ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Enhancing Reading Comprehension for EFL Students in Vietnamese Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Nonverbal communication, including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements, serves as a valuable tool in English as a Foreign Language classrooms by reinforcing language comprehension and fostering an engaging learning environment. This study explores the role of nonverbal communication in enhancing reading comprehension among Vietnamese students learning English as a Foreign Language. A mixed-methods approach is employed, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data gathered through observations and student questionnaires in the English as a Foreign Language classroom setting at a Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that gestures and facial expressions are particularly effective in aiding vocabulary comprehension and interpreting the emotional tone of reading material. Eye contact and body movements contributed significantly to maintaining focus and creating a supportive atmosphere that encourages student participation. These insights suggest that integrating nonverbal communication strategies into reading instruction can make language more accessible and relatable, enhancing students' comprehension and engagement. This study underscores the importance of nonverbal cues in English as a Foreign Language pedagogy and offers recommendations for further research on nonverbal communication's role across different language learning skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, nonverbal communication has gained recognition as a critical component of effective teaching and learning, particularly in language education (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; Mehrabian, 1971). Nonverbal communication, which encompasses gestures, facial expressions, body language, and other non-spoken cues, can enhance learners' understanding and engagement by reinforcing verbal messages and adding depth to the information presented (Ekman, 2003; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where language barriers may hinder students' comprehension, nonverbal cues provide alternative pathways for understanding and can facilitate smoother, more impactful interactions between lecturers and students (Gullberg, 2010). This study aims to investigate the role of nonverbal communication in enhancing reading comprehension among Vietnamese EFL students, a topic that has seen limited exploration in academic research, especially within Southeast Asian educational contexts.

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill in language learning, essential for academic success and personal development (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). For EFL students, particularly those in Vietnamese classrooms, reading English texts poses unique challenges due to limited exposure to the language and often complex cultural contexts embedded in English literature and materials (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). These factors can cause trouble of

comprehension, frustration, and disengagement. In this context, nonverbal communication may serve as a valuable tool to bridge these gaps, offering visual, gestural, and emotional cues that help students better grasp the content and make sense of unfamiliar language patterns (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; McNeill, 1992). However, while research has frequently highlighted the importance of nonverbal communication in speaking and listening activities, its specific application to reading comprehension is relatively underexplored, leaving a research gap that this study seeks to address.

Prior research has shown that nonverbal communication can enhance various aspects of the language learning experience. According to Wulandari et al. (2024), nonverbal cues like gestures and eye contact play a significant role in maintaining students' attention and providing context that aids understanding. These cues become particularly important in EFL contexts, where students may lack vocabulary or language structures needed to fully understand a text through words alone. Nonverbal communication can thus act as a supplementary instructional tool, helping students to decode meanings, grasp emotions, and build associations with words and phrases (McNeill, 1992; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Furthermore, research by Guerrero and Floyd (2006) emphasizes that nonverbal communication not only complements verbal language but also operates as a standalone medium that conveys meaning effectively, especially in diverse and multilingual classrooms.

While there is a substantial body of research on nonverbal communication in general educational settings, studies focusing on its role in EFL reading comprehension, specifically in Vietnamese classrooms, are scarce (Dinh & Ha, 2024). Vietnamese students often encounter English as a foreign language primarily within classroom environments, with limited opportunities for real-world practice. This situation creates a heavy reliance on instructional techniques that can enhance understanding within the classroom. Unlike Western educational contexts, where students might have more exposure to English and the cultural nuances associated with it, Vietnamese EFL learners may benefit significantly from instructional practices that make language more accessible (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Therefore, examining the role of nonverbal communication in reading comprehension for Vietnamese EFL students offers the potential to uncover teaching strategies that cater to their specific needs and learning challenges. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring how nonverbal communication can support and enhance reading comprehension in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. Specifically, it seeks to identify which types of nonverbal communication - such as gestures, facial expressions, and visual aids are most frequently employed by lecturers to facilitate understanding, as well as students' perceptions of the effectiveness of these methods. By analyzing both observational data and students' feedback, this research study hopes to provide valuable insights into how nonverbal communication can be effectively integrated into reading instruction, ultimately supporting Vietnamese EFL students in developing stronger reading skills and greater confidence in their comprehension abilities. This study poses the following research questions: (1) What types of nonverbal communication are most frequently used by lecturers during reading comprehension activities in Vietnamese EFL classrooms?; (2) How do Vietnamese EFL students perceive the impact of nonverbal communication on their reading comprehension skills?

In addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature by shedding light on an under-researched area of EFL instruction. The findings are expected to inform teaching practices that can enhance reading comprehension in Vietnamese EFL classrooms and to offer a foundation for further research on nonverbal communication's role in language education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition and scope of nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is broadly defined as the transmission of meaning without the use of words. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), it encompasses any form of communication that does not rely on verbal language, including body language, facial expressions, gestures, and even proxemics (the use of space in communication). Nonverbal communication often works in tandem with spoken language, adding nuances and reinforcing meanings, but it can also function independently, conveying thoughts and emotions effectively on its own. Negi (2009) further defines nonverbal communication as the use of non-linguistic cues to stimulate meaning, emphasizing that it is a core component of human interaction and essential for effective communication in diverse settings.

