

The Power of a Smile: Exploring the Connection Between Teacher Facial Expressions and ESL Learning

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Abstract

This research was designed to determine the impact of smiling by an ESL teacher on students' learning achievement. Ten males and six females were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. All of them were students of a higher education program in the United Arab Emirates for the study. The findings suggested that a smile is a major part that can lead to better learning outcomes and affirmed the positive psychology theory. In addition, it was ascertained that a smiling teacher leads to positive changes in attitude; learning climate; motivation and involvement; rapport with the subject; reduction in stress; anxiety; fear and anger; and an improvement in trust and respect. Higher learning outcomes may be achieved through any of these ways. This conceptual model is conducive to empirical research study as presented in this research.

Keywords: *Smile, ESL, Engagement, Learning Experience, Positive Psychology.*

Introduction

Teaching is essential as part of the profession and, in the case of ESL teachers, who are most often pressed to address their learners' needs, teaching is becoming increasingly challenging (Gebhard, J. G., 2006). Many researchers point out that the objectives of instruction include increasing learning achievements and students' satisfaction and that these variables explain teachers' performance. Nevertheless, no study has shown which particular approaches can help ESL teachers accomplish these objectives (Horwitz & E. K., 2020). Learning teachers are always looking for new ideas, student activities, as well as, professional development that will create a positive impact on their students and learning (Barr, 1958; Vandiver and Walsh, 2010). Some of the literature regarding effective teaching, effective teachers, and common features of teachers include Muijis & Reynolds, 2017; Perrott, 2014; and Marshall, 2016 among others. The majority of these studies emphasize organizational strategies as the important aspects of teaching besides content knowledge, questioning skills, structure planning, and organization of lesson delivery, feedback, and assessment. This is however not an exhaustive list of special abilities that are crucial in the ability of an educator to use in the classroom. PT also stressed other skills, which include spoken and non-spoken skills and communication skills. According to Santos, (2007), the things that teachers may engage in to support or emphasize their teachings include hand movements, tilting head, and facial gestures. Interpersonal communications that involve the use of interpersonal touch regard nonverbal communication as critical because it enables people to convey their emotions, start a conversation, and even influence a certain other person (Burgoon et al., 2016). Teachers can also assess the facial expressions of students by engaging in non-verbal communication and persuading and motivating their students. It's a powerful tool. Teachers are not only involved in interactions with children; teachers' nonverbal communication affects it too.

Talking and writing are not the only ways to teach, teachers can also use gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, emotion, and spatial distance between the educator and the students can improve student learning results. Facial expressions that teachers may use while lecturing may enhance learner's duration of focus and clear conceptual meanings and relations (Butt and Iqbal, 2011). The literature review has revealed that the leading research has focused on different frowns used by ESL teachers; concurrently, "the smile"—a crucial facial emotion that can enhance educational results has been neglected (Ulug et al., 2011). A smile pays much more off in schools since there are children of different ages who may feel offended or under pressure. To promote confidence and a feeling of self-worth, it guarantees that those children are safe,

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comfortable, and appreciated. Societal progress rises therefore learning and personal satisfaction, thus there are positive results as found by Aboelazm, K. S., Tawakol, F., Dganni, K. M., & AlFil, N. Z., 2024.

Smiling, especially in educational settings, hasn't been extensively researched compared to laughter, even though both often happen together in different social situations (Haakana, 2010). Distinguishing between the two can be tricky because the boundary between them is so subtle (Andrén and Cekaite, 2016). While we usually think of smiling as something we see, it can also be heard—much like laughter—making both smiles and laughter not just visual, but verbal signals too (Ford and Fox, 2010; Glenn and Holt, 2013). In the classroom, both students and teachers can use smiling and laughter as communication tools (Jakonen and Evnitskaya, 2020). For example, a teacher's smile can positively influence student engagement and outcomes (Nussbaum, 1992) and foster a sense of warmth (Gorham, 1988). Neill (1989) also notes that a smile shows care, which can significantly impact how students respond (Pappamihel, 2004). This study aims to explore how smiling by ESL teachers affects students' learning outcomes.

