



## Students' spontaneous smile in the EFL classroom

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**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses the importance of the students' spontaneous smile in the EFL classroom interaction and its implication for their oral production. The findings proved that the students' spontaneous smile served as a fundamental interactive nonverbal sign as it not only favors a closer relation among students, but also helps them in the co-construction of oral activities in group work. Summing up, the students' spontaneous smile appeared to be a nonverbal indicative of proximity and increasing oral interaction among them.

**Keywords:** interaction, nonverbal element, oral production.

### O sorriso espontâneo dos alunos em aulas de língua inglesa

**RESUMO.** Este artigo discute a importância do sorriso espontâneo dos alunos na interação em sala de aula em Língua Inglesa e sua implicação para a produção oral dos alunos. Os resultados mostraram que o sorriso espontâneo dos alunos serviu como um fundamental elemento não-verbal interativo por não apenas favorecer uma relação mais próxima entre os alunos, bem como ajudá-los na co-construção das atividades orais durante os trabalhos em grupo. Isto é, o sorriso Duchenne dos alunos mostrou-se como um indicativo não verbal de proximidade e de aumento de interação oral entre eles.

**Palavras-chave:** interação, elemento não verbal, produção oral.

### Introduction

Communicating is much more than expressing ideas and feelings through words. In conversations, a simple gaze can reveal either a sensation of pleasure or disgust. Nonverbal signs, as part of the process of human communication, reveal different types of communicative meanings throughout gestures, eye contact, facial expressions and body language. What the person does while conversing might strongly sign his/her personal feelings much more than when it is verbally expressed. Talking to a work colleague with crossed arms and a steady position, for example, might sign the person's discomfort on the topic discussion or the person's desire to talk about something different at that time. The way people look at each other and sign their body movements in conversations might be known as nonverbal indicatives of complementing or contradicting the exchanged messages among interlocutors.

According to Pennycook (1985), our bodies constantly convey functional meanings during any interaction and they are always coordinated with the spoken language, providing contextual cues to the interlocutor-listener-interpreter in the task of understanding what the interlocutor-speaker has said before. For instance, direct eye contact can

signal attentiveness followed by head movements during interactive encounters. And, while downcast eyes represent respect in the Eastern cultures, on the other hand, in the Western cultures it might signal misunderstanding during face-to-face encounters.

Touching, which is one of the nonverbal elements in human communication, varies according to the specific culture considered (PENNYCOOK, 1985). For example, while in some cultures touching can be regarded as acceptable in public domains, for others it is not acceptable. For North American people, touching friends can be considered normal, but for Japanese people it can be conceived as an impolite behavior. Pennycook (1985) sustains that we express ourselves more with body movements than with words. Nonverbal resources are used along the spoken language in order to complement the functional meanings of the whole human communication. Similar to Pennycook's comments, both Santos (2007) and Gregersen (2007) have asserted that the teachers' nonverbal signs tend to substitute, contradict, explain or monitor their verbal behavior during classroom interactions. For this reason, the nonverbal feature of communication needs to be treated with cautious as it depends on individual, contextual and cultural factors in the

process of understanding and interpreting messages in social interactions.

One of the categories that have received attention in studies about nonverbal communication has been the Paralanguage. Pennycook (1985) explains that paralanguage refers to all aspects of nonverbal communication and it is used in a broad sense, but not as an interrelated subsystem comprising the overall communicative competence. In a narrow sense, this author refers to paralanguage as the paraverbal features, which consist on kinesics, proxemics and the paraverbal features of the vocally-produced sounds. They both serve to complement or emphasize the spoken language in conversations. Whatever the nonverbal type of resource used in discourse is, the nonverbal elements have interactive and communicative intentions (ACIOLI, 2007; DANTAS, 2007; OLIVEIRA, 2007; SANTOS, 2007; SOUZA, 2007). Taking into account the communicative perspective, these elements can both express peoples' intentions and personal feelings. And, interactionally speaking, nonverbal signs can influence or modify others' nonverbal behaviors in response to what they hear and see in conversational episodes.

