

Impact of Non-Verbal Communication Between Lecturers and Students on Academic Success: Case Study of Bolgatanga Technical University, Ghana

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<i>Abstract</i>	<i>Journal of Policy and Development Studies (JPDS)</i>
<i>This study investigates the role of non-verbal communication in influencing academic success in tertiary education, specifically within the context of Bolgatanga Technical University (BTU) in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The study utilized Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with both lecturers and students, providing nuanced insights into the ways non-verbal communication shapes classroom dynamics, student motivation, and overall academic outcomes. The findings revealed that positive non-verbal behaviours, such as open posture and sustained eye contact, foster student engagement and enhance motivation, while negative cues, including crossed arms and lack of eye contact, contribute to disengagement and diminished academic performance. Additionally, lecturers' facial expressions and gestures were found to directly affect students' comprehension and retention of course material. The study concludes that non-verbal communication is a critical factor in improving student-teacher interactions, promoting effective learning environments, and enhancing academic success at BTU and similar institutions.</i>	<i>Vol. 17 Issue 2 (2024)</i> <i>ISSN(p) 1597-9385</i> <i>ISSN (e) 2814-1091</i> <i>Home page:</i> https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jpds ARTICLE INFO: Keyword <i>Non-verbal communication, academic success, Social Cognitive Theory, body language, higher education</i> Received: <i>25th October 2024</i> Accepted: <i>29th December, 2024</i> DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jpds.v117i2.11

1. Introduction

Effective communication is pivotal in teaching-learning (Duta et al., 2015), especially in academic environments where both verbal and non-verbal communication elements are key (Jacob et al., 2016). Non-verbal communication, which includes body language, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice, significantly influences student engagement, motivation, and academic performance (Papadopoulos, R. 2019). Non-verbal communication plays a significant role in conveying information and ideas across various fields. Especially, it has been extensively applied in marketing (Agustia, 2019; Fielding, 2015; Sommers et al., 2013), psychology and counseling (Del Giacco et al., 2020; Bull & Frederickson, 2019), and teaching and learning (Bambaeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Haneef et al., 2014). In institutions like Bolgatanga Technical University (BTU) in Ghana, where students and lecturers come from different and diverse backgrounds, understanding the impact of non-verbal cues is crucial for improving academic success (Khuman, 2024).

It should be stressed that over the years, tertiary institutions in Ghana like BTU have experienced significant changes in teaching methodologies (Broni, K. E. A. 2017). While lecture-based teaching some years back, modern pedagogies now emphasize more interactive, student-centered approaches (Bakar, S.,2021). It is in this evolving context that non-verbal communication has become increasingly important. Effective use of non-verbal cues can enhance and improve connections between lecturers and students, improve learning experience outcomes, and create a positive academic atmosphere (Khuman, P. .2024). It is without doubt that lecturers who use non-verbal communication effectively often create a more engaging environment, leading to better student participation, focus, and retention.

The Upper East Region, where BTU is located, has a distinct cultural background that influences how non-verbal communication is interpreted or decoded. Cultural factors, such as respect for authority and community values, affect both verbal and non-verbal communication practices (Leach, E.,1972). In this regard, understanding these cultural differences is essential for overcoming potential communication barriers and improving student-teacher interactions (Keengwe, J., 2010). Therefore, investigating the role of non-verbal communication in academic success in this region can provide valuable insights for enhancing educational outcomes.

Non-verbal communication remains an under-researched area in Ghanaian higher education. While verbal communication and teaching methods have received substantial attention, non-verbal cues have often been overlooked. Specifically, there is limited empirical research on how non-verbal behaviors influence student learning and performance in tertiary institutions in Ghana, particularly in the Upper East Region (Sutiyatno, S.,2018). This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how non-verbal communication affects academic success at BTU.

This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how non-verbal cues can be leveraged to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Also, it is the conviction of the researchers that the finding of this study will provide practical recommendations for lecturers on enhancing their non-verbal communication skills, which could lead to better student engagement, performance, and overall academic success at BTU and other similar institutions in Ghana.

2. Review of Related Literature

Global Perspective

According to some scholars, non-verbal communication is widely acknowledged as an essential element of interpersonal interactions, especially in educational settings (Paranduk, R., & Karisi, Y. 2020). Highlight that non-verbal cues can either complement or contradict verbal messages, shaping how information is received and understood (Djalolovna, M. S.,2025). Studies have shown that in higher education, lecturers who use non-verbal communication effectively are more likely to maintain student attention, foster inclusivity, and facilitate a better understanding of complex concepts (Azizah, L. N. et al., 2023). Positive non-verbal behaviors such as maintaining eye contact and using open body language foster trust and rapport, which are vital for creating a productive learning environment (Ekron, C.,2015).