Recent research underscores the significance of nonverbal communication in educational settings. For instance, a study by Kamiya (2016) examines how learners' age, English proficiency, and years of learning English affect the accuracy of interpreting nonverbal behaviors among EFL learners. The findings suggest that learners' ability to

correctly decode nonverbal behaviors develops with increased exposure to the target language and culture, highlighting the importance of integrating nonverbal communication into language instruction.

2.2. Importance of nonverbal communication in EFL education

Nonverbal communication holds particular significance in EFL education, where language learners often encounter difficulties in understanding spoken language due to limited vocabulary and exposure. Gullberg (2010) notes that nonverbal communication can help overcome these issues, offering visual and contextual support that helps learners interpret spoken or written language more effectively. In Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where English is learned as a foreign language with limited real-world application, nonverbal cues are valuable for guiding students toward accurate interpretation and responses. Nonverbal communication not only aids comprehension but also fosters a positive learning environment, as lecturers' expressions, gestures, and posture can encourage students to participate and feel more at ease, according to Nuraeni and Harahap (2023).

A recent study by Bellés-Calvera (2016) investigates the importance of gestures in the communication process and how the appropriate use of nonverbal communication enhances classroom interaction and contributes to conveying meaning. The findings suggest that lecturers' use of iconic hand movements enhances students' acquisition of the target language, emphasizing the role of nonverbal communication in EFL teaching.

2.3. Types of nonverbal communication relevant to reading comprehension

Nonverbal communication encompasses a wide range of behaviours, but several types are particularly pertinent to reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. Key types include facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and body movement, all of which play unique roles in supporting comprehension.

2.3.1 Facial expressions

Facial expressions are universally recognized and can convey a wide range of emotions without the presence of words. Ekman and Friesen (1975) emphasize that facial expressions are understood across cultures and are particularly useful in educational settings for indicating approval, disapproval, encouragement, and empathy. For EFL learners, a teacher's facial expressions can help clarify the emotional tone or implied meaning of a text, particularly if the text contains figurative language or complex themes. For example, a teacher's look of surprise when discussing a shocking event in a reading passage can signal to students that the passage should be understood with a certain level of emotional intensity.

2.3.2. Gestures

Gestures are another powerful form of nonverbal communication that can visually represent ideas and actions. According to McNeill (1992), gestures play a crucial role in speech and can help to convey abstract concepts more concretely. In EFL reading activities, gestures can be used to illustrate vocabulary words or actions described in a text, making them more accessible to students. For instance, pointing or mimicking an action described in a story can help students associate words with meanings more quickly and accurately. Negi (2009) suggests that gestures reduce cognitive load for learners by providing a secondary channel through which they can interpret language, which is particularly beneficial for vocabulary development in EFL contexts.

2.3.3. Eye contact

Eye contact is a central element of teacher-student interaction and can significantly impact students' focus and engagement. According to Nuraeni and Harahap (2023), eye contact is essential for establishing rapport and conveying attentiveness. In reading activities, a teacher's eye contact can help guide students through text, indicating points of focus or signaling the importance of specific sections. In Vietnamese classrooms, where students may be more reserved in expressing themselves, eye contact can serve as a non-verbal form of encouragement, fostering a supportive environment for active participation and questions.

2.3.4. Body movement and posture

Body movement and posture communicate attentiveness, enthusiasm, and authority in the classroom. For example, a teacher who stands upright and moves around the classroom demonstrates confidence and control, which can make students feel more secure in engaging with the material. Body movements like leaning in when students read aloud or moving closer during discussions create an impression of engagement and interest. Research by Negi (2009) highlights how lecturers' body language, such as nodding or moving to emphasize points, encourages students to respond with increased interest and enthusiasm, creating a more interactive reading environment.

2.4. Nonverbal communication and reading comprehension

While most studies on nonverbal communication in EFL settings focus on speaking and listening, its role in reading comprehension is less frequently explored. Reading comprehension involves not only understanding words on a page but also interpreting the emotions, attitudes, and subtleties within a text. In EFL contexts, nonverbal communication can help bridge comprehension gaps by signaling tone, mood, and emphasis that might otherwise be missed (Tran, 2020). For example, lecturers can use facial expressions to convey the tone of a dialogue in a story or use gestures to emphasize key details, enhancing students' understanding of narrative flow and character development. Research by Antika and Ikhsan (2018) supports this, noting that nonverbal cues like facial expressions and gestures improve students' interpretive skills, helping them relate better to the reading material.