Taking these theoretical perspectives about the nonverbal behavior in classroom interactions into account, this article analyzes the students' facial expression smile in the EFL classroom to discuss its interactive meanings during oral tasks. Although it is well known among the nonverbal specialists that nonverbal signs often accompany the verbal signs in the spoken discourse as to complement or contradict the spoken language (ACIOLI, 2007; DANTAS, 2007; OLIVEIRA, 2007; PENNYCOOK, 1985; SOUZA, 2007), I narrowed down the analysis to the students' smile as it was the most recurrent nonverbal sign produced during classroom interactions, which carries different interactional meanings needed to the discussion about the learning implications for oral production.

The objective of this article is threefold. First of all, I discuss relevant research on nonverbal behavior in the classroom interaction. Secondly, I explain the types of smile (DAVIES, 1979; EKMAN, 2003; FREITAS-MAGALHÃES, 2006; RECTOR; TRINTA, 1993). Finally, I analyze the Duchenne's spontaneous smile produced by the students in an EFL classroom environment at college level and its learning implication to their speech production.

### **Nonverbal elements in the classroom interaction**

Considering that the interaction implies the exchange of words, feelings and emotions of any sort among the interlocutors who are constantly

(re)creating or (re)negotiating their social roles and attitudes, the nonverbal behavior also plays a fundamental role in the process of human communication (MARCUSCHI, 1991; PENNYCOOK, 1985; SANTOS, 2007). This nonverbal facet of communication is not so different in the classroom context. It is through gestures, hand movements, head movements, the smile, eye contact, silence and/or distancing (DANTAS, 2007; OLIVEIRA, 2007; SOUZA, 2007) that teacher and students attempt to indicate how close or distant they are from each other in the classroom interaction, attempting to establish the social roles they may need to adopt in specific class moments. Being that complementing, emphasizing, excluding, explaining or contradicting what they intend to say in the classroom, nonverbal elements contribute in the co-construction of knowledge by adding interactive meanings to the individual's emotions and attitudes throughout classroom conversations.

Currently, there has been a growing interest among scholars to search for the teacher's gestural behavior in the classroom interaction and its implications in relation to the teaching and learning processes. From different perspectives, Sime (2008) and Lorsch (2003) examined the teacher's nonverbal signs and their teaching implications to the foreign language (FL) classroom. Sime (2008) analyzed the learners' perceptions of the teacher's gestures in the EFL classes. She found out that the teacher's gestures contribute to the classroom interaction by enhancing comprehension, facilitating the learning processes and indicating the teacher's reactions to the learners' output.

Lorsch (2003), in turn, observed the teacher's nonverbal signs in German schools in 1972 and 1994, and concluded that the learners tend to interpret the teacher's gestures correctly. This author noticed that the teacher's gestures are often used to provide positive feedback, to highlight information and to replace the verbal elements when the lexemes are unknown by the learners. This particularly occurs with a high intensity at the beginner level and within phases in which fictitious communication takes place, for example, in moments of role play when learners are expected to act out a story. Similar to Santos (2007), Lorsch (2003) asserted that the teacher's nonverbal signs occur in connection to the verbal signs to interpret, comment or modify the verbal utterances in the spoken discourse.

Facial expressions have also been investigated in classroom interactions. Dantas (2007) analyzed the teacher's smile in the EFL classroom interaction. Her principal goal was to reflect upon how the

teacher's smile could influence EFL learning as a whole at moments of interaction between teacher and students at the extension school of English from the Federal University of Alagoas. She found out that the smile was the nonverbal element used to increase classroom interaction through a convivial strategy (a balance between the instructional and the spontaneous discourse), as well as to promote a funny learning environment, therefore favoring students' learning, and also to reprimand students (exerting power and saving the face) for not doing their homework. Although her work gave emphasis on the teacher's smile in relation to the EFL learning, she could also notice that the teacher's smile helped to lower the affective filter between teacher and students, favoring oral interaction among students.

Observing teacher's facial expressions in a classroom environment of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade from the primary education in a public school in Maceió, Alagoas State, Oliveira (2007) investigated how the teacher's face promotes meaning construction during interactive moments between the teacher and the students' interactions. This author focuses the analyses on the human face, bearing in mind that it is the face one of the nonverbal signs used in communication to exchange information and to see how power relations can be managed and perceived through eye contact. Besides the expressive eye, it was observed the teacher's smile positively contributes to the teacher and students' relationship, being seen as a manifestation of enjoyment, by means of a true smile, and as a polite instrument of contact through a social smile. The author concluded that both eye expressions and the smile can contribute to the enjoyment or the lack of it in classroom interactions and, as a consequence, they can favor or not the meaning construction in the pedagogical setting.

