



Understanding the Role of Teacher Immediacy in Enhancing English Communication among University Learners

Virginia Gabrella Sengkey

Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP Universitas Klabat, Manado, North Sulawesi

Corresponding E-Mail: virginia.sengkey@unklab.ac.id

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Abstract

This study utilized both correlational and comparative research methodologies to investigate the relationship between teacher immediacy behaviors and university students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English classes, as well as to assess potential gender-based differences in students' perceptions of these behaviors and their WTC of a private university in North Sulawesi. The sample consisted of 275 undergraduate university students enrolled in English courses, ranging from basic to advanced English levels. The analysis revealed a statistically significant correlation between teacher immediacy behaviors and students' WTC in English classes, with a p -value of .000 and $r = 0.392$. Furthermore, the results indicated no significant gender differences in students' perceptions of teacher immediacy behaviors or their WTC in English classes. Therefore, cultivating a warm, non-threatening classroom climate where students feel emotionally safe can further amplify the benefits of teacher immediacy and promote greater participation in English communication tasks.

Keywords: *English; students; teacher immediacy behaviors; willingness to communicate*

Introduction

In the field of learning and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), several ongoing issues seem to hinder students' progress toward proficiency, despite teachers' efforts to help them become proficient in the target language. Especially in an EFL setting, teachers may encounter the fact that many students are reluctant to speak in English, even when encouraged, which then gives rise to numerous problems for the teachers to address. This reluctance is somehow pointed out to be sourced from the teacher. For instance, it is believed that teacher factors such as their belief, attitude, the way they interact, and their teaching style can significantly affect students' engagement and willingness to communicate (WTC) (Jaya et al., 2022; Sheybani, 2019; Sofyan & Mahmud, 2018). Thus, some teacher-related factors can affect students' proficiency.

It is undeniable that to be proficient in English, learners of EFL need to practice using the language as often as possible. Wijaya and Rizkina (2015) suggested that practicing the language inside the classroom can help students familiarize themselves with the structures, linguistic, and real communicative skill of the language. Sarwat et al. (2023) found that willingness to communicate in English is significantly correlated with oral proficiency in English language learning. However, presently, many English learners do not take this as an important matter. The underlying reasons for that can vary according to learners.

Unwillingness or reluctance of students to speak or communicate in English is a problem that many English teachers in Indonesia face. As stated by Rafii (2018), English lecturers highlighted the lack of student participation and their unwillingness to speak in English. He further added that having the students to speak and participate in the class using English is something that is expected and desired to happen. A number of studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have been done to investigate factors that are closely related with students' willingness to communicate. Some of the factors that were found to be closely related to students' WTC were motivation, self-confidence, interest, culture, communication apprehension, personality, gender, age, and self-perceived communication competence (Amalia et al., 2024; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004). Furthermore, Cai (2021) discovered that teacher immediacy behaviors as one influential teaching means in helping the students be more willing to communicate. Thus, besides personal factors, the immediacy behaviors of the teacher may also affect students' WTC.

Students' unwillingness to talk has been one of the setbacks experienced by teachers, especially by English teachers. This has been an issue that requires further investigation, as students' unwillingness to talk can hinder their proficiency. In fact, Riasati (2012) noted that when students are less willing to communicate, it can result in reduced language production and less effective communication. Wijaya and Rizkina (2015) also noted that, although opportunities have been provided for students to speak, many of them would

prefer to remain silent, even after learning English for several years. Thus, this result in very low English communicative competence. Several factors have been identified to be affecting students' WTC. Ilyas (2022) found that one of the factors is the teacher factor. For this reason, the researcher is interested in determining whether teacher immediacy behaviors are one of the factors related to students' WTC. In addition, although previous studies have been conducted in other countries, there remains a paucity of research directly investigating these two variables in Indonesia, especially in North Sulawesi. Therefore, the researcher intends to examine these two variables to see whether the results would be the same as what have been found previously.

This study aimed to provide insights on the correlation between teacher immediacy behaviors as perceived by the students, more specifically university students, and whether male and female students differ significantly in their perceptions of teacher immediacy behaviors and their WTC. Hence, the research questions in this study are formulated as follows:

1. Is there any significant correlation between teacher immediacy behaviors as perceived by the students and their WTC?
2. Is there any significant difference in students' perceived teacher immediacy behaviors based on gender?

