

Exploring the Effects of Teachers' Use of Nonviolent Communication on Learners' Classroom Participation in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

With communication being the backbone of language classes, the interactions learners have with each other and with their teachers play a chief role in the teaching-learning process in EFL classes. Accordingly, teachers and researchers are in constant search for various innovative ways in which they can increase the frequency and quality of learners' classroom participation. Evidently, this is not an easy task, but using nonviolent communication (NVC) – an approach to communication that promotes mindfulness, empathy, mutual understanding and respect – seems to have a lot to offer in this respect. The use of NVC has led to positive effects in an array of domains. However, little is investigated with regard to its effects on classroom participation. Against this background, the aim of this study was to explore the effects of the teachers' employment of NVC on learners' classroom participation in EFL classes. An experimental design with systematic observation was implemented for the study, where the participants' classroom participation was systematically observed and reported using a standardized observation protocol. The results indicated that the use of NVC in communicating with learners positively affects their classroom participation frequency.

1. INTRODUCTION

No rational mind can deny the fact that communication plays a major role in education. It is an essential element for effective learning for learners, and the key for efficient teaching for teachers. Briefly put, communication is the linchpin of the teaching-learning process. With this in mind, how teachers communicate with their learners strongly impacts the teaching-learning process, and thus can either enhance the latter or hinder it. Although this holds valid in all classes, it is especially true in language classes such as those of EFL, where the use of language to communicate is given more importance.

An important aspect of the teaching-learning process is the learners' use of language for the purpose of interacting with the teacher and with other learners, the act that is commonly referred to within the context of education as classroom participation. The latter is invaluable because it allows learners to express themselves, exchange opinions, remain engaged and

motivated throughout the session, ask questions, and so on and so forth. For teachers, classroom participation is crucial because it allows them to smoothly guide learners throughout the lesson, identify learners' needs and interests and use them to make the lessons more engaging, and check learners' understanding, to mention but a few.

Given its importance, teachers constantly seek ways to encourage their learners to participate in classroom discussions and activities, but doing so is one of the most challenging tasks. Preparing interesting lessons is not enough. Teachers need to actually interact with learners in a way that encourages them to participate. In this regard, the use of nonviolent communication (NVC) seems to have a lot to offer. The latter is an approach to communication that empathizes mindfulness, respect, empathy, and understanding, among others. To the best of our knowledge, little is known about its impact on learners' classroom participation. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to explore the effects of NVC on the learners' classroom participation.

For the purpose of achieving this objective, the researchers conducted their study so as to answer the following questions:

1. Does the teachers' use of NVC affect learners' classroom participation?
2. If so, what aspects of classroom participation does it affect? And to what extent?

Based on previous research on NVC in contexts other than the classroom, the researchers held the assumption that the employment of NVC by the part of teachers in EFL classes would have a positive impact on learners' classroom participation, as it helps in creating and maintaining a teaching-learning atmosphere where respect, empathy, and understanding prevail. Accordingly, they formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: The teacher's use of NVC increases EFL learners' classroom participation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Students' Classroom Participation

"Classroom participation is a ubiquitous idea in education" (Schultz, 9, p. 1). This communication process enables learners to express their opinions and discuss ideas, which keeps them engaged throughout lessons and facilitates interaction with peers and teachers. For educators, it is a valuable opportunity to connect with students and understand their academic capabilities and personal needs. Without classroom participation, teaching would be reduced to a static transfer of knowledge.

Classroom participation is influenced by various factors, including the physical environment, materials, lesson type and topic, and teacher characteristics. A crucial yet often overlooked factor is the quality of communication between teachers and students. Effective communication, encompassing both speaking and listening, significantly influence student behavior and enhances many aspects of the teaching-learning process, including classroom participation.

2.2. NVC and Classroom Participation

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is particularly promising in this context. Based on principles of respect, honesty, empathy, mindfulness, and a genuine desire to connect, NVC fosters healthier interactions. Rosenberg (2015, p. 5) described NVC as "founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions." It aims to replace hostile elements in interactions with those that lead to more constructive outcomes. While specific studies linking NVC to classroom participation are limited, its positive impact in other areas suggests its potential.

In this regard, NVC has been shown to improve relational climate and empathy (Costetti, 2001), enhance honesty, trust, and clarity (Cox & Dannahy, 2005), boost interpersonal communication (Hart & Göthlin, 2002), assist in anger expression (Lee et al., 2009), and increase cooperation, compassion, and respect (Jones, 2009). Despite these findings,

there is a lack of research specifically connecting NVC with classroom participation, particularly in EFL contexts.

2.3. The NVC Process

NVC involves two main components: expressing honestly and receiving empathically. Expressing honestly includes observing others’ words and actions without judgment, identifying the feelings these provoke, focusing on the underlying needs, and making requests to address these needs effectively.

Receiving empathically involves similar steps but from the listener’s perspective. This process entails looking beyond words and actions to understand the speaker’s true feelings and needs, fostering mutual understanding and satisfaction. Rosenberg (2015) suggests specific language for both honest expression and empathic reception.

Table 1
A Language Template for the NVC Process

	Expressing Honestly	Receiving Empathically
Making an Observation	When I see/hear...	When you see/hear...
Identifying Feelings	I feel... ..because...	You feel... ..because...
Recognizing Needs	I need/value...	you need/value...
Making Request	Would you be willing to...?	Would you like...?

