Teacher nonverbal cues and student first impressions in Vietnamese EFL classrooms
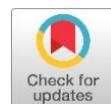
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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study explores the perspectives of Vietnamese students on nonverbal cues from their English teachers and how these cues influence their first impressions and motivation in EFL classrooms. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study first collected survey data from 97 students across four majors (Information Technology, Law, Marketing, and Public Relations) and then conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 voluntary participants. Quantitative results indicated consistently positive evaluations of nonverbal cues, particularly confident posture, neat attire, and smiling, with notable differences between majors: students in communication-oriented fields placed greater value on visual and interpersonal cues, while technical students adopted more neutral stances and frequently compared English teachers with instructors in their major subjects. Thematic analysis of interview data further revealed that nonverbal cues from teachers contributed to lowering anxiety, enhancing classroom inclusion, and increasing student engagement. In general, the study highlights the significant role of nonverbal communication of teachers in creating supportive and motivating EFL learning environments and provides pedagogical implications for improving teacher training and classroom interaction in Vietnamese universities.

1. Introduction

First impressions are very important in educational settings because they shape how students feel about their teachers and how willing they are to engage in learning from the very beginning (Šerić, 2021). This is particularly relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where many Asian students, including those in Vietnam, often approach English with uncertainty or low confidence (Pourgharib & Shakki, 2024; Thach & Khau, 2025; Yakovleva, 2021; Zhang, 2025). Since English is typically a required subject, many students have limited exposure to the language and may feel anxious about using it (Le, 2023; Malik et al., 2021; Truong & Ho, 2022). In such contexts, the early interactions between teachers and students become especially important for establishing trust and reducing affective barriers.

Nonverbal communication plays a key role in making these initial interactions. Simple actions such as friendly facial expressions, supportive gestures, confident posture, and appropriate clothing can help students feel comfortable, build trust, encourage participation (Gutiérrez-Hernández & Ramírez-Alfaro, 2024; Lee, 2022; Oliver et al., 2022; Yang, 2025). Although previous research has

shown that nonverbal cues influence student perceptions, empirical studies focusing specifically on first impressions in EFL classrooms remain limited. Even fewer studies examine this phenomenon within Vietnamese technical universities, where many students come from STEM-oriented disciplines and may have lower English confidence or different communication expectations compared to students in social sciences. Additionally, existing literature rarely provides cross-major comparisons, leaving unclear whether students from different academic backgrounds value teacher nonverbal cues differently.

To address these gaps, this study examines how students from four disciplines (Information Technology, Law, Marketing, and Public Relations) perceive the nonverbal cues of their English teachers during the first class meeting. It also explores how these initial impressions influence students' comfort, motivation, and attitudes toward English learning in a technical university context. By drawing on both survey data and interview evidence, the study clarifies the role of early teacher nonverbal cues in shaping student engagement and offers practical implications for improving English instruction in Vietnamese higher education. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What nonverbal cues do students identify as the key to creating a positive first impression of their English teachers during the initial meeting?

2. How do these nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, and clothing, affect students' motivation and comfort in English classes after that first impression?

1.1. First impressions and nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms

First impressions refer to the initial judgments students form about their teachers, often shaped by visual and behavioral cues even before verbal interaction occurs. These early impressions strongly influence student motivation, attitudes, and participation. Soltanian and Sadeghi (2021) found that brief "thin slices" of teacher behavior can significantly impact student perceptions. In EFL classrooms, where learners may feel anxious, underconfident, or less motivated, these impressions become even more consequential (Gholamrezaee & Ghanizadeh, 2018) . In many Asian contexts, including Vietnam, English is perceived as a mandatory subject, particularly among non-English majors (Van Van, 2020), making the teachers' initial presentation highly influential. A positive impression reduces anxiety and fosters engagement, whereas a negative one can undermine motivation (Wang et al., 2024).