It cannot be overemphasized that research across various cultural contexts supports the importance of non-verbal communication in enhancing academic outcomes (Purnell, L. (2018). One of the typical examples that can be cited to buttress this point is the United States where studies show that students perform better in classrooms where lecturers engage in active non-verbal behaviors like smiling or using gestures to emphasize key points (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2007). Similar findings have been observed in Europe, where lecturers who use positive non-verbal cues encourage greater student engagement and participation (Floyd, 2017). It must be pointed out that the above-mentioned studies underscore the role of non-verbal communication as a key factor in effective teaching and learning across different academic contexts.

Perhaps it is against this background that the integration of non-verbal communication into teacher training is also gaining momentum globally. Anderson, K. A. (2023) lays more emphasis on the importance of training educators in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Their research found that lecturers who receive formal training in non-verbal communication are better able to manage classroom dynamics and improve academic outcomes. This approach has been adopted in several countries, indicating the growing recognition and the important role of non-verbal communication as an essential skill for effective teaching.

African Context

In many African countries, including Ghana, non-verbal communication is deeply embedded in cultural norms and plays a critical role in classroom interactions. Manyinyire, F. (2023) notes that African students often rely on non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language to interpret their lecturers' intentions and attitudes. These non-verbal signals influence students' perceptions of their lecturers' credibility, authority, and approachability, all of which impact student motivation and engagement.

African lecturers often use non-verbal communication to manage classroom dynamics, convey respect, and create a positive learning environment. Vifah, W. K. (2023) highlights that in African educational settings, non-verbal communication helps establish hierarchical relationships while maintaining respect. However, when non-verbal cues contradict verbal messages, students may become confused or disengaged, which can hinder learning outcomes.

It was also very important to note that the role of non-verbal communication in African classrooms is also shaped by socio-cultural factors like oral tradition and communal values. In cultures with strong oral traditions, such as many African societies, how a message is delivered both verbally and non-verbally significantly affects how it is received. This is particularly relevant in classrooms where lecturers must balance authority with encouraging students' participation and engagement (Khuman, P. (2024). Therefore, it cannot be underestimated that understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing teaching strategies that align with students' expectations and learning needs.

Ghanaian Context

In Ghana, non-verbal communication in universities, including BTU, is influenced by a combination of traditional cultural norms and Western educational practices. While formal teaching styles remain dominant, non-verbal cues still play an important role in fostering effective student-teacher relationships. Bambaeroo et al (2017) found that lecturers who use positive non-verbal cues, such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, and using gestures to emphasize key points, are perceived as more approachable and engaging, leading to higher student participation and improved academic performance.

However, Ghanaian classrooms often see lecturers adopting rigid and formal communication styles that tend to limit the effectiveness of non-verbal communication. Ackah, A. B. (2020) found that students may struggle to engage with lecturers who display closed body language or avoid eye contact, which can hinder learning. This calls for the need for lecturers to be more attuned to the impact of their non-verbal communication.

Additionally, large class sizes and limited resources in universities in Ghana create challenges in establishing effective communication. Appiah, E. (2022) suggests that non-verbal communication can serve as a useful tool in managing classroom dynamics, particularly in large lecture halls where verbal communication alone may not be sufficient to maintain student engagement. Effective use of non-verbal cues can encourage participation, create a positive learning environment, and address individual student needs, thereby improving academic outcomes. Additionally, Bawah (2020) suggests that lecturers who engage with students through non-verbal cues, such as nodding or using open gestures, can enhance students' sense of belonging and reduce feelings of alienation.

It must be pointed out that despite substantial research on non-verbal communication in education worldwide, there remains a gap in studies focused on its impact in tertiary institutions in Ghana, particularly in regions like the Upper East Region of Ghana. Existing research often concentrates on verbal communication or general classroom dynamics, overlooking the role of non-verbal behaviors in student performance. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the cultural context of non-verbal communication at BTU, where traditional values and respect for authority shape communication styles.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), which emphasizes the role of observation, imitation, and modeling in learning. The theory suggests that students observe

and internalize non-verbal cues from lecturers, which in turn influences their behaviour, engagement, and academic performance. Additionally, the Theory of Non-Verbal Communication (Argyle, 1975) was used to examine how specific non-verbal behaviors such as facial expressions, gestures, and posture affect communication in the classroom.