One of the aspects investigated about the smile is its cultural implication in the classroom interaction. Bohn (2004) investigated how the Japanese culture on smile influences Japanese students' oral participation in an ESL classroom. Through a questionnaire to students and classroom observations, the author found out that the smile serves as a sign of politeness or a kind of etiquette among the students, and between the students and the teacher. Also, the smile tends to be used to protect privacy, to show interest, to seem friendly and to listen carefully. In protecting privacy, the smile is often managed as a way to prevent the personal feelings on the event itself. For example, when asked if they understood the lesson or not, Japanese students tend to smile instead of verbally

expressing their sensations. The spoken discourse is replaced by the smile as a way to sign a lack of desire to orally participate in class activities.

### Types of smile

Although the smile is commonly accepted as a facial expression that denotes joy and satisfaction, its origin comes from the facial expression of fear (FREITAS-MAGALHÃES, 2006). The smile-face may be traced from the primate's grimace or fear grin in order to sign self-defense manners. Initially, it was among the animals that the smile was connected as a threat since it exposes the teeth, or a sign of submission. Then, the primates used the fear-smiley-face by showing their teeth when in the context of animals attack to their environment. By doing so, the primates tended to suggest that they were harmless. Their smile started out to show a peaceful and friendly meaning. With its evolvement in human communication, the smile turned out to be related to joy, happiness and pleasure (FREITAS-MAGALHÃES, 2006). The fear-smile compared to the joy-smile began to be recognized in human communication in accordance to the context that surrounds their use (DAVIES, 1979).

According to Freitas-Magalhães (2006), the smile presents three functions. The first function tends to appear in the expression of emotions and interpersonal attitudes. A spontaneous smile that emerges from jokes can be regarded as an expression of happiness. Secondly, the smile can be related to the sending of specific meaningful signs in social interactions. Social smiles which often occur during wedding ceremonies may reflect politeness among the guests. And thirdly, the smile can indicate typical aspects of the individual personality. Sometimes, a smile may indicate that a student is nervous or timid when he or she does not know what and how to speak in front of the classroom. Although the smile has frequently been defined as an affective and social positive reaction to external stimulus, it suffers meaningful alterations grounded on cultural patterns and experiences of social interactions.

Still based on Freitas-Magalhães (2006), the smile can be defined under five categories: the primitive smile, the reflex smile, the exogenous smile, the instrumental smile and the coordinated smile. The primitive smile is shown in the answers to the neurobiological excitements and do not represent a relation to the outside world. Such behavior can be noticed during the period in which the baby is sleeping – only the mouth and face move. The reflex or endogenous smile can be regarded as instinctive. The baby smiles using all

muscles of the face what characterizes the beginning of the smile morphology. Such endogenous smile is the result of the internal brain operations, notably seen in the babies, with no external interference for its realization.

Influenced by cultural and social patterns of social interactions, there are smiles which presents distinguished communicative and interactive effects. The exogenous smile manifests a relation to the outside stimulus, that is, this smile is regarded as a response to affection. Being socially used as a conduct and strategy of affection, the exogenous smile favors affective proximity. The instrumental smile, in turn, can be managed in interactive moments for intentional purposes. This smile can be seen when a man flirts a woman for the first time and uses such smile in order to show his interest towards her. The coordinated or organizational smile appears when the social smile has been already established. This smile reflects the individual's attitudinal mechanism when corresponding to someone else, for instance, the smile with a happy tone of voice (FREITAS-MAGALHÃES, 2006).

Based on research in the Psychiatry clinic, Duchenne de Boulogne, a French neurologist, found out the difference between a false and a true smile. In observing the way(s) each facial muscle changes the people's appearance, Duchenne concluded that there are involuntary and voluntary smiles. The involuntary smile involves the movement of the zygomaticus muscle near the mouth and the obicularis muscle which is near the eyes. This smile reveals a true smile as it results from positive emotion and stimulus. It was also named as the Duchenne (or spontaneous) smile (EKMAN, 2003).