Nonverbal cues is one of the most powerful factors of the early judgment. They include facial expressions, gestures, body posture, eye contact, clothing, and physical distance (Burgoon et al., 2021). Empirical studies in EFL classrooms consistently shows that positive nonverbal cues such as smiling, open gestures, and attentive gaze enhance classroom atmosphere and reduce anxiety. For example, Tikochinski et al. (2025) found that gestures and facial expressions directly increased student motivation, while Yuan (2024) showed that these immediacy behaviors improved engagement in English classes.

However, despite this growing body of work, existing studies rarely examine whether students from different academic disciplines interpret these nonverbal cues in similar or divergent ways. Most research treats "students" as a homogeneous group, overlooking the potential variation between, for example, communication-focused majors and technical majors. This lack of cross-major evidence leaves an important gap in understanding how disciplinary norms can shape students' expectations and reactions to teachers' nonverbal cues, particularly in technical universities where English is often viewed as a supplementary rather than central subject.

1.2. Frameworks for understanding nonverbal communication

Teacher Immediacy Theory (Burgoon et al., 2021) provides a central lens for understanding how nonverbal behaviors shape students' perceptions during early classroom encounters. The theory posits that behaviors such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, adopting an open posture, and using relaxed body movement reduce perceived psychological distance, thereby fostering approachability, emotional safety, and readiness to participate. Recent L2 research further shows that teacher immediacy contributes to increased student engagement and willingness to communicate (den Brok et al., 2004; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Huang & Li, 2024).

Within this theoretical orientation, nonverbal cues in EFL classrooms can be organized into several well-established categories. These categories help explain how teachers' moment-to-moment

behaviors communicate warmth, authority, professionalism, and respect signals that strongly influence students' first impressions and affective responses. Table 1 synthesizes the major types of nonverbal communication widely discussed in the literature, along with examples relevant to teaching and learning.

Table 1. Types of non-verbal communication in EFL classrooms

Category	Definition	Example	Sources
Kinesics	Body movements such as gestures, facial expressions, and posture	Smiling to show friendliness; open arms to welcome students	Kesevan et al. (2020); Nong (2025)
Proxemics	Use of physical space between people	Teacher standing close to students to show approachability	Farsani and Rodrigues (2021)
Oculesics	Eye behavior such as eye contact and gaze	Making eye contact to show attention; cultural variations in gaze	Kourieos and Evripidou (2024); Haataja et al. (2021)
Appearance	Clothing and grooming that affect impressions	Wearing professional clothing to gain respect	Oliver et al. (2022); Kashem (2019)
Chronemics	Use of time, including punctuality and timing	Starting class on time to show respect	Wilson et al. (2021)

These nonverbal cues are not interpreted uniformly, as students' perceptions are shaped by cultural norms and classroom expectations in Vietnam. In Vietnamese EFL settings, eye contact, interpersonal distance, and classroom formality influence students' comfort and their initial judgments of teacher approachability. Research in Vietnamese classrooms has highlighted that gestures, facial expressions, posture, and smiling play a crucial role in creating welcoming and supportive learning environments (Nguyen, 2025; Nguyen & Khau, 2022; Thanh Thao & Thuy, 2024). Recognizing these cultural nuances is therefore essential for understanding how nonverbal behaviors contribute to positive first impressions and effective classroom interactions in Vietnamese EFL contexts.

1.3. Effects on student motivation and comfort

Nonverbal cues not only shape first impressions but also influence student emotions, motivation, and engagement in the classrooms. Behaviors such as smiling, use open gestures, eye contact, or moderate proximity help create a positive and supportive learning environment. In EFL classrooms, nonverbal immediacy increased willingness to communicate (Amini & Weisi, 2021; Lin, 2019; Yan et al., 2025) and supportive cues enhanced enjoyment, confidence, and risk-taking in language use (Anderson, 2025; Babad, 2007; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020).

