, when expressed correctly and effectively, has a pivotal role in the conveyance of information. However, a substantial number of respondents argued that the interpretation of non-verbal behaviours may cause interlocutors to misconstrue the message, due to the subjectivity of interpreting these signals. This is indeed true as researchers have yet to find a standard and universally agreeable method of evaluating non-verbal signals. Several factors may influence a person's perception and understanding of non-verbal behaviours. These factors may include relativity in linguistic, cultural backgrounds, age, geographical factor as well as gender differences. Hence, being learners of English as a second language, they may derive interpretations that are different from the intended message, primarily due to restrictions in understanding the implied meanings, which may only be understood by native speakers of English.

Another observation raised by the respondents is the conveyance of emotions through non-verbal behaviour. An effective method of indicating a person's emotional state at the time of speaking is through the use of non-verbal signals. The states of happiness, anger, sadness, disgust and surprise are some of the emotions (Russell, 1980) that are typically expressed through non-verbal communication. This realisation from respondents about the relationship between non-verbal communication and emotion is in agreement with studies in social psychology and communication.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the perception of ESL learners in recognising non-verbal channels expressed through its portrayal in silent comedy. The outcome of the study has primarily contributed to the body of knowledge in non-verbal communication, whereby respondents' observation is in agreement with several functions of the non-verbal behaviours in the communicative process. They have realised that non-verbal communication is dynamic, non-verbal signals are expressed concurrently, and that it has a relation to the emotive representation of interlocutors during the communicative process. Future research will investigate in greater depth the functional aspects of non-verbal communication in a variety of settings, specifically in social and classroom interactions.

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