3 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the impact of non-verbal communication between lecturers and students on academic success at Bolgatanga Technical University (BTU). Qualitative research was deemed suitable for this inquiry, as it focuses on understanding participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in their natural settings. By utilizing qualitative methods, the study aimed to gather rich, detailed data on how non-verbal communication was used and understood within the classroom context at BTU, and how it influenced student engagement, learning, and academic outcomes.

Research Design

The research design consisted of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' views while offering flexibility to delve deeper into emerging topics during conversations. This approach is ideal for obtaining nuanced insights into how both lecturers and students perceived and responded to non-verbal communication in the classroom. Besides Focus Group Discussion and participant observation were developed and pretested before going to the field to gather the data.

The study involved two main groups of participants: lecturers and students of BTU. The sample included 20 lecturers from various academic departments at BTU, selected based on their teaching experience and the diversity of their teaching styles and disciplines. This selection ensured that the data would reflect a broad perspective on non-verbal communication across different academic contexts. Lecturers were approached via the university's academic staff list, with participation being voluntary.

The student sample also consisted of 30 undergraduate students from various years and programmes at BTU. Students were purposefully selected to include a mix of academic achievers and those who faced academic challenges, to understand how non-verbal communication impacted different types of learners. Additionally, students were selected from diverse demographic backgrounds, including factors such as age, gender, and social context, to capture a wide range of perspectives.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and participant observation were conducted with both lecturers and students. The interviews focused on the following key areas: How lecturers perceived the role of non-verbal communication in teaching in the classroom, (e.g., body language, facial expressions, eye contact), lecturers' beliefs about how these non-verbal cues influenced student engagement, comprehension, and academic performance and the challenges they faced in

using non-verbal communication effectively. With regards to the student's perspective, the interviews focused on how students interpreted and responded to their lecturers' non-verbal communication in the classroom., the non-verbal cues from lecturers that students found most effective or motivating., the impact of lecturers' non-verbal communication on students' learning experiences, motivation, and academic outcomes and Non-verbal cues that students found confusing, disengaging, or demotivating. The researchers also through Participant observation and Focus Group Discussion observed how the lecturers displayed positive and negative through their verbal cues during teaching in the classroom and also elicited views and perceptions of the participants about the social inquiry.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to provide detailed responses and share their experiences in their own words, ensuring a deep and comprehensive understanding of their perspectives.

4. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that focuses on identifying and analyzing patterns or themes within qualitative data. This process involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the content. Themes were identified by coding the data based on features related to the research questions. NVivo software was utilized to organize and analyze the data, providing tools for coding qualitative data, sorting themes, and identifying patterns within large datasets. This ensured a systematic and transparent approach to data analysis.

Through thematic analysis, the study sought to uncover how non-verbal communication was understood, perceived, and acted upon by both lecturers and students in the classroom setting. The findings aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the influence of non-verbal communication on student engagement, motivation, and academic success, offering valuable insights for improving educational outcomes at BTU and similar institutions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the study, as it involved human participants. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and their privacy was respected. The researchers ensured that all personal information remained confidential, and interview transcripts were anonymized by using pseudonyms in the reporting of findings to protect participants' identities.

Validity of the Study

To ensure the validity of the study, data triangulation was employed, drawing from multiple sources. Additionally, the researchers maintained transparency throughout the data collection and analysis process. Some participants were provided with the opportunity to review the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and provide feedback, further enhancing the credibility of the study's findings.

5. Findings

The significance of non-verbal communication in educational settings has increasingly been recognized in recent years. This study investigates the impact of positive non-verbal cues such as eye contact, smiling, and body language on student engagement, classroom dynamics, and academic performance, with a focus on Bolgatanga Technical University. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and observational methods, the results highlight the critical role of lecturers' non-verbal behaviors in shaping students' learning experiences.

Several key themes emerged from the analysis, including the impact of inconsistent or limited use of non-verbal communication in the classroom setting, the **Impact of Positive Non-Verbal Communication in the Classroom setting: Enhancing Student Confidence and Engagement**, and the **Link Between Consistently Used Positive Non-Verbal Communication and Academic Performance**.

Impact of Inconsistent or Limited Use of Non-Verbal Communication in the Classroom Setting

The study found that approximately 40% of lecturers were unaware of the importance of non-verbal communication cues in the teaching process, often relying solely on verbal communication. When non-verbal cues such as eye contact, smiling, and open body language are absent or inconsistently applied, student engagement and classroom dynamics suffer. Students often felt disconnected and lacked confidence in their learning. One of the lecturers reflected on this during a focus group discussion:

"The most important thing to do as a lecturer is to teach the students, and I do this through verbal communication. I think the students have ears to listen and understand the lesson" (Semi-structured interview, 2025).