Studies in Asian contexts further confirm these patterns (Huang & Li, 2024). For example, Fallah (2014) found that young learners felt more motivated when teachers used expressive gestures and relaxed posture, which made them feel comfortable and ready to participate. Similarly, research in Thai EFL classrooms suggests that the absence of supportive and immediate teacher behaviors, reflected in profiles such as impatient, uninspiring, and intimidating teachers, significantly undermines students' L2 willingness to communicate (Raksawong et al., 2024; Suvongse & Liang-Itsara, 2022). In addition, research in Chinese EFL universities indicates that teacher non-verbal immediacy including gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions is significantly associated with students' classroom engagement and willingness to participate (Derakhshan et al., 2023; Ding & Wang, 2025; Li et al., 2025).

However, many teachers may be unaware of how their body language is interpreted by students. Neutral or closed cues such as limited eye contact or crossed arms can inadvertently make students feel unnoticed. Frenkel et al. (2024) found that emotionally distant behavior reduced learner interest and motivation, whereas more emotionally engaging or supportive behavior was shown to increase learner interest (Trang et al., 2023). This issue is especially relevant in technical universities in Vietnam, where English is often viewed as a required subject (Ngo & Tran, 2024; Yakovleva, 2021) and many teachers have limited training in nonverbal communication strategies (MOET, 2020). These gaps highlight the need for further research on how students interpret teacher nonverbal cues in such contexts.

2. Method

2.1. Participant background

A total of 97 second-year students from Binh Duong Economics and Technology University (Vietnam) participated in this study. The sample included four majors: Information Technology/Software Engineering (n = 26, 26.8%), Law (n = 25, 25.8%), Marketing (n = 23, 23.7%), and Public Relations (n = 23, 23.7%). The balanced distribution supported meaningful cross-group comparisons.

All participants had completed English Course 3 with final grades ranging from 6.5 to 7.9, reflecting a moderately uniform level of English proficiency. This moderately uniform proficiency level reduced the risk of language ability influencing judgments about teacher nonverbal cues.

Table 2. Participant distribution by academic majors

Major	N	Percent (%)
Information Technology/Software Engineering	26	26.8
Law	25	25.8
Marketing	23	23.7
Public Relations	23	23.7
Total	97	100.0

2.2. Research design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. The survey phase provided a broad understanding of which teacher nonverbal cues were most notable to students, and the interview phase explored students' interpretations and emotional responses behind these patterns. This design is appropriate when initial quantitative findings require deeper contextual explanation (Hashemi, 2023).

The survey consisted of two sets of items aligned with the research questions and grounded in common categories of nonverbal communication (kinesics, oculesics, proxemics, appearance, and chronemics). While Set A measured the importance of nonverbal cues in forming first impressions, Set B measured how those cues influenced motivation and comfort. Both sets used a five-point Likert-type scale, which enabled students to express graded perceptions clearly and reliably. Internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach's α = .940 for Set A; .977 for Set B).

The six semi-structured interview questions were intentionally designed to match the two research questions. The first three focused on nonverbal cues shaping first impressions, while the last three explored motivation and comfort. These questions allowed students to elaborate on processes that cannot be captured through fixed-scale survey items.

The questions were piloted with four students with one from each major to check for clarity and relevance. Feedback was used to improve the questions, but pilot data were not included in the main analysis.

2.3. Data collection

The survey was distributed via Google Forms. Vietnamese was used to avoid comprehension barriers and ensure that students could accurately express subtle perceptions related to teacher nonverbal cues. A total of 97 valid responses were collected voluntarily with support from course instructors.

Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 2 students selected using convenience sampling. This approach was appropriate because the aim of the qualitative phase was not representativeness but depth of insight, and voluntary participation was essential to ensure comfort and openness. The sample included 5 students from Information Technology/Software Engineering, 3 from Law, 2 from Marketing, and 2 from Public Relations. Each interview lasted from 20 to 30 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese in a quiet meeting room. Participants were informed of confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the purpose of the study before giving written consent.