On the other hand, the voluntary smile can also be known as the polite smile, yellow smile or masked smile. This type of smile is voluntary since it often appears "[...] when people do not feel enjoyment of any kind [...]" (EKMAN, 2003, p. 204). That is why the voluntary smile does not bear a real meaning as it represents a mask to hide any unfavorable feeling, emotion or to avoid showing worries and sadness to others. The Japanese people, for example, tend to smile even when a relative dies. For them, smiling is not a matter of affective insensibility, but a way to prevent their sadness from appearing to others (RECTOR; TRINTA, 1993).

Although it is well known among nonverbal specialists that the nonverbal signs often accompany the verbal elements in the discourse (ACIOLI, 2007; DANTAS, 2007; OLIVEIRA, 2007; PENNYCOOK, 1985; SANTOS, 2007), I narrowed down the analysis to the students' smile, investigating its interactional

meanings into the classroom interactional context, since it was the most recurrent nonverbal sign observed among students and in teacher-student interactions during oral tasks throughout the doctoral research. Next, I present the methodology adopted in the analysis.

## Methodology

The participants involved were divided into two semesters on the year 2008, time period of the research. In the semester 2008.1, there were one teacher and fourteen students. In the semester 2008.2, there were eighteen students. All of them were in the discipline English Language 1, at the Languages and Literature Course of the State University of Paraiba (UEPB) in Campina Grande, Paraiba State.

Since this study focused on face-to-face interaction in the classroom context, the conversation analysis (CA) was the trend of analysis used for the data transcription. According to the objectives held by CA, as well as the principles that underlie a qualitative research, three aspects need to be taken into account for the analysis: (1) the contextual information, that is, what actually happens in the event itself; (2) the interlocutors' characteristics, which means their social and cultural background; and (3) the interlocutors' communicative strategies, that is, the verbal and nonverbal elements used throughout the interactive encounter (ARMENGAUD, 2006; GOFFMAN, 2002; KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI, 2006; MARCUSCHI, 1991; SACKS; SCHEGLOFF; JEFERSON, 1978). Hence, the CA employs the techniques of the ethno methodology as to describe all the procedures, activities and methods the individuals employ in oral interactions.

To the ethno methodologists, describing means observing-and-reporting the world around them. As Coulon (2005, p. 49) explains,

[...] if I describe a scene of my daily life, it does not mean that I explain the world in the light of the ethno methodology, but in doing so, my description makes the world, it constructs the world (my translation).

Therefore, there are four principles which guided this work, as follows: 1) there was the initial contact to find out the area and people to take part of it; 2) the analysis is holistic, as it is believed that the human behavior is connected to specific contexts in order to fulfill certain objectives; 3) the analysis deals with description since it describes the reality as it is; and 4) the research is based on the participants' viewpoint of the social reality (COULON, 2005; WARDHAUGH, 1985).

As the *corpus* for the conversation analysis comes from interactive sequences of natural occurrence, "[...] the data consists of tape-recording and transcriptions of conversations" (LEVINSON, 1983, p. 326). In Levinson words,

[...] the CA methodology is based on three basic procedures (a) collecting recurrent patterns in the data, and hypothesizing sequential expectations based on them; (b) showing that such sequential expectations actually are oriented to by participants; and (c) showing that, as a consequence of such expectations, while some organizational problems are resolved, others are actually created, for which further organizations will be required (LEVINSON, 1983, p. 326).

#### Students' smile in the EFL classroom interaction

Even though the smiling expression is mostly recognized as an enjoyable facial expression (EKMAN, 2003), its meaning is context-sensitive since it takes a full account of the individual's affective and personality traits during social interactions. The students' smile in this work accounted for their personal feelings and attitudes in relation to what happens when interacting with their classmates and with their teacher. Their smile, therefore, tends to be an interactive result of what occurs in different class events. This is due to the fact that smiling depends on the contextual factors in which it occurs and on what social and interactional motivation it is based. According to specific contexts for its realization, we can identify different types of smiles (FREITAS-MAGALHÃES, 2006) which includes their communicative, informative and interactional meanings (EKMAN; FRIENSEN, 1969).