Literature Review

Teacher's talking and writing is not the only strategy of teaching, the use of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, emotions, and territorial interaction between the teacher and students help the learners increase their results. Postural gestures, which may be used by teachers when presenting a lecture, may increase the learner's duration of attention and increase the comprehensiveness of the concepts and relations that are presented by the teachers. The literature review analysis has highlighted that the preceding literature has provided attention to several frowns operational by ESL teachers; contemporarily, 'the smile' which is an imperative facial mood that can foster student educational success has been ignored (Ulug et al., 2011). A smile earns much more of the returns in schools because there are children of all ages some of whom may be offended or pressured. That way it guarantees that such children have a bulk feeling of self-worth confidence and safety without feeling anyone's discomfort or rejection because they know they are safe and accepted. Accordingly, societal progress emerges due to learning and personal satisfaction, and there are positive, as conclusions of Aboelazm, K. S., Tawakol, F., Dganni, K. M., & AlFil, N. Z., 2024.

At the same time, while there is no literature containing addresses smiles when it comes to education, let alone teaching, laughing has been subject to a considerable amount of research, even though both smiling and laughing signify something visible and intertwine in very different social practices. Besides, it appears almost herculean to distinguish between them because there is indeed a thin line between the two (Andrén & Cekaite, 2016). Even though smiling is widely described as a visual phenomenon, the audience hears a smile; thus, laughing and smiling are verbal discoveries (Ford & Fox, 2010; Glenn & Holt, 2013). Jakonen and Evnitskaya (2020) have pointed out that smiling and laughing are two of the action resources available for instructors and students to apply in the classroom(set). A teacher's grin can improve student performance (Nussbaum, 1992) and can increase assumed warmth (Gorham, 1988). On his part, Neill (1989) was of the view that the smile is a concern that triggers a response from pupils (Pappamihel, 2004). Hence the development of the following research question; how does smiling impact the student's learning outcome when done by English as Second Language teachers?

Since feelings should be expressed in different ways in different cultures, an understanding of the importance of smiling as a culture can also be rather difficult. For example, Russian students in classrooms in the US say that their teachers are too joyful while the teachers who have Russian learners believe that their students are not active in class or can appear to be happy (Gregersen, 2007). In addition, smiling can sometimes be understood as when one teases another (Jakonen and Evnitskaya, 2020). While acknowledging the usefulness of the study in dissecting the meaning of teacher smiles, Looney and Kim (2018) explained that, one potential analytic feature that might be useful concerns how students' prior turns may or may not align with the current activity and its perceived locally appropriate student response. It will be important to note that to date there have been no previous studies carried out on ESL teachers. Most of the smiles directed at teachers are considered irrespective of the gender or selected teachers (for instance, Harrington, 1955, Wallace, 2014 Jakonen and Evnitskaya, 2020).

Methodology

Specifically, this study aims to show how smiling facial gestures employed by ESL teachers influence the learning achievements of UAE students in higher learning institutions. To examine the aforementioned relationship, a qualitative approach is used because it is particularly suitable for use in analyzing data (Palmer and Bolderston 2006). Moreover, an interpretivism research paradigm is adopted since the research is of a qualitative kind (Campbell, 2014). Convenience sampling was used to recruit sixteen students for this study. All the participants ensured at baseline that they had completed at least three semesters of study. To collect data, two UAE higher education institutions were included in the shortlist. Focus group discussion was conducted among the students from the targeted/selected higher education institution. They were divided into groups for example male and female. This was done to ensure that each group member gets to do involvement with fellow group members. A description of the participants is as follows in Table 1 below;

Table 1: Participants

Participants	
Males	Females
10	6
Total: 16	

The most acceptable and widely used interview technique of collecting data on the effects of smiling on learning achievement was the semi-structured Interviews (Taylor, 2005). It is considered improper (Kallio et al., 2016) to stick to some type of format in these kinds of interviews, but they were performed with no strict patterns set beforehand. Their purpose: The interview questions are preestablished, but the overall flexibility of the process is rather low.

Findings

The analysis of data revealed six major factors: organization of the learning environment, higher level of motivation and learning activity, a closer relationship between student and teacher, changes for the better in the students, reduction of tension and anxiety, buildup of trust and respect. Figure 1 shows the depiction of each of them.