2.4. Data analysis

The quantitative survey data were entered into SPSS Statistics version 26, checked for accuracy, and screened for missing or inconsistent entries. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and mean scores, were calculated to identify which nonverbal cues students most commonly noticed and valued across academic majors.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read repeatedly for content familiarity, coded for meaningful units, and then grouped into preliminary themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined before being used to interpret how teachers' nonverbal cues influenced students' first impressions, motivation, and comfort.

Table 3. Example of Coding

Excerpt	Initial Codes	Subtheme	Theme
Mỗi khi mà cô em cười ý hả, em thấy như mình được chào đón trong lớp, vui vẻ hơn hẳn mà còn kiểu muốn học hành hơn nữa á. Mà em thấy cô cũng hỏi thăm bạn này bạn kia ngay trong buổi đầu luôn ạ. Every time she smiles, I feel welcomed, happier and more willing to study. She also often has small talks with my other classmates right from the beginning.	teacher smile; small talk; feeling welcomed; higher motivation	warm and friendly demeanor	warmth-based nonverbal behaviors increase students' emotional comfort and motivation
Cách cô giao lưu với lớp, đi lại trong lớp thoải mái tự tin làm em rất là ưng bụng. Cảm thấy kiểu như cô có năng lượng tích cực nên muốn học liền liền. The way my teacher communicates with us effectively and walks comfortably and confidently around classroom makes me very satisfied. I feel like she has positive energy, which make me want to study right away.	confident movement; energetic presence; uplifting classroom atmosphere	energetic and confident presence	warmth-based nonverbal behaviors increase students' emotional comfort and motivation
Lúc nào giảng bài cô cũng nhìn thẳng tụi em hết á, kiểu không phải nhìn dữ dằn đâu ạ. Cô nhìn kiểu cô lắng nghe câu trả lời của tụi em, nên tụi em không tập trung trả lời không được đâu ạ. Whenever she do her lectures, she always looks straight at us, not in a fierce way. She looks at us like she is listening to our answers, so we have no choice but stay focused.	supportive eye contact; perceived attentiveness; increased focus	attentive instructional presence	attentive and responsive nonverbal cues promote student focus and engagement

To enhance trustworthiness, peer checking was conducted in which the second researcher reviewed the coding scheme and theme definitions.

3. Finding and Discussion

3.1. Nonverbal cues and first impressions of EFL teachers

The survey findings show that students generally had positive views on teacher nonverbal cues during the first encounters, with all seven items scoring above the scale midpoint (Table 4). Confident posture was rated highest (M = 3.99, SD = 0.984), followed by outfit neat (M = 3.91) and smile (M = 3.84). These findings align with research showing that kinesic cues and appearance strongly influence initial judgments (Burgoon et al., 2021) and can reduce early anxiety in language classrooms.

Interview data reinforced these survey patterns. As a student shared that the teacher *"…bước vô rất là tự tin luôn. Cô cũng cười tươi lắm á, cô chào cả lớp, tự nhiên em cũng kiểu cảm thấy bớt bồn chồn."* (…walked in very confidently. She also smiled and greeted the class, somewhat making me feel less nervous), indicating that the calming effect of confident posture. Especially, all 12 informants mentioned that the teacher's warm smile made them feel *"được chào đón"* (welcomed), highlighting the immediacy effect of positive facial expressions.

Table 4. Summary of student evaluations on first-impression nonverbal cues

Nonverbal Cues	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Smile	97	1	5	3.84	1.017
Hand gesture	97	1	5	3.76	1.116
Standing confidently	97	1	5	3.99	0.984
Eye contact	97	1	5	3.78	1.129
Comfort distance	97	1	5	3.82	1.127
Outfit neat	97	1	5	3.91	1.061
Punctuality	97	1	5	3.79	1.099

Other cues such as comfortable distancing (M = 3.82), punctuality (M = 3.79), and eye contact (M = 3.78) were also evaluated favorably. These cues signaled attentiveness and respect, consistent with proxemic and oculesic principles. Short interview responses supported this interpretation, with one student sharing that eye contact made them feel *"mình được lắng nghe"* (being listened to), suggesting enhanced learner agency.