Despite these promising insights, there is a gap in research on how nonverbal communication specifically impacts EFL reading comprehension. The majority of studies have been conducted in Western educational contexts, focusing on verbal instruction and cultural contexts that differ significantly from those in Vietnamese classrooms. The unique challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL students, who often lack exposure to English outside the classroom, make nonverbal communication potentially even more essential in supporting comprehension. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how nonverbal communication affects reading comprehension in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where limited English exposure and distinct cultural norms influence language learning. For instance, when reading a short story that includes unfamiliar idioms or emotional expressions, a teacher may use facial gestures (such as raising eyebrows to express surprise or frowning to signal confusion) and hand movements to represent actions described in the text. These nonverbal cues help students better understand the implied meaning of the text, especially when their vocabulary knowledge is limited (Dinh & Ha, 2024; Tran, 2020).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. A mixed-methods design enables a thorough exploration of how nonverbal communication is utilized in the classroom and its perceived impact on reading comprehension. The quantitative component consists of systematic observations to capture the frequency and type of nonverbal cues used by lecturers during reading sessions, while the qualitative component involves a survey to gather students' perspectives on the role of these nonverbal cues in aiding their comprehension. This dual approach enables a comprehensive analysis that combines observable behaviors with subjective insights.

3.2. Participants

This study involved 50 EFL students enrolled in a public university in Thai Nguyen city, Vietnam. The sample size of 50 was determined based on practical considerations common in classroom-based educational research, including class size limitations, accessibility, and the need for manageable data collection within a semester-long study. This number also aligns with similar small-scale experimental or quasi-experimental studies in applied linguistics, which often range between 30 to 60 participants for focused intervention research.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting non-English major students aged 18-21 years old who had a pre-intermediate level of English proficiency. They were enrolled in general English courses and had limited exposure to English outside the classroom environment. The selection criteria aimed to create a homogeneous group with similar educational and linguistic backgrounds, which allowed the study to focus more precisely on the effects of nonverbal communication on reading comprehension. This purposive sampling approach ensured that all participants met the study's objectives and contributed relevant data to the research questions.

The scope of the study focuses on the role of nonverbal communication, including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements in enhancing reading comprehension for Vietnamese EFL students. Conducted in a Vietnamese EFL classroom context, the study addresses the unique challenges faced by learners with limited exposure to English and its cultural nuances. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research incorporated both observational data and student questionnaires to analyze how nonverbal cues were used by lecturers and perceived by students. The study aimed to provide targeted insights into improving teaching strategies to support better comprehension and engagement in reading activities.

3.3. Research setting

The study takes place in a Vietnamese EFL classroom setting, where English is taught as a foreign language with limited exposure to native speakers or English-speaking environments. This context is crucial, as Vietnamese students may lack familiarity with the cultural and contextual nuances often embedded in English texts. The classroom sessions selected for this study focus on reading comprehension practice, where students analyze short passages and stories. Nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact are anticipated to play a significant role in bridging comprehension gaps for these learners. The structured nature of this academic environment warrants systematic observation of teacher-student interactions and the specific nonverbal techniques employed by instructors to support reading comprehension.

3.4. Data collection instruments

This study utilizes two primary instruments: an observation checklist and a questionnaire.

3.4.1. Observation checklist

The observation checklist is designed to systematically capture the types and frequency of nonverbal cues used by lecturers during reading sessions. Based on frameworks from previous studies (e.g., Kamiya, 2016; Bellés-Calvera, 2016), the checklist includes categories for facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and body movement/posture. The checklist is adapted to the specific classroom context, with indicators that detail the use of each nonverbal cue in relation to reading tasks. For example, the checklist notes instances of lecturers using gestures to illustrate vocabulary, eye contact to maintain student focus, and facial expressions to convey tone. Observations are conducted over six classroom sessions, each lasting 45 minutes, to ensure a comprehensive collection of data across different reading activities. Each instance of nonverbal behavior is recorded by frequency and context to enable detailed analysis.

3.4.2. Questionnaire

To gain insights into students' perceptions of nonverbal communication's impact on their reading comprehension, a questionnaire was administered at the end of the six session observation. Adapted from validated questionnaires in nonverbal communication studies (e.g., Antika and Ikhsan, 2018; Kamiya, 2016), this instrument includes both closed and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions use a Likert scale to measure students' agreement with statements regarding the usefulness of nonverbal cues in aiding comprehension. Statements include items such as, "Gestures used by the teacher help me understand difficult vocabulary" and "I find it easier to follow the reading material when the teacher uses facial expressions to show emotions."

The open-ended questions invite students to provide additional feedback on how specific nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye contact, hand gestures) affect their engagement and understanding of reading materials. This combination of question types encompasses both quantitative analysis of student responses and qualitative insights into individual experiences, thereby enriching the study's findings.

3.5. Data collection procedure

The data collection process spanned over six reading sessions in the selected EFL classroom. During each session, the researcher observes and records nonverbal behaviors used by the teacher, noting the context in which each behavior occurs and its apparent effect on student engagement and comprehension. The researcher maintains a non-intrusive presence in the classroom to minimize disruption and ensure that observations reflect natural classroom interactions.

Following the observation sessions, the questionnaire was distributed to the participating students, who completed it anonymously to encourage honest responses. The survey was administered immediately after the final observation session to ensure that students' experiences with nonverbal communication in reading activities remained fresh in their minds.

3.6. Data analysis

Data analysis involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches to address the research questions comprehensively.