Is there any significant difference in students' WTC based on gender? Based on the research problems stated above, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. There is no significant correlation between teacher immediacy behaviors as perceived by the students and their WTC.
2. There is no significant difference in students' perceived teacher immediacy behaviors based on gender.
3. There is no significant difference in students' WTC based on gender.

Review of Literature

Numerous scholars have offered definitions of immediacy behaviors. Mehrabian (1966), who first introduced the concept, described it as the tendency for people to physically or emotionally distance themselves from those they dislike and to move closer to those they favor and view positively. In a similar vein, Richmond (2002) characterized immediacy as the feeling of being physically or mentally close to someone. Likewise, Hayes et al. (2013) viewed immediacy as actions that foster a sense of psychological closeness between individuals. Overall, immediacy can be understood as a set of behaviors that either promote or diminish a sense of connection, depending on how individuals feel about one another.

Immediacy behaviors are generally categorized into two main types. According to Bozkaya and Aydin (2007), these are verbal and nonverbal forms of immediacy. Therefore, teacher immediacy can also be classified as either verbal

or nonverbal. Verbal teacher immediacy involves spoken expressions that convey empathy, openness, encouragement, humor, praise, and a willingness to interact with students, as explained by Ballester (2015). On the other hand, nonverbal teacher immediacy, as described by Richmond and McCroskey (as cited in Ballester, 2015), includes body language and other nonverbal cues that promote a sense of physical and emotional closeness, ultimately enhancing students' positive feelings toward the teacher, the subject, and the classroom experience. Both verbal and nonverbal immediacy play important roles in influencing students' engagement and learning outcomes.

Teacher immediacy behaviors are widely recognized as a key influence on student learning. Mullane (2014) emphasized that these behaviors are among the most impactful strategies educators can use, contributing significantly to students' academic achievement and their likelihood of continuing their education. As such, immediacy behaviors are believed to enhance students' ability to retain information and perform well academically. Additionally, Ballester (2015) pointed out that the way teachers communicate with their students plays a crucial role in determining how effective their instruction is. Students' perceptions of this communication style can influence both their emotional engagement and cognitive development. In essence, teaching effectiveness may largely depend on how effectively educators connect with their students through communication.

In addition, immediacy can play a crucial role in enhancing students' engagement and motivation to learn. Fahara and Castro (2015) explained that when students feel a sense of psychological closeness with their teacher, this reflects the presence of teacher-student immediacy. In other words, the development of a close psychological bond indicates that immediacy is at work in the classroom. Similarly, Furlich (2016) noted that students' personal connections with instructors often stem from the use of immediacy behaviors, which help foster such engagement.

Mullane (2014) also emphasized that when teachers consistently demonstrate immediacy behaviors, students are more likely to respond positively to the teacher's requests, view the teacher as more credible, and become more motivated to concentrate on the subject matter. This suggests that teacher immediacy can significantly impact students' attitudes and focus. Therefore, for educators aiming to boost student motivation and willingness to learn, incorporating immediacy behaviors into their teaching practices is essential.

Various scholars have offered different definitions of willingness to communicate (WTC). MacIntyre et al. (2002) described WTC as a continuum that reflects an individual's tendency either to engage in or avoid communication when given the opportunity. In simpler terms, WTC is a personal inclination toward initiating or refraining from communication when one is free to choose. Similarly, Mortensen et al. (1977), along with McCroskey and Richmond (1982), also characterized WTC as an individual's natural tendency to begin a conversation

when circumstances permit. Additionally, Kang (2005) defined WTC as a person's intentional willingness to participate in communication in a given situation, influenced by factors such as the conversational partner, topic, and setting. Based on these perspectives, WTC in the context of English language learning can be understood as the learners' readiness to actively take part in classroom communication, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, skill levels, personalities, classroom environment, cultural norms, or the nature of the tasks involved.

Numerous factors have been examined regarding their relationship with WTC. For instance, Yu, cited in Gol et al. (2014), who conducted a study among Chinese English language learners, found that all communication variables, including WTC, fear of communication, and their perception of their communication competence, were significantly correlated with each other, whether it is in a Chinese communication setting or an English communication setting. Another study, conducted by Riasati (2012) in the Iranian context, investigated the factors contributing to their WTC in the English class based on their perceptions. The results show that the type of task, topic of discussion, teacher, classroom atmosphere, personality, and students' speaking ability, as perceived by themselves, affected the EFL learners' WTC in the English class. Furthermore, Alemi et al. (2013) explored the relationship between WTC and individual differences, finding that these differences, in one way or another, affected their WTC. Thus, learner and teacher factors, as well as the type of task and the atmosphere of the learning environment, are some of the factors related to students' WTC.