Although hand gestures had the lowest score (M = 3.76, SD = 1.116), students still recognized their instructional value. One student commented, gestures helped them *"không tập trung cũng không được"* (could not help but pay attention).

Table 5. High ratings (4–5) of nonverbal cues across majors

Nonverbal Cues	IT/SE (%)	Law (%)	Marketing (%)	PR (%)
Smile	46.2	68.0	56.5	73.9
Hand gesture	42.3	64.0	56.5	73.9
Standing confidently	50.0	68.0	73.9	82.6
Eye contact	46.2	60.0	56.5	78.3
Comfort distance	57.7	64.0	56.5	78.3
Outfit neat	50.0	68.0	56.5	87.0
Punctuality	38.5	76.0	47.8	82.6

Despite the variations shown in Table 5, several cross-major patterns highlight how students interpret instructors' nonverbal cues through discipline-specific norms when interpreting nonverbal cues. Public Relations students rated nonverbal indicators the highest, especially neat appearance (87%) and confident posture (82.6%), which is consistent with the strong focus on impression management and interpersonal communication in their field. Law students, in contrast, placed greater importance on punctuality and professional demeanor, reflecting the norms of authority and structure associated with legal education. Marketing students tended to value a confident and engaging presence rather than strict time discipline, which suggests a preference for dynamic gestures and expressive movement that signal energy.

Meanwhile, IT/Software Engineering students reported the lowest overall ratings, yet interview responses reveal that they still appreciated warmth and clarity, particularly when these cues differed from the more formal and distant communication styles common in their technical courses. As one student remarked, *"Vô lớp tiếng Anh thì cô lúc nào cũng tươi cười vui vẻ, còn mấy thầy cô dạy chuyên ngành thì thôi khỏi bàn tới, nhìn thầy cô lúc nào cũng căng"* (In English class, the teacher is always smiling and happy, but the teachers who teach technical courses are usually not. Looking at instructors of my major constantly makes me tense), which highlights how even students with lower ratings continue to rely on immediate nonverbal signals to assess teacher approachability.

The findings show that confident posture, neat appearance, and smiling were the most influential nonverbal cues in shaping students' first impressions, consistent with Teacher Immediacy Theory (Burgoon et al., 2021) and recent L2 studies (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Hu & Wang, 2023). Interview data highlighted that warm smiles and confident classroom entrances immediately created a sense of welcome and reduced tension, confirming that kinesic and appearance cues are crucial for early teacher-student rapport in EFL classrooms (Kashem, 2019; Kesevan et al., 2020; Nong, 2025; Oliver et al., 2022).

Cross-major differences reflected clear disciplinary patterns. PR students gave the highest ratings to expressive behaviors, showing their sensitivity to interpersonal cues and social presence. Marketing students also valued confident gestures and sustained eye contact, emphasizing persuasive and engaging communication. Law students, in contrast, rated punctuality and structured presentation higher, consistent with the norms of authority-focused disciplines. IT/SE students gave generally lower ratings but still responded positively to warmth and attentiveness, which differed from the formal style of their technical courses. These results suggest that students' interpretations of teacher immediacy depend on disciplinary culture. Therefore, teacher training should include nonverbal immediacy skills and guidance on adapting behaviors to different student groups to support positive classroom interactions and motivation.

3.2. Nonverbal cues of English teachers and student motivation in EFL classrooms

Table 6 presents all cues received average scores above the midpoint (3.0), suggesting that students viewed these cues as generally helpful in creating a supportive classroom environment. In particular, standing confidently received the highest rating (M = 3.87, SD = 1.124), followed by neat appearance (M = 3.80) and smiling (M = 3.76). These results suggest that confident posture, professional presentation, and friendly expressions play a central role in shaping learners' motivation. Other cues such as maintaining a comfortable distance, making eye contact, and punctuality were also viewed positively, reinforcing that attentiveness and respect help create a supportive learning climate. Although hand gesture received the lowest mean (M = 3.68), it was still seen as a useful part of classroom communication.