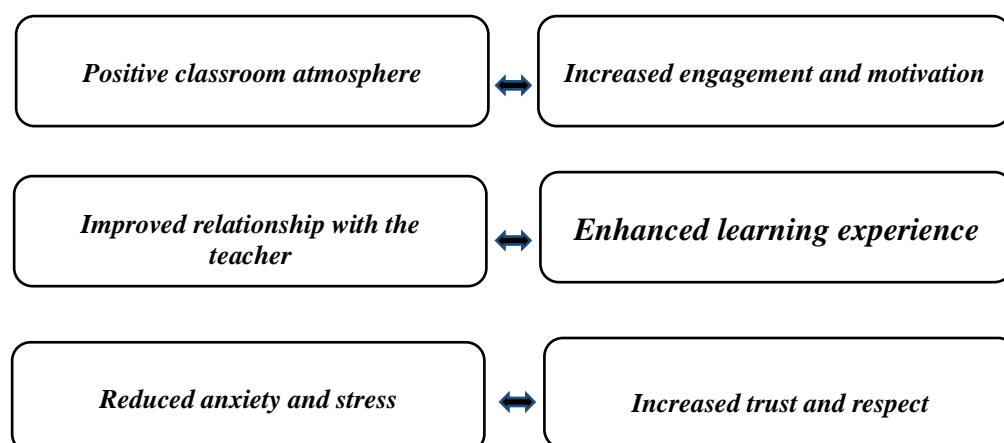


Figure 1: Themes

Positive Classroom Atmosphere, Increased Engagement and Motivation

Many participants noted they realized that the friendliness of the ESL teacher, a grin, for example, increased the level of comfort and desire to study in the classroom. From this, it may be deduced that through a smile, the teacher might improve the general classroom environment and the student's perception of their self-belonging to the course. As per the feedback of several of the participants, one of the ESL teacher's grin significantly enhanced their proactivity and classroom engagement (Aboelazm, K. S., Dganni, K. M., Tawakol, F., & Sharif, H., 2024). This indicates that a smile as a nonverbal gesticulation from the instructor can motivate a student to learn more than a scolding from the instructor to motivate him/her to learn.

Improved Relationship with the Teacher and Enhanced Learning Experience

Numerous participants stated that they felt nearer and had a good relationship with their ESL teacher because of her smile. This study underlines how important is to develop a good teacher-student relationship because it might influence a student's learning process and outcomes. Some of the participants stated that the smile of their ESL teacher contributed greatly to fun and meaningful learning. From this, it would be realized that a happy and engaging learning environment could be boosted by the teacher's grin and this in turn could lead to an increase in engagement, learning retention and therefore higher learning outcomes (Ramadan, S. A., 2023).

Reduced Anxiety Stress and Increased Trust and Respect

Several participants said that during the class the grin of their ESL teacher made them feel less tense or anxious. The focus of this work is on students' emotions during class and how their ability to regulate stress and anxiety through the teacher's nonverbal gestures. Three of the participants informed that their ESL teacher's smile could make them feel confident and respect her (Yas, N., Al-Bayati, Y., Sarhan, M. I., & Abdijabar, Z. G., 2024). From this, it is suggested that perhaps the teacher's smile can be perceived by the pupils as her cues regarding her competence, truthfulness, and word credibility. It will enhance students' attitude toward the instructor and enhance their willingness to listen and accept her authority as that of a figure of authority. Altogether, it is possible to conclude that the results accumulated in the course of this study can assert an ESL teacher's smile can influence students' experience positively in terms of supporting classroom climate, furthering motivation and engagement, enhancing the teacher-student relations, augmenting the learning process, decreasing stress and anxiety along with enhancing trust and respect to an ESL teacher. The suggested model by the findings is presented in Figure 2.