3.6.1. Quantitative analysis

The quantitative data from the observation checklist are fed into SPSS software to calculate descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, for each type of nonverbal communication observed. This analysis reveals which nonverbal cues are most frequently used and in what contexts they are applied, offering insights into patterns regarding the use of nonverbal communication during reading comprehension activities. The quantitative data from

the closed-ended questions on the questionnaire are also analyzed using SPSS to determine the overall levels of student agreement with each statement about nonverbal communication's effectiveness in aiding comprehension.

3.6.2. Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data from the open-ended responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using thematic coding. The responses were reviewed to identify recurring themes related to students' perceptions of how nonverbal cues influence their reading comprehension. The themes include students' views on specific types of nonverbal behaviors (e.g., gestures, facial expressions) and their effects on understanding vocabulary, interpreting emotions in text, and maintaining focus. This thematic analysis ensures deeper insights into students' experiences and provides context for the quantitative findings.

3.6.3. Triangulation

To strengthen the validity of the findings, the study employs triangulation by cross-referencing the data from the observation checklist with the questionnaire responses. For example, if the observation data indicate frequent use of gestures to illustrate vocabulary, and the students reported in the questionnaire responses that gestures help them understand vocabulary better, this alignment collectively supports the reliability of the results. Triangulation ensures that the study captures a comprehensive picture of nonverbal communication's impact on reading comprehension.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, organized by the research questions. Each question is addressed with quantitative and qualitative data from the observation checklist and questionnaire responses, revealing insights into the types of nonverbal communication most frequently used by lecturers during reading sessions and the students' perceptions of these nonverbal cues on their reading comprehension.

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Research question 1: What types of nonverbal communication are most frequently used by lecturers during reading comprehension activities in Vietnamese EFL classrooms?

The first research question aims to identify the types of nonverbal communication most commonly employed by lecturers during reading comprehension sessions. The data collected from the observation checklist over six classroom sessions provided insights into the frequency and contexts of various nonverbal behaviors, including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements.

Observational results of nonverbal communication types

The observation checklist results reveal that gestures and facial expressions were most frequently used by the teacher during reading activities, followed by eye contact and body movements. The following section discusses the frequencies of nonverbal behaviours and their observed usage.
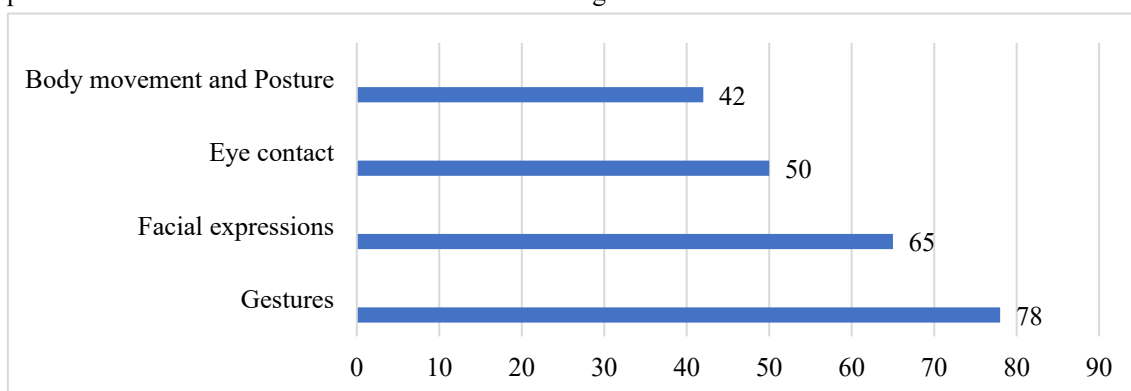

Figure 1. Frequency of nonverbal communication types used by lecturers

The data presented in Figure 1 illustrates the frequencies of various nonverbal communication types used by lecturers during the observed reading comprehension activities. Each type of nonverbal behavior serves a distinct purpose, enhancing students' understanding of the reading material and contributing to a more engaging and supportive classroom environment.

Gestures were the most frequently observed form of nonverbal communication, recorded 78 times. The lecturers used gestures primarily to introduce new vocabulary or explain actions within the text. For instance, they would mimic actions like "running" or "jumping" to help students visualize these concepts, especially when words alone were insufficient. The high frequency of gestures highlights their importance in making abstract language more accessible and memorable for students, offering a secondary channel through which they can understand and retain new information.

Facial expressions were the second most commonly used nonverbal cues, observed 65 times. The lecturers utilized facial expressions to convey the emotional tone or mood of the reading material, such as joy, sadness, or surprise which added depth to students' comprehension. By mirroring the emotions within the text, facial expressions help students connect more meaningfully with the content and better grasp implied meanings. The frequency of facial expressions underscores their effectiveness in creating an emotionally engaging learning experience, helping students relate to the language on a deeper level.

Eye contact was used 50 times and played a key role in maintaining students' focus on the reading material. The lecturers often directed eye contact towards individual students, either to emphasize important sections of the text or to gauge students' understanding. This nonverbal cue fostered a direct connection between the teacher and students, encouraging them to stay attentive and engaged. The frequent use of eye contact suggests it is an essential tool for promoting active participation and ensuring students remain focused during reading sessions.