Table 6. Teacher nonverbal cues influencing student motivation and comfort

Nonverbal Cues	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Smile	97	1	5	3.76	1.153
Hand gesture	97	1	5	3.68	1.142
Standing confidently	97	1	5	3.87	1.124
Eye contact	97	1	5	3.75	1.182
Comfort distance	97	1	5	3.76	1.116
Outfit neat	97	1	5	3.80	1.086
Punctuality	97	1	5	3.75	1.146

When examined across four majors, the motivational impact of nonverbal cues showed distinct patterns, but several consistent tendencies emerged. As presented in Table 7, Public Relations (PR) students consistently gave the highest ratings for all seven cues that improved their motivation and comfort in English classes. In particular, more than 78% of PR students rated smile, standing confidently, eye contact, outfit neatness, and punctuality as contributing positively to their motivation and comfort in class. Especially, standing confidently (82.6%) stood out, showing PR students' strong attention to body language, a key aspect of their discipline. Their responses in the interviews supported this, emphasizing the role of interpersonal presentation. One student remarked "*Cách cô giao lưu với lớp, đi lại trong lớp thoải mái tự tin làm em rất là ưng bụng. Cảm thấy kiểu như cô có năng lượng tích cực nên muốn học liền liền*", (The way my teacher communicates with us effectively and walks comfortably and confidently around classroom makes me very satisfied. I feel like she has positive energy, which make me want to study right away).

Table 7. High ratings (4 – 5) for motivational impact of nonverbal cues across academic majors

Nonverbal Cues	IT/SE (%)	Law (%)	Marketing (%)	PR (%)
Smile	50.0	56.0	65.2	82.6
Hand gesture	46.2	60.0	60.9	69.6
Standing confidently	53.8	64.0	69.6	82.6
Eye contact	50.0	56.0	69.6	73.9
Comfort distance	53.8	60.0	60.9	78.3
Outfit neat	46.2	60.0	65.2	78.3
Punctuality	38.5	60.0	60.9	78.3

Marketing students showed similar patterns with relatively high ratings at 69.6% for both confident posture and eye contact. Their interview data that confident and expressive body language made the

teacher appear more persuasive and trustworthy, a perception that echoes marketing principles of credibility and audience engagement. A student noted that the teacher's sustained eye contact signaled genuine listening, which helped maintain focus during lessons.

Law students expressed moderate but consistent appreciation for most nonverbal cues, with punctuality standing out at 60%. While not the highest among all groups, this figure suggests that Law students value time management and teacher reliability. Their interview examples often connected punctuality and systematic lesson flow with reduced uncertainty, supporting literature that links consistent teacher behavior with a sense of security and preparedness.

> *"Có hai việc mà em thấy làm rất là okay là: vào lớp, ra chơi đúng giờ và dạy bài không bị cháy giáo án. Kiểu em biết được là mình sẽ làm gì học gì, trình tự như thế nào trong lớp khiến em an tâm hơn khi học lớp cô."*

> (There are two things that my teacher does really well: entering class and taking breaks punctually and managing to complete each section of a lesson on time, no delays, no overtime. You know, when I know what I will be doing, what I will be learning, in a certain order, makes me feel more secure.)

Compared to other majors, students in Information Technology/Software Engineering gave the lowest overall ratings. However, interview data reveal that nonverbal cues, especially a friendly smile, were still appreciated by these students. Students frequently contrasted the warm demeanor of English teachers with the more distant communication style of their technical instructors. As one student explained:

> *"Thường thầy cô dạy chuyên ngành của tụi em, em thấy, sao mà khô khan lắm, hiếm khi nào có thầy cô cười đùa với sinh viên. Cô lớp tiếng Anh thì khác, lúc nào cô cũng cười tươi, kiểu thấy dễ chịu lắm ạ, thấy mình học nó nhẹ nhàng thoải mái lắm luôn á."*

> (I usually find the teachers who teach our specialized courses so dry, rarely do they laugh and joke with the students. My English teacher is different. She always smiles brightly, which makes me feel very comfortable, and I find it very easy and comfortable to learn.)