One of the students also at a FGD stated;

"Some lecturers often wear frown faces during teaching, and this intimidates us, making it difficult to participate effectively in class. Others also sit down to teach without displaying gestures or eye contact" (FGD, 2025).

The findings suggest that fostering an atmosphere where positive non-verbal communication is consistently employed can significantly enhance student participation, strengthen the connection between students and lecturers, and improve academic performance.

Impact of Positive Non-Verbal Communication in the Classroom: Enhancing Student Confidence and Engagement

The findings also revealed that positive non-verbal cues, such as nodding, hand gestures, eye contact, smiling, and open body language exhibited by lecturers during teaching reinforce students' understanding and boost their confidence. One student described the impact of non-verbal cues:

"When the lecturer looks at you and smiles, it makes you feel like they see you. It gives me the confidence to ask questions and join the discussion" (FGD, 2025).

Another student noted:

"When the lecturer nods or uses hand gestures to emphasize points, it feels like they're hearing me. This encourages me to contribute more, knowing I'm being understood" (FGD, 2025).

A lecturer also commented:

"I find that when I maintain eye contact and smile, students are to feel comfortable asking questions, which leads to a more interactive class" (Semi-structured interview, 2025).

Another lecturer explained:

"I use nodding and hand gestures to guide the class and reinforce important ideas. These cues help keep students focused and involved in the discussion" (Semi-structured interview, 2025).

These behaviors were perceived by the students and some lecturers as indicators of approachability, fostering a classroom environment that encouraged active participation and interaction. This sense of connection led students to feel more comfortable and willing to contribute to discussions.

Link Between Consistently Used Positive Non-Verbal Communication and Academic Performance

The study revealed a clear correlation between lecturers' consistent use of positive non-verbal cues and improved academic performance. Students who felt acknowledged through these cues demonstrated higher levels of engagement, greater participation, and better retention of information, which ultimately contributed to enhanced academic outcomes.

As one student explained:

"When I'm acknowledged with eye contact or a smile, it gives me the confidence to participate more. This boosts my understanding of the material and, ultimately, my grades" (FGD, 2025).

A lecturer observed:

"I've noticed that students who feel connected through these non-verbal cues are more active in discussions, which leads to better performance and greater retention of information" (Semi-structured interview, 2025).

Further supported these findings. The researchers through Participant Observation in the Classroom also observed that in classrooms where lecturers consistently employed positive non-verbal communication, the environment was more interactive and dynamic. Students ask more questions, engage with their peers, and remain actively involved in the learning process. Conversely, classrooms where lecturers failed to use such cues exhibited lower levels of student engagement.

Interacting with some of the Classroom representatives after a lecturer had completed his lesson, One of the Classroom representatives remarked:

"In this class, the lecturer's positive body language, which included maintaining eye contact and smiling, created a lively atmosphere where students felt motivated to engage and ask questions."(Participant Observation, 2025)

In contrast, in a classroom where the lecturer avoided eye contact and exhibited closed body language, students appeared disengaged and hesitant to participate.

As remarked by another Class Representative:

"In this class, there was noticeably less interaction. The students were passive, possibly due to the lecturer's lack of positive non-verbal cues." "(Participant Observation, 2025)

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study underscore the critical role of non-verbal communication in enhancing student engagement, shaping classroom dynamics, and fostering academic success. By examining the effects of non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact, smiling, body language, and hand gestures on students' learning experiences at Bolgatanga Technical University (BTU), this study provides valuable insights into how communication dynamics influence educational outcomes, particularly within the context of tertiary education in Ghanaian.

A concerning finding of this study is that 40% of lecturers at BTU remain unaware of the significance of non-verbal communication or fail to consistently utilize these cues. This problem may not be limited to BTU alone but to the remaining tertiary institutions in Ghana. This oversight is problematic, as the literature robustly supports the notion that non-verbal cues are integral to effective teaching. Mehrabian (1972) highlighted that non-verbal behaviors constitute a substantial portion of communication in educational contexts. The absence of key non-verbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures can create emotional distance, leading to disengagement. This finding aligns with the work of Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016), who emphasized that the lack of such cues impedes the establishment of rapport, undermining students' sense of belonging and confidence in the classroom.

Lecturers who rely solely on verbal communication may neglect the emotional and social dimensions of the learning process. As one of the students expressed; "the absence of a lecturer's smile or engaging eye contact can evoke feelings of intimidation and disconnection, hindering participation". This highlights the importance of cultivating a welcoming and dynamic learning environment, where students feel empowered to engage and express themselves openly.