Body movement and posture were recorded 42 times and contributed to creating a relaxed and inviting classroom atmosphere. The lecturers used open posture and movements, such as leaning in when students were reading aloud or asking questions, to signal an approachable demeanor. These movements likely reduced students' anxiety and fostered a more interactive learning experience by signaling the teacher's attentiveness and openness to student contributions. The relatively high frequency of body movements and posture indicates that this form of nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in establishing a supportive environment conducive to student participation.

All in all, it can be observed that gestures and facial expressions were the most frequently observed nonverbal behaviours, suggesting their importance in supporting comprehension and conveying complex concepts and emotions. Eye contact and body movements, though less frequent, were essential for maintaining engagement and creating a comfortable classroom setting. Together, these nonverbal cues contribute to a dynamic and accessible learning experience, underscoring the value of integrating diverse nonverbal strategies in EFL classrooms to make language more tangible and relatable for students.

Students' perceptions of nonverbal communication's impact on reading comprehension

The second part of the analysis focuses on students' perceptions of how nonverbal communication by lecturers affects their reading comprehension. This was assessed through a questionnaire that included both closed-ended Likert scale items and open-ended questions, yielding quantitative and qualitative insights into students' views. The responses indicate that students overwhelmingly view nonverbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements as valuable tools that enhance their understanding, engagement, and comfort during reading activities. The following section provides detailed findings for each type of nonverbal communication based on students' feedback.
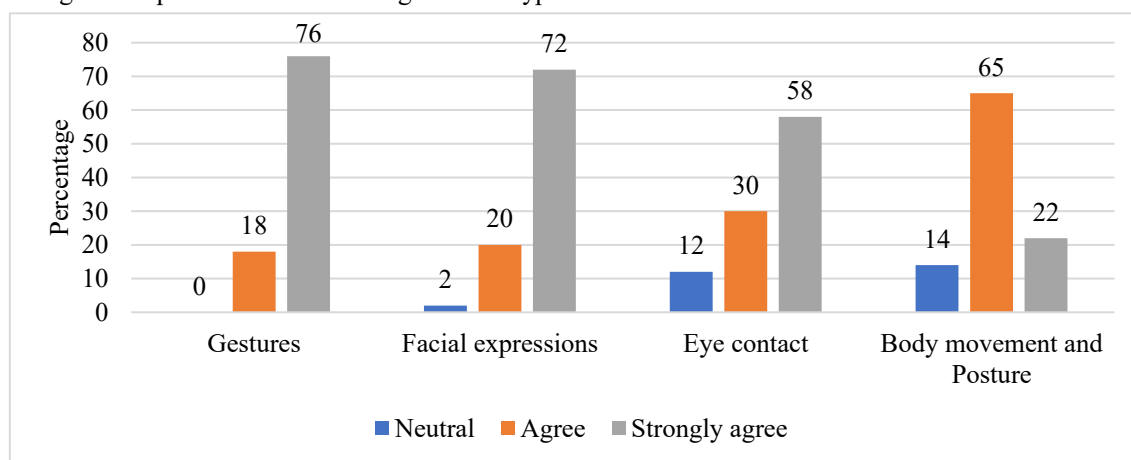

Figure 2. Students' perceptions of nonverbal communication in Reading comprehension

Figure 2 provides insights into students' perceptions of various types of nonverbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body movement, and posture) and their impact on enhancing reading comprehension. The figures are drawn on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (SD) to Strongly Agree (SA). Each type of nonverbal communication is analyzed below.

Regarding gestures, a significant majority of students (76%) strongly agreed that gestures help improve their reading comprehension, while an additional 18% agreed. Notably, there were no neutral or negative responses recorded. This indicates that gestures are perceived as the most effective form of nonverbal communication, with a total of 94% positive responses. The effectiveness of gestures is likely attributed to their ability to visually represent abstract or complex ideas, making reading materials easier to understand.

Facial expressions were claimed to be similarly effective, with 72% of students strongly agreeing and 20% agreeing that they enhance understanding of reading materials. Only 2% of students selected a neutral response, and there were no negative responses. These results underscore that facial expressions effectively convey emotional tones and implied meanings, helping students connect with the content. With 92% positive responses, facial expressions are reported to be nearly as impactful as gestures in aiding comprehension.

Eye contact received positive feedback from 88% of students, with 58% strongly agreeing and 30% agreeing that it enhances focus and engagement during reading activities. However, 12% of students were neutral, indicating that eye contact may not have the same universal appeal as gestures and facial expressions. While eye contact is particularly effective for maintaining attention, its slightly lower percentage suggests it is less impactful in directly aiding comprehension compared to other forms of nonverbal communication.

Body movement and posture garnered 87% positive responses, with 65% agreeing and 22% strongly agreeing that they contribute to reading comprehension. However, 14% of students selected a neutral response, and no negative response was recorded. While these forms of nonverbal communication are perceived as beneficial, they are seen more as supportive tools for creating a comfortable and interactive learning environment rather than directly enhancing comprehension.