In this work, the nonverbal object of investigation in the classroom interactions were the students' smiles. Due to their frequent occurrence in classroom interactions, the students' smiles indicated different interactional and informative meanings depending on the class activity they were involved in and on the interactive moments they were inserted among their classmates and with the teacher.

When interacting among them, the students tended to assume a different nonverbal posture compared to the way they interacted with the teacher. Notably, in pair and group work activities, the students seemed to be more self-confident in exchanging ideas among them. As a consequence, their smile appeared as a sign of pleasure and agreement during their conversations. On the contrary, when in direct contact with the teacher or in open discussions with all the students, the

students' smiles tended to appear as an instrument of defense. That is to say, in smiling the students seemed to avoid oral interaction with the teacher or they seemed to prevent themselves from saying something they did not know or did not want to say. These interactional meanings, in which the students' smiles appeared, served as fundamental aspects for a better understanding of the learning implications in relation to their speech production.

#### Students' spontaneous smiles

Throughout the research, I could notice two types of smile expressed by the students in different class interactive moments. One of them was often used in group activities among students when fulfilling an oral task established by the teacher: the Duchenne smile, the one this article draws attention to. Either discussing grammatical exercises or making up stories based on previous class activities, the students' smiles appeared as a facial expression denoting the students' engagement towards the co-construction of knowledge during oral activities. This smile can be defined as the Duchenne smile or the spontaneous smile (EKMAN, 2003). It was, thus, through the Duchenne smile that the students' speech production seemed to increase more.

The students' Duchenne smile was not only noticed in group activities, but also in funny class moments. This episode could be seen during classroom observations, especially at the very first semester 2008.1. Particularly at the outset of the classes, the observed teacher tended to use some jokes to break the ice between the students and her. To illustrate this class moment, before explaining the use of past tenses, the teacher said: "I've got two dictionaries for those who need them. So, I charge 10,00 bucks to each 30-minute use". After this, everyone laughed and I could perceive, from that moment on, a more relaxed classroom atmosphere. The aforementioned situation occurred during a written exercise whose objective was to review past verb tenses. This kind of verbal behavior was often encountered in this teacher's classes, particularly before an explanation of a grammar point or of an oral task.

However, it was mainly in group activities that the students' Duchenne smile could be more noticed. In one of the class moments, the students were oriented to create a final story about the teacher Mr. Thackeray's professional future, based on the movie 'To Sir, with Love', by James Clavell, which was watched in the previous class. The teacher organized the students in groups of three or four to make up an interesting story about Mr. Thackeray's professional future. Based on

the film, the teacher faced awkward difficulties in dealing with high school students from a public institution and, because of that, he decided on continuing teaching. The group activity was for students to elaborate another ending for the teacher Mr. Thackeray. The teacher observed, then, gave the students approximately 30 minutes to create a final story.

While students were interacting to each other to accomplish that group activity, I could notice that the students' smile differed from group to group. In one group, one student was writing while another was sending information. In another, one student smiled while orienting his classmates on the task (this student seemed to have a more advanced level than the group as he spoke more fluently). And in another group, the case of image 1 shown below, all students smiled while sharing ideas for the creation of the story.



**Figure 1.** Students' Duchenne smile.

At first sight, the students' smile could denote joy in that oral interaction, as shown in figure 1. Everyone was smiling and seemed to be relaxed with one another. Probably because of this context of interaction, the oral task was about to be accomplished having all students joining efforts and sharing ideas for the creation of their story. According to Ekman and Friesen (1969), when there is a shared nonverbal behavior in conversational episodes in that one nonverbal behavior influences or modifies another, there is the case of interactive meaning.

The interactive meaning of nonverbal behavior could also be recognized through the individuals' body movements. Along with the smile, the students' body movements tended to reflect their individuals' personality traits and personal attitudes

in the interaction. As seen in image 1, while the students smiled, the movement of the arms accompanied it. As noticed throughout research, there were some extroverted students in the classroom which tended to behave differently from those who were timid. Such attitudinal behavior could indicate the students' tendency to speak more or less in class activities. Depending on their individual personality trait, the students appeared to show a high or low tendency in relation to their oral production in oral tasks. In image 1, the two students who moved their arms while talking were the extroverted ones. Only one who did not move his arms tended to present himself as a timid student throughout research.