The study's findings regarding the positive impact of non-verbal cues such as smiling, nodding, and maintaining eye contact are consistent with extensive research on the benefits of these behaviors in the classroom. McCroskey (2006) asserted that non-verbal communication plays a vital role in establishing trust and rapport, both of which are essential for fostering a positive

learning environment. As noted in the literature review, active non-verbal communication can lead to heightened student participation and increased classroom interactivity (Floyd, 2017).

In the case of BTU, students reported feeling more confident to participate when lecturers employed non-verbal cues that signaled attentiveness and approachability. This finding resonates with the work of Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (2007), who demonstrated that students perform better and exhibit greater motivation when their instructors engage with them non-verbally.

Moreover, the observed improvements in student engagement and confidence when lecturers consistently employed positive non-verbal cues are consistent with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), which underscores the influence of modeled behaviors on students' learning outcomes. At BTU, students who observed their lecturers using non-verbal cues such as eye contact or hand gestures felt more valued, which in turn motivated them to actively participate and deepen their understanding of the material.

A particularly significant finding of the study is the correlation between lecturers' consistent use of positive non-verbal cues and improved academic performance. The literature supports this relationship, with research indicating that students who feel acknowledged through non-verbal communication tend to perform better academically (Mehrabian, 1972). In BTU classrooms, when lecturers maintained eye contact, smiled, and used gestures, students were more likely to engage in discussions, retain information, and ultimately achieve better academic outcomes. This finding aligns with the work of Rahmani, N. (2024) who argued that in large lecture settings, non-verbal cues can bridge the gap left by verbal communication, fostering a stronger connection between students, their instructors, and the content.

The observations made in this study further suggest that positive non-verbal communication contributes to a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment, wherein students feel empowered to participate. This observation is in line with Wahyuni, A. (2018) findings, which emphasize the role of non-verbal engagement in reducing students' sense of alienation and boosting their motivation. Consequently, consistent and positive non-verbal communication not only serves as a tool for improving classroom dynamics but also acts as a key driver of academic success.

This study also highlights the cultural dimensions of non-verbal communication within the Ghanaian context, particularly at BTU. The intersection of Western educational practices and traditional African communication styles creates a distinctive environment where non-verbal cues hold significant weight. Research by Omodan, B. I., & Mamaile, D. (2024) underscores the importance of non-verbal behaviors in managing classroom authority and establishing rapport in African classrooms. At BTU, students' reliance on non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, is deeply rooted in cultural norms, amplifying the impact of these behaviors on student-teacher interactions.

However, as Merani K. (2019) observes, the tendency of lecturers to adopt rigid, formal communication styles may hinder the potential of non-verbal cues. This underscores the need for lecturers at BTU and other tertiary institutions to find a balance between formal communication

and the use of approachable, engaging non-verbal behaviors. Lecturers who are sensitive to the cultural nuances of communication can foster a more inclusive and participatory classroom environment, ultimately enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.

6.1 Theoretical Implication

By incorporating consistent positive non-verbal communication, lecturers can create a classroom atmosphere that fosters trust, encourages active participation, and leads to improved academic outcomes. As suggested by Social Cognitive Theory and the Theory of Non-Verbal Communication, students internalize and model the non-verbal behaviors they observe, which in turn influences their own engagement and academic performance. This study calls for greater awareness and training of lecturers in the use of non-verbal communication strategies to enhance student success and foster a more inclusive learning environment.

7 Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that BTU and other tertiary institutions in Ghana incorporate non-verbal communication training in professional development programs for lecturers. Lecturers should be encouraged to become more mindful of their body language, facial expressions, and gestures to create more inclusive and engaging classroom environments.

Given the lack of research on non-verbal communication in Ghanaian tertiary institutions, further studies should examine the long-term impact of non-verbal communication on academic success, particularly in other regions of Ghana and other African countries.

7 Conclusion

The study underscores the pivotal role of positive non-verbal communication in fostering an interactive and dynamic classroom environment. Lecturers who consistently use eye contact, open body language, and other positive cues contribute to a classroom atmosphere where students feel valued, motivated, and confident. This enhanced student engagement ultimately leads to improved academic performance. Moreover, the findings suggest that non-verbal communication serves as a crucial tool for shaping classroom interactions and influencing student success. Positive non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, body language, and hand gestures, help create an environment where students feel acknowledged and confident in their learning. As a result, lecturers who effectively incorporate these cues can enhance student participation, leading to better academic outcomes and overall student success.

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