Overall, among the four types of nonverbal communication, gestures (94%) and facial expressions (92%) were rated as the most effective tools for supporting reading comprehension. These forms likely simplify complex ideas and help students connect emotional contexts to the material. Eye contact (88%) and body movement/posture (87%) were also highly rated, though they are more relevant for maintaining engagement and fostering a conducive learning environment. Importantly, none of the nonverbal communication methods received disagreement (SD or D), indicating that all forms are considered beneficial to some extent by the students.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the critical role of nonverbal communication in improving reading comprehension, with gestures and facial expressions standing out as the most impactful tools. Teachers should prioritize these forms while also incorporating eye contact and body movements to create a dynamic and engaging classroom experience.

4.1.2. Research question 2: How do Vietnamese EFL students perceive the impact of nonverbal communication on their reading comprehension skills?

The second research question explores students' perspectives on the effectiveness of nonverbal communication in aiding their comprehension of reading materials. This was assessed through a questionnaire distributed to the 50 participating students after the final observation session.

Quantitative results from the questionnaire

Overall, the quantitative data from the questionnaire's Likert scale items highlights strong positive perceptions of nonverbal communication among the students in relation to reading comprehension. Each type of nonverbal cue, including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements, received high levels of appreciation, suggesting that the students viewed these cues as instrumental in enhancing their understanding and engagement with the reading material. Table 1 shows the quantitative results on the role of nonverbal communication in reading comprehension.

Table 1 shows that Gestures emerged as particularly helpful in aiding vocabulary comprehension. When responding to the statement, "Gestures used by the teacher help me understand difficult vocabulary," 76% of students strongly agreed, while 18% agreed, resulting in a total of 94% positive responses. This finding aligns with observational data, where gestures were frequently used by lecturers to clarify and illustrate vocabulary and concepts,

making them more accessible to students. The high percentage of agreement underscores the role of gestures in visually reinforcing language, helping students associate new words with physical actions or representations, which can make learning more concrete and memorable.

Table 1. Quantitative results on the role of nonverbal communication in reading comprehension

Nonverbal communication	Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Total positive responses (%)
Gestures	Gestures used by the teacher help me understand tricky vocabulary.	76	18	94
Facial expressions	I find it easier to follow the reading material when the teacher uses facial expressions.	72	20	92
Eye contact	Eye contact from the teacher helps me focus on important parts of the text.	58	30	88
Body movements and posture	The teacher's body movements make me feel comfortable asking questions.	22	65	87

Facial expressions were also highly valued for their role in conveying the emotional context of reading materials. In response to the statement, "I find it easier to follow the reading material when the teacher uses facial expressions to show emotions," 72% of students strongly agreed, and 20% agreed, totaling 92% positive responses. This strong agreement suggests that facial expressions helped students interpret the tone and mood of the text, making reading material more relatable and emotionally engaging. The use of facial expressions allowed lecturers to mirror the emotions embedded in the text, thus reinforcing the importance of nonverbal cues in helping students grasp implied meanings beyond the literal words.

Eye contact was similarly well-received, with 58% of students strongly agreeing and 30% agreeing that "Eye contact from the teacher helps me focus on important parts of the text," resulting in 88% positive responses. This finding is consistent with observation data, where lecturers used eye contact to guide student focus and maintain engagement during reading sessions. Eye contact appears to foster a sense of connection between teacher and students, motivating them to stay attentive and follow along with the text. Students indicated that eye contact serves as a subtle but effective way to emphasize key information, which enhances their concentration and helps them remain focused on the material.

Body movements and posture also received positive responses, indicating their impact on classroom comfort and participation. For the statement, "The teacher's body movements make me feel comfortable asking questions and participating," 65% of students agreed, and 22% strongly agreed, totaling 87% positive responses. Students felt that lecturers' open posture and movement around the classroom created an inviting atmosphere, making it easier for them to participate actively and engage in discussions. This response highlights how body movements and posture can reduce student anxiety and foster a more interactive learning environment.

In summary, the respondents viewed each type of nonverbal communication—gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements as a valuable component of their reading comprehension experience. Gestures and facial expressions were particularly effective for aiding vocabulary and emotional understanding, while eye contact and body movements contributed to maintaining focus and creating a supportive classroom environment. These insights suggest that incorporating nonverbal communication strategies in EFL classrooms can significantly enhance students' comprehension, motivation, and engagement with the reading material.

Qualitative feedback from open-ended responses

The open-ended responses to the questionnaire offer deeper insights into students' perceptions of how nonverbal communication impacts their reading comprehension. These responses highlight four key themes: clarity in vocabulary and concepts, emotional connection to the text, enhanced focus and engagement, and comfort in participation. Together, these themes reflect the specific ways in which students believe nonverbal cues from lecturers contribute to a more effective and engaging learning environment.

Clarity in vocabulary and concepts

Many students emphasized that gestures helped them understand challenging vocabulary and complex language structures within the reading material. For example, a student shared, "When the teacher uses hand movements to show a word like 'running,' I can remember it better because I see the action." This feedback underscores how gestures provide a concrete visual aid that reinforces the meaning of unfamiliar words. In the case of action words like "running," gestures enable students to visualize the word's meaning, making it easier to comprehend and retain. This aligns with research suggesting that physical representations of words create stronger cognitive associations, especially for abstract or complex concepts. Overall, students' responses suggest that gestures are valuable tools in vocabulary acquisition, helping to make language more accessible by connecting it to physical actions that students can see and remember.