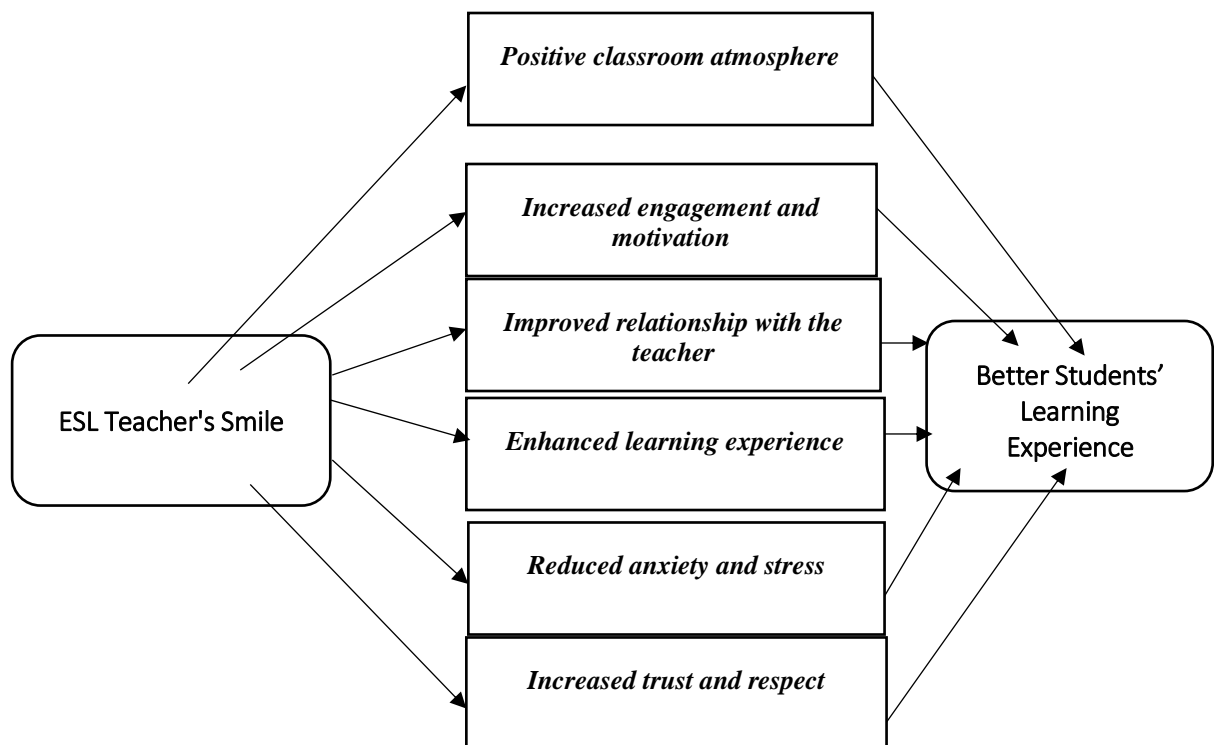


Figure 2. Proposed Model for ESL Teachers' Smile and Student Learning Experience.

Discussion and Implications

Teachers' and students' teaching–learning characteristics, like personality and social history, relate to the misbehavior that takes place in the classroom. As mentioned by Breaux & Whitaker (2010), the best educators know the fact that: It is almost impossible for a student to offend or misbehave when his teacher is smiling at him p.70. It is not hard to smile at your students when you are only looking at it from their aspect. Much as many teachers hate being in that class, every teacher remembers being in that class as a learner and all the teacher did was reproach them or other pupils, turning the class from being that center for learning into an open prison. Well, it doesn't mean that a grin is expensive. A teacher can simply turn and walk out of the class after asking the class 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon', 'I like what you have done small as that, or the feedback you have given me'. While some teachers may question this it is rather useful and efficient, at least in this case. At the very least it is not harmful in any way, shape, or form for them to do it.

As teachers' facial expressions are the most potent tools (Butt, et al., 2011, Leung and Chan 2022) and basic components of all interpersonal communications, they play a critical role in enhancing learning-related students' performance (Brackett and Katulak 2013). Of these expressions that may raise a measure of performance such as the pupils' attention, the most significant, according to Ergül (2021), is the smile of the teacher. Therefore, the reason for this study was to establish how the learning results of students were impacted when ESL teachers smiled. The results indicated a significant correlation between students' perceptions of their ESL teacher and the learning environment on one hand, and their perception of the given teacher's smile, on the other. This is in parity with other comparable research works done and available on the relationship between Nonverbal communication on student's teacher relationships and the dynamic environment of a classroom (Krauss et al., 1995; Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967). This paper also reveals that a smile from the ESL teacher has a positive impact on students learning, motivation, and social/emotional development in the following manners. To teach ESL, teachers should also know if their actions could affect their learners in any way, for instance, their gestures or their facial expressions. Worthy of notice is the fact that there are numerous studies done on the impact of teachers' nonverbal communication, including body language and facial expressions, on students' motivation and learning which has been discussed above. For example, research has shown that instructor interest enhances students' knowledge gain and interest. This passion can be communicated differently through body language and gestures as well as the use of facial expressions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Moreover, work based on classroom observation emphasized that teacher immediacy which means that persons have a joint social space and can speak and show their attitudes at once with others enhances the learning outcomes and motivation of students (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995).