Teacher immediacy behaviors has been identified as one factor that contributes to students' WTC. Gol et al. (2014) conducted a study in Iran on Iranian EFL learners' perceived teacher immediacy and their WTC. The study aimed to investigate the factors that affect students' WTC. A questionnaire on WTC developed by the researchers and Gorham's (1988) Verbal Immediacy Measure (VIM) and McCroskey et al.'s (1996) Revised Nonverbal Immediacy Measure (RNIM) were used as the instrument. The results showed that seven factors affected students' WTC, one of which was teacher immediacy. Moreover, the results also showed that a positive correlation existed between verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors and EFL learners' WTC in the EFL classes. Thus, the researchers concluded that one of the variables that underlie students' WTC is teacher immediacy, and teachers who show immediacy behaviors during the teaching and learning process can increase students' WTC.

Method

The research methods employed in this study were correlational and comparative. The researcher employed correlational and comparative methods to investigate whether a significant correlation existed between teacher immediacy

behaviors and students' WTC, and whether a significant difference in perceived teacher immediacy behaviors and students' WTC existed based on gender. The population of this study consisted of students enrolled in different English proficiency levels at a private university.

The researcher employed the convenience sampling method to select respondents for this study. This means that the respondents of this study were only the students who were available at the time of data gathering.

The instrument that was used in this study was the Verbal Immediacy (VIM) questionnaire developed by Gorham (1988) and the Nonverbal Immediacy Measure (NIM) developed by McCroskey et al. (1996) to measure the extent of teacher immediacy behaviors, and the WTC questionnaire developed by Gol, Zand- Moghadam, and Karrabi (2014) to assess the students' WTC. The questionnaire was translated to Bahasa Indonesia to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

The reliability of the questionnaire was also calculated using Cronbach's Alpha which shows that questionnaire possessed an acceptable internal consistency because it has a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.85$ for teacher immediacy behaviors and Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.78$ for students' WTC. The Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient was used to answer Research Question 1. Lastly, the t-test was used to answer research questions two and three.

Results

Research Question Number 1

Table 1. Correlation Between Teacher Immediacy Behaviors as Perceived by the Students and Their WTC

Correlations		
		WTC
TIB	Pearson	.392**
	Correlation	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	275

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results presented in Table 1 indicate a significant moderate correlation between teacher immediacy behaviors and students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English class, with a p-value of .000 and a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.392$. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which posited that "There is no significant correlation between teacher immediacy behaviors as perceived by the students and their WTC," is rejected. This finding suggests that teacher immediacy behaviors are significantly related to students' willingness to communicate in English class. Specifically, the greater the perceived immediacy of the teacher, the more likely students are to demonstrate a willingness to communicate in English.

Therefore, teachers must recognize their role in creating an environment that encourages students to communicate in English. However, given the moderate strength of the correlation, it is likely that other factors also play a significant role in influencing students' willingness to communicate in English.

Research Question Number 2

Table 2. Difference in Students' Perceived Teacher Immediacy Behaviors Based on Gender

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Mean	Equal variances assumed	-.478	273	.633	-.02705	.05655
	Equal variances not assumed	-.478	263.592	.633	-.02705	.05658

Table 2 presents the differences in students' perceptions of teacher immediacy behaviors. The results, as indicated in Table 2, show a p-value of .633, suggesting that there is no significant difference in students' perceptions of teacher immediacy behaviors based on gender. Thus, the hypothesis which states "There is no significant difference on students' perceived teacher immediacy behaviors based on gender" is accepted.

This finding suggests that both male and female students perceive their teachers' immediacy behaviors in a similar manner, which may indicate that factors such as the teacher's communication style are universally recognized across genders. It is noteworthy that despite potential differences in individual experiences, gender does not appear to be a determinant in how teacher immediacy is perceived.