Emotional connection to text

Another prominent theme was the role of facial expressions in helping students connect emotionally to the text. Several students commented that facial expressions allowed them to "feel the emotions in the story." One student explained, "When the teacher looks serious or sad, I know the story is serious. It helps me understand the mood." This feedback reflects how facial expressions offer emotional cues that guide students in interpreting the tone and mood of the reading material. By mirroring the emotions embedded in the text, lecturers help students understand the underlying feelings that might be difficult to convey through words alone. This finding aligns with the quantitative data, where facial expressions were highly rated for their role in conveying emotions. The ability to connect with the emotional aspect of the text enhances students' overall engagement and helps them interpret nuances in character behavior or story events, contributing to a deeper, more holistic understanding of the material.

Enhanced focus and engagement

Eye contact emerges as a powerful nonverbal cue that students associate with improved focus and engagement. Eye contact was frequently mentioned as a motivating factor, encouraging students to remain attentive and actively involved in the reading activity. For instance, one student remarked, "When the teacher looks at me, I pay more attention. It makes me feel like I am part of the lesson." This response suggests that eye contact fosters a sense of inclusion and accountability, motivating students to stay focused and feel connected to the activity. Eye contact creates an interactive experience where students feel directly involved, which can be especially valuable in reading activities that require sustained attention. This feedback underscores the role of eye contact as a subtle yet effective tool for enhancing engagement, promoting a learning environment where students are more inclined to participate and follow along with the material.

Comfort in participation

Body movements and posture were also mentioned frequently, with many students appreciating these cues for creating a welcoming classroom environment that encouraged participation. A student shared, "When the teacher moves close to us, I feel more comfortable to speak and ask questions." This response highlights how lecturers' body movements, such as moving closer to students or maintaining an open posture, signal approachability and attentiveness. These behaviors contribute to a supportive and interactive learning atmosphere, making students feel more at ease and confident to engage in discussions and ask questions. The sense of comfort fostered by these nonverbal cues is crucial in EFL classrooms, where students may feel anxious about speaking or participating due to language barriers. By creating a space where students feel accepted and understood, body movements and posture help alleviate this anxiety, enabling more active participation and fostering a collaborative learning environment.

In summary, the open-ended responses from the students reveal the significant impact that nonverbal communication exerts on their learning experience, particularly in reading comprehension. Gestures aid in vocabulary retention by providing concrete visual representations of words, while facial expressions help convey the emotional depth of the text. Eye contact enhances focus and creates a sense of inclusion, and body movements foster a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable participating. These insights highlight the multifaceted role of nonverbal communication in enhancing EFL students' comprehension, engagement, and confidence, underscoring the value of incorporating these strategies in language instruction.

4.2. Discussion

The results of this study affirm the significant impact of nonverbal communication on reading comprehension among Vietnamese EFL students, aligning with existing research in education and language acquisition (Bellés-Calvera, 2016).

This study highlights that gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements each play a crucial role in supporting students' comprehension, engagement, and overall comfort in the classroom. Gestures and facial expressions, in particular, emerged as essential tools for conveying meaning beyond language, aiding students in vocabulary acquisition and understanding the emotional context of the text. These findings are consistent with Antika's (2018) conclusion, which highlights the role of nonverbal cues in improving students' interpretive skills and enabling them to relate to reading materials more effectively. The observed effectiveness of gestures in vocabulary comprehension highlights their function as a "visual aid" for language learners. By offering a concrete representation of abstract or complex words, gestures help students anchor new language in physical actions, making it both more accessible and memorable. This aligns with McNeill's (1992) theory that gestures function as a secondary but integrated channel for conveying meaning, an idea that is especially relevant in EFL contexts, where verbal input may not be sufficient for learners to fully grasp unfamiliar language. This study also supports McNeill's findings, as the majority of students reported that gestures enhanced their understanding of difficult vocabulary, especially action verbs and descriptive adjectives. For example, mimicking the act of "climbing" or showing "cold" through body shivering helped students visualize and internalize new words. These results resonate with the Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986), which suggests that learners retain information better when it is presented through both verbal and nonverbal channels. More importantly, recent research further validates this approach. Nowbaghi and Vosoughi (2021) confirms that the use of iconic gestures that visually represent the meaning of words, significantly improved vocabulary retention in Iranian EFL classrooms. Their study shows that learners exposed to gestures alongside verbal instruction recall more words and use them more accurately in speaking and writing tasks. Similarly, Hernández-Gutiérrez et al. (2022) demonstrate that co-speech gestures contributed to semantic processing and memory retrieval, especially among learners with lower proficiency levels.