Past studies have focused on what positive nonverbal communication namely a teacher's affective gestures means for the health of students and the classroom as a whole. For example, Denham, Zoller, and Couchoud (1994) found that students 'perceived' positive affect or affective climate in the class as well as students' positive feelings towards the lesson and the teacher were higher when teachers used more positive nonverbal communication like smiling. Likewise, Hamre and Pianta (2005) pointed out that children enjoy more level of social and emotional activity within the classroom when the professors use positive facial expressions. It has also been found out by recent findings regarding the factors related to ESL teachers and their smiles. It may cause an enhanced learning atmosphere, increased motivation and participation, higher quality teacher-student rapport, enhanced performance, reduced stress and pressure, and increased levels of trust and esteem. On such bases of attributes, this research has made it feasible for the emergence of a conceptual framework, which other researchers conducting empirical research may apply.

Though this study is about ESL teachers' affective states, it pays mainly attention to the smiles on their faces. In this respect, the study has several implications for researchers and ESL teachers. From the study, students believe that their ESL teacher's grin could be a critical paralinguistic feature that could positively affect students' learning process with theoretical implications. This highlights the importance of gestural and facial movement for educators to learn because these have a tremendous impact on how students will whatsoever understand the content as well as their ability to grasp concepts presented. In addition, the

study established that students' perceptions of their ESL teacher and classroom environment were more positive when they perceived that the teacher was smiling more often. This means that educators might stand a better chance of enthusing and motivating their pupils and setting a cheerful classroom by use of non-verbal communication clues such as smiling. This work differs significantly from previous studies as the latter either investigated all the facial movements or just the smiles of some instruction groups.

Further, the study has provided policymakers and the producers of professional development programs with practical implications apart from theoretical implications. Policy-makers require an understanding of classroom settings and what that implies about affects student learning results. Therefore, the schools and other centers of education must spend their money on such teacher training courses that also contain constructive classrooms with the students' active behaviors, motivation, and achievements properly. The message provides important evidence as to just where support for nonverbal communication should begin a targeted professional development team, with special attention to the efficacy of smiling in enhancing classroom climates for students. Such programs should also help teachers focus on grasping the student's attention, reducing stress, and anxiety, and building their trust and respect, all of which are crucial to the success of their students. Hence, schools and other players in the educational systems can improve the learning environment and prospects of the learners by promoting a healthy classroom environment. Similarly, also, individuals who are joyful, shocked, or even in other positive moods tend to smile. Perhaps, though, teachers are unable to regulate one or both of these emotions when the stress of their roles becomes unbearable because of institutional work or teaching, and disruptive students seize the day. You must indeed wish to smile for your facial expression would be a joy to others who would see it. However, the article does not consider the topic of smiling concerning the teacher-student interaction in a context rather primitive from the psychological and scientific point of view. It just offers the teacher's intention to step into the classroom with a smile, to try and gain the students' trust, and to encourage them and boost their morale. Students can approach their lectures prefer and with less prejudice when they are not so anxious about being shy. In addition, pupils will develop better ways of accepting criticism from teachers, and their growth will be better enhanced provided they stand frank and make honest remarks.

Limitations and Recommendations

However, the study has provided certain specific findings that can be specific to the researchers and practitioners, few general limitations were observed in the present study that need to be controlled while designing future studies. First, the study indicates that ESL teachers must be cognizant of their body language in class including their smiles and facial gestures. This could involve monitoring oneself or requesting that other employees, or learners, report on the body signals that they are perceiving. Thus, by accessing a larger number of students and educational institutions, it is possible to conduct a more comprehensive study of the correlation between teachers' non-verbal communication and the results of students' learning processes. This could lead to a better understanding of the fine details that shape students' learning and help chart the best approach when developing effective instructional plans. Second, although the relevancy of smiles was limited to the teachers in the study further studies revealing the correlation between the teachers' nonverbal communications and the students' learning outcomes will be required. This can include or examine how more features, including gestures, eye contact, or facial expressions, influence students' perception of the world and schooling. Thirdly, it makes sense to accept the fact that most likely there will be a rather multilayered connection between the students' outcomes of their learning, on the one hand, and the teachers' nonverbal cues that accompany the learning process, on the other. Again, a teacher's pedagogical experience and competency in language may also determine how pupils view their education. Fourthly, the present study involves only students from a single University and a larger research effort is needed to determine if the observed phenomenon is generalizable to different populations and settings. Fifth, since the conceptual model has been developed from the findings it is not being tested but can be tested for the quantitative results in future research.

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