These reflections suggest that while IT/SE students may not consistently rate nonverbal cues as highly as others in surveys, they still respond positively to them in practice. In particular, a warm and open demeanor of English teachers helps create a more comfortable classroom atmosphere, which may be especially impactful for students who are used to more formal or distant teacher–student interactions in their core subjects. These accounts support the argument that immediacy behaviors may be particularly impactful for students who are accustomed to formal or less interactive academic environments.

Teacher nonverbal behaviors strongly influenced students' motivation and comfort. Confident posture, neat appearance, and smiling were particularly impactful, suggesting that professional presence combined with warmth encourages engagement. Other behaviors, such as eye contact, respectful distance, and punctuality, also fostered a positive classroom climate, supporting findings that immediacy cues reduce anxiety and enhance participation in EFL settings (Hu & Wang, 2023; Tikochinski et al., 2025). Hand gestures were less prominent but still contributed to communication clarity.

Differences across disciplines revealed how students interpret nonverbal cues through their field-specific expectations. PR students responded most strongly to all cues, reflecting sensitivity to interpersonal and visual behaviors. Marketing students favored expressive and confident behaviors, linking them to persuasion and engagement. Law students highlighted punctuality and structured delivery, emphasizing reliability and order. IT/SE students rated cues lower overall but valued warmth and attentiveness, contrasting with the more formal style of their technical instructors. These patterns align with Teacher Immediacy Theory (Burgoon et al., 2021) and reinforce prior research showing that immediacy supports engagement, particularly when students experience more formal or distant teaching in their discipline (Fallah, 2014; Yuan, 2024). The findings imply that nonverbal

communication should be emphasized in teacher training and EFL curricula, with attention to disciplinary expectations to maximize motivation and comfort.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the nonverbal cues that students identify as the key to creating a positive first impression of English teachers, as well as how those cues influence students' motivation comfort in EFL classrooms. The findings contribute to the growing literature on teacher immediacy and early classroom perception by showing that students rely on a consistent set of cues, such as smiling, eye contact, and confident posture, while also interpreting them through discipline specific norms. This extends existing research by illustrating how cultural and institutional contexts influence student expectations of professional presence in EFL settings.

These findings highlight important pedagogical considerations, suggesting that teacher training should address nonverbal communication to foster student engagement and a positive classroom atmosphere. Training modules that focus on posture, eye contact, spatial cues, and classroom presence can strengthen relationship building, especially in institutions where students are accustomed to formal or distant instructional styles. For technical universities integrating interpersonal communication components into EFL courses can help reduce anxiety and promote a more supportive learning environment.

Building on these findings, future research could incorporate classroom observations to triangulate self reported data and capture nonverbal cues in real time. Including variables such as teacher gender, student gender, and prior language learning experience would deepen the analysis of how nonverbal cues are interpreted in different contexts. Longitudinal designs could also clarify how student perceptions evolve over a semester, offering richer insights into the role of nonverbal communication in sustained engagement.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of nonverbal cues in shaping the first teacher student interactions and suggests that strengthening teacher awareness of these cues may enhance classroom motivation and comfort, particularly within technical university environments.

Declarations

Author contribution	:	Cuong Phan Quoc served as the main lead of the research project and was responsible for the study design, data collection, transcription, data analysis, and initial drafting of the manuscript. Angelica Puspasari Manao supported the drafting process and contributed to revising and refining the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript.
Funding statement	:	This research received no specific grant or funding from any agency.
Conflict of interest	:	We declare that there are no competing interests.
Ethics Declaration	:	The author acknowledges that this work was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards and complies with the regulations of the university. Permission was obtained from the relevant institute prior to data collection. The author supports ELTEJ in maintaining high standards of personal conduct and upholding honesty in all professional practices and endeavors.
Additional information	:	No additional information is available for this paper.

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