Facial expressions are also shown to be a powerful tool in helping students connect emotionally with the reading material, mirroring findings by Ekman and Friesen (1975), who emphasize the universality of facial expressions in conveying emotions. In this study, facial expressions help students interpret the tone of the text, making it more relatable and engaging. This aligns with Kamiya (2016), who found that nonverbal communication enhances EFL learners' cultural and emotional comprehension, thus enriching their overall reading experience. Similarly, Wulandari et al. (2024) conducted the classroom-based research in EFL contexts and reported that teachers' deliberate use of facial expressions significantly improves students' attention span, emotional involvement, and interpretive accuracy in reading tasks. The study emphasizes that facial expressions help students better understand irony, sarcasm, and tone in narrative text areas that are often challenging for learners from different cultural backgrounds. In the same vein, Hernández-Gutiérrez et al. (2023) conducted an event-related potential study revealing that speakers' emotional facial expressions influence listeners' syntactic processing during language comprehension. Specifically, happy facial expressions are found to enhance the positive facial cues which can modulate linguistic processing pathways. These recent insights highlight the cognitive-affective dual function of facial expressions in EFL reading: they help decode meaning (cognitive) and build emotional resonance (affective). In contexts like Vietnamese classrooms, where cultural norms may limit student verbal interaction, expressive nonverbal cues from teachers provide a safe and intuitive channel for interpretation, especially when students lack confidence in their linguistic abilities.

Eye contact and body movements played an important role in creating a supportive and responsive classroom environment. Eye contact, in particular, was observed to be highly effective in keeping students focused and engaged, fostering a sense of inclusion, mutual attention, and accountability. When teachers maintain eye contact while posing questions or guiding reading tasks, students appear more alert, attentive, and willing to participate. This finding aligns with Nuraeni and Harahap's (2023) assertion that eye contact is essential for establishing rapport and sustaining student attention, especially in language classrooms where learners may be hesitant to speak. Recent research continues to emphasize the importance of eye contact in communicative language teaching. According to Chen and Rafik-Galea (2024), consistent and purposeful eye contact enhances student trust and psychological safety, which in turn increases learners' confidence to ask questions or volunteer responses. This is particularly relevant in Vietnamese EFL settings, where cultural norms may encourage quietness and deference in classrooms. Eye contact, used subtly, helps signal teacher availability and attentiveness, reducing the psychological distance between teachers and students. In parallel, body movements, especially open posture, forward-leaning, and teacher mobility, were instrumental in creating a comfortable and inclusive learning atmosphere. Teachers who move naturally around the

classroom, maintain open gestures, and lean in while students speak are perceived as approachable and encouraging. These behaviors contribute to a non-threatening classroom climate, lowering students' anxiety and increasing their willingness to participate, echoing the findings of Negi (2009). Recent evidence from Dinh and Ha (2024) confirms that the teachers' use of movement to interact with students and learning materials has a positive effect on student motivation, emotional comfort, and interaction quality. Their study in Southeast Asian EFL classrooms highlights that students are more active and expressive when teachers move closer to them during tasks, use dynamic posture, or gesture openly while explaining content.

In sum, the findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role of nonverbal communication, particularly gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements in enhancing reading comprehension among Vietnamese EFL learners. Gestures serve as effective visual aids that reinforce vocabulary retention and comprehension by providing physical representations of abstract language. Facial expressions supported emotional interpretation and engagement with the text, bridging cultural and linguistic gaps that often hinder learners' connection with written materials. Eye contact promotes focus, attentiveness, and a sense of inclusion, while body movements and posture create a psychologically safe and participative classroom atmosphere. These results align with foundational theories such as McNeill's gesture-speech integration and Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, while also reflecting recent empirical evidence highlighting the pedagogical power of nonverbal cues in EFL contexts. Overall, nonverbal communication in reading instruction is not peripheral, it is central to fostering comprehension, emotional connection, and learner confidence. Integrating these strategies into teacher training and classroom practices holds strong potential for improving student outcomes, especially in environments where language exposure is limited and cultural distance is significant.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the important role of nonverbal communication in enhancing reading comprehension among Vietnamese EFL students. By focusing on gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements, the findings reveal that nonverbal cues significantly improve students' ability to understand vocabulary, grasp emotional tone, maintain attention, and feel more comfortable participating in class. Gestures and facial expressions emerge as particularly impactful tools, helping students visualize meaning and emotionally connect with the text, while eye contact and body movements contribute to creating an engaging and supportive classroom environment. These findings underscore the value of incorporating nonverbal strategies into EFL reading instruction, especially in Vietnamese contexts where students often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

However, this study also has several limitations. It was conducted with a relatively small, homogenous sample from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The research also focuses solely on reading comprehension, without examining how nonverbal communication might influence other language skills such as speaking, listening, or writing. Additionally, the data relies largely on classroom observations and self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to participant bias.

Future research should expand on these findings by including larger and more diverse student populations across different educational settings. Experimental or longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into the long-term effects of nonverbal communication on language learning. Moreover, future studies may explore how nonverbal cues operate in online or hybrid classrooms, where visual communication is mediated through technology, or examine how cultural background influences both teacher use and student interpretation of nonverbal signals. Overall, this research provides a foundation for developing more effective, inclusive, and culturally responsive language teaching practices that integrate nonverbal communication as a central element of instruction.

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