Research Question Number 3

Table 3. Difference in Students' WTC Based on Gender

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Mean	Equal variances assumed	1.386	273	.167	-.05811	.04193
	Equal variances not assumed	1.380	259.723	.169	-.05811	.04210

As shown in Table 3, there is no significant difference in students' WTC. The result shows that the $p = .167$. Thus, the hypothesis which states "There is no significant difference on students' WTC based on gender" is accepted. The result indicates that both men and women do not differ significantly in terms of their WTC in English class and that it is not gender that determines the difference on

students' WTC since there was no significant difference found between male and female students' WTC.

Discussion

These results highlight the significance of teacher behaviors in creating an environment that fosters student participation. Teachers who engage in behaviors that promote immediacy, such as maintaining eye contact, using warm body language, and providing positive verbal feedback, appear to encourage students to be more open to speaking and engaging in class discussions. Therefore, educators need to recognize and cultivate these behaviors to enhance students' willingness to participate in English communication.

However, it is important to note that the correlation observed is moderate, suggesting that while teacher immediacy plays a significant role, it is not the sole determinant of students' willingness to communicate. Other factors, such as individual student characteristics, cultural influences, language proficiency, or classroom dynamics, may also contribute significantly to students' WTC in English. The result of this study on the correlation between teachers' immediacy behaviors and students' willingness to communicate is similar to that found by Nurdizati et al. (2023).

They conducted the study on students in second grade in MAN PANGKEP and found that teacher immediacy behavior has a high positive correlation with students' WTC. Furthermore, Zhi and Wang (2024) found that teachers' immediacy influences EFL students' willingness to communicate in English class. They suggested that students seem to be more willing to communicate or talk when their teachers show communication behaviors that develop closeness with them.

The same result was also found by Gol et al. (2014), who discovered that teacher immediacy behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, significantly correlate with students' WTC. They further explained that the more effective the teacher's immediacy behaviors, the more willing the students would be to speak in class. Thus, teacher immediacy behaviors are important factors determining students' WTC in English class. Moreover, the result shows that both male and female students have the same perceptions regarding their teacher's immediacy behaviors.

The result found in this study is similar to that found by Hussain et al. (2021), who found that gender is not a factor that affects the perception of teacher immediacy behaviors. Similarly, Al Ghamdi, Samarji, and Watt (2015) and Azar et al. (2024) argued that gender does not significantly affect the verbal or nonverbal immediacy behaviors as perceived by the students as they also found no significant difference in the scores between male and female participants regarding their perception of their teacher immediacy behaviors.

In fact, Stork and Hartley (2014) pointed out that exploring the effect of gender on perceptions is not easy because predicting the perceptions of males

and females depends largely on various factors, such as experiences, education, family, and occupation. Thus, calculating the perceptions of males and females needs to consider numerous factors and cannot be easily determined by gender alone.

Lastly, the result on the insignificant difference on students' WTC based on gender is similar to the one by Maranatha and Sengkey (2023). In the present study, no significant difference in students' WTC was found because there might be other factors that lead students to have differences in their WTC or not communicate in English class. The factors include understanding of the topic, speaking in groups and pairs, task type, lack of vocabulary mastery, and background of knowledge, and other individual factors such as self-confidence, language anxiety, motivation, and grit (Bakar et al., 2022; Qamaria, 2024; Saputra et al., 2024; Solikah et al., 2025).

More specifically, the reason why in this study no significant difference was found on students' WTC based on gender could be that the students, both men and women experience the same language anxiety. As found by Wijayaa and Rizkina (2015), language anxiety is one of the most influencing factors in Indonesian students' WTC. Thus, this might also be the reason why the students in this study did not differ significantly in their WTC since both male and female students have the same language anxiety and thus it affects their WTC in English class similarly.

Conclusion

Based on the results obtained in this study, it is concluded that teacher immediacy behaviors are one factor that can help develop students' WTC in English class. Furthermore, both male and female students perceive their teacher's immediacy behaviors in the same way. Lastly, the students' WTC in English class is the same for both males and females. Thus, gender is not a factor that determines whether students are willing or not willing to speak English in English class.

It is recommended that teachers be aware of their immediacy behaviors as their immediacy behaviors are one factor that affects students' WTC. Thus, they need to ensure that they provide positive gestures and expressions, as well as positive and encouraging words, to students so that the students will feel comfortable in English class and be more willing to communicate in the class. Lastly, it is recommended that further in-depth studies and similar research be conducted at different educational levels and in several different school settings to identify other factors that may affect students' WTC in English class, as this study was limited to a single private university.

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