With arms crossed, the head quite often in a down position and avoiding eye contact to the classmates, these nonverbal signs came along with a timid smile by one of the students. Although such nonverbal attitude indicates a more polite smile (FREITAS-MAGALHÃES, 2006), it seems here that this student also shared the feeling of satisfaction with other classmates on his own manner. Although having a pre-intermediate level of proficiency, this student was constantly motivated by the other two to add his ideas for the story creation. Probably, this motivational attitude could help the timid student to be more confident, leading him to orally participate. Nevertheless, his introverted behavior seemed not to be troublesome for the sharing concept the group activity demanded. After a while, this timid student started to speak a bit more.

When nonverbal signs draw others' attention reflecting on similar nonverbal response, we say that a nonverbal interactive meaning was established. Also known as a coordinated smile (EKMAN, 2003), this type of smile reflects the individual's attitude in correspondence to a specific tone of voice or an expressive glance, for example. As shown in image 1, the students' spontaneous smile could also be regarded a coordinated smile for it was connected to the shared pleasant atmosphere among them (EKMAN; FRIENSEN, 1969). When one student gave a smile, others responded by giving the same smile back.

Regarding the level of social relationships established in this group, that is, the activity among students, a more symmetrical relation could be noticed (KOCH, 2006; MARCUSCHI, 1991). Symmetrical relations can be identified when the interlocutors share similar social roles, and when everyone is responsible for the turn-taking system. Each one has the right to talk. In this group activity, the students seemed to be in their own right in

coordinating who and when should speak by using their spontaneous smile as a sign of agreement and joy. Although the timid student seemed to participate less than the others as shown by his body movements, he was in a situation

[...] in which the several participants have supposedly the same right to self-choose the word, the topic to deal with and to decide about his/her timing (MARCUSCHI, 1991, p. 16) (my translation).

The same symmetrical relation with the Duchenne smile can be seen in image 2, as illustrated below. Differently from image 1, in this group activity all students seem to share agreement through their Duchenne smile. Although there is one student with a more advanced level of proficiency – the one with a red T-shirt placed in the middle – all of them seem to own the same right to coordinate who should speak first. There was no assistance given, but negotiation of how their story would be developed. Similar to the group in image 1, this group was sharing ideas about Mr. Takeray's professional future. As seen in image 2, three students were attentive to what one of them was saying. According to their head position, they were signaling attention, joy and agreement through the Duchenne smile, as the dark blue T-shirt student kept talking.



Figure 2. Students' Duchenne smile.

The same interactive meaning of these students' smiles could be seen during classroom observations. Observing two students talking about a handbag store downtown they know, one of them used hand movements followed by a smile as they went on explaining where that store was situated. Another student, who was attentively listening, nodded making his classmates see that he was following the conversation. According to research on nonverbal elements in the EFL classrooms (GREGERSEN, 2007; SANTOS, 2007), these gestures might serve to emphasize on the student's speech when they provide explanation about the store place. As for the smile, I could observe that its use probably

reinforced the explanation given by the student-speaker. Hence, as the other student nodded, the coordinated and Duchenne smile appeared.

## Conclusion

In the analysis herein cited, I could notice a great social relation of proximity among students in the group activities. And one of the nonverbal elements used to emphasize this social and friendly behavior among them was by means of the Duchenne or spontaneous smile (EKMAN, 2003). According to Ekman (2003), the spontaneous smile is often found in social interactions in which individuals express happiness and pleasure. In the group activities under investigation, the students' smile tended to facilitate oral interaction among them, leaving them with enough freedom of expression and it also contributes to a better self-stem in those interactive moments in which they are (re)formulating stories, as shown.

Instead of complementing or emphasizing the spoken language in the classroom conversations, as most classroom research has noticed about the role of nonverbal signs (DANTAS, 2007; OLIVEIRA, 2007; SOUZA, 2007), in this study the students' smile tended to express their personal feelings and intentions in relation to the class activities they took part of. The understanding and interpretation of their Duchenne smile could be seen in accordance to what they did and said among them. In other words, the smiling expression appeared to be an important interactive nonverbal element that besides favoring a closer relation among students, also served as a sign to help them co-construct oral activities favoring an increase of oral interaction among them (RECTOR; TRINTA, 1993).

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