Evidently, many other alternatives can be used for different situations, meaning that it is not necessary to adhere strictly to the templates above. What is necessary, however, is to involve all the four components: 1) making an observation and separating it from any judgments, 2) identifying feelings, 3) identifying the needs that trigger feelings, and 4) making a request. Therefore, the table above is a good reference for learning how to use NVC, but it is not intended to impose any limits as far as the four components are all present in one’s communication.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted in Morocco. Being a multilingual country with Arabic and Amazigh as its official languages, Morocco has a rich linguistic landscape shaped by its historical, cultural, and socio-political context. French is widely used in business, science, and higher education, reflecting the country's colonial history. However, English has been gaining importance over the past few decades. The growing emphasis on English is driven by globalization and the recognition of English as a global lingua franca. Therefore, English proficiency is increasingly seen as essential for academic and professional opportunities, as well as for accessing scientific and technological advancements. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is introduced in Moroccan public schools starting from the middle school level (approximately age 12). By the time students reach high school, English is a mandatory subject, and proficiency in English is considered crucial for academic success and future career prospects. The curriculum emphasizes the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, with a particular focus on communicative competence.

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The target population of this study involved 10 learners who were part of a Second Year Baccalaureate class, Arts Stream, at Al Kindy High School in Dar El Kebdani, Driouch, Morocco. This sample was selected based on their frequency of classroom participation. They rarely participated in classroom discussions and activities. Likewise, they seldom asked questions or engaged in constructive interactions with their classmates or their teacher. To ensure diversity with regards to gender, 50% of the participants were males and the other 50% were females.

3.2.Design

To test the effects of NVC on the selected sample's classroom participation, we adopted an experimental design. However, instead of having a control group and an experimental group, only one group was studied before and after the use of NVC to check whether that resulted in any differences regarding learners' classroom participation.

3.3.Instruments

To collect data about the effects of NVC on learners' classroom participation, a standardized observation protocol was used. Before and after the introduction of NVC to the teaching-learning process, the classroom participation frequency of the selected sample was systematically recorded using a report with a set of criteria, the participant's full name, the participant's frequency of participation every week and a section for remarks.

The criteria encompassed learners' frequency of participation in classroom discussions that usually take place during the warm-up and presentation phases of the lesson, their frequency of asking questions about the lessons during the presentation and practice stages, their frequency of sharing exercises answers with the whole class during the practice stage, and their frequency of participating in classroom activities such as enacting dialogues and conducting presentations. The criteria also included the learners' frequency of constructive engagement with other learners such as asking each other questions and comparing answers and their constructive engagement with the teacher such as engaging in greetings and saying goodbye when leaving the classroom.

3.4.Procedure

In total, this action research took four weeks. It started on the 3rd of April 2024 and continued until the 29th of the same month and year. During the first two weeks, NVC was not used in the classroom. In the following weeks, however, NVC was introduced in the form of one-on-one conversations with the participants at the end of the sessions. Sometimes, however, the participants were addressed as a group after other learners had left the classroom.

The conversations were based on the NVC process of observing, identifying feelings and needs or wants and making a request, particularly its first part: expressing honesty. The participants were told the following: I have noticed that you are not participating in any classroom discussions. This makes me feel disappointed because I want to see you learning and becoming better and better every day. Would you please tell me the reasons why you do not participate? This was done with other aspects of classroom participation as well, such as learners' frequency of asking questions and engaging in constructive interactions with their peers and with their teacher.

When learners provided a direct answer, the process continued in order to allow them to fully express the reasons behind their reluctance concerning classroom participation. There were instances, nevertheless, when learners remained silent and could not clearly identify those reasons. In those cases, more specific questions were asked. An example of that was the

following: Do you avoid participating in the classroom because you are scared of being judged by the teacher or by others? Do you need more pair work to participate more? And so on. This continued until the reasons behind not participating were clearly identified.

At the end of the four-week period, the learners’ classroom participation frequency of the first two weeks was compared with that of the last two weeks when NVC was introduced. This was done in order to test for the differences in terms of classroom participation before and after the intervention using NVC. The comparison considered the overall classroom participation frequency of the learners as well as the more specific one related to each aspect.

3.5.Ethical Considerations

The confidentiality and the anonymity of the participants were strongly protected. The gathered data was used for research purposes only and were not shared with any third party. The participants’ names were systematically replaced using symbols. Moreover, participants were informed about the aims of the study, presented with their rights to withdraw from the experiment at any time and their right to ask questions. Last but not least, all of the required permissions were taken before initiating the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1.Results

The results obtained from the four-weeks systematic observation were summarized and presented in the table below. It involves the ten participants but does not reveal their names for confidentiality purposes. Instead, names were coded into symbols, P1 for the first participant, P2 for the second, and so on. The table also involves two columns, with the first one including the participants’ classroom participation frequency during the first two weeks and the second column encompassing their frequency during the following two weeks in which NVC was introduced. Each one of the two columns involves the six-item criteria on which the observation was based. Just like participants, the criteria were also coded for the purpose of conciseness. Therefore, C1 stands for the first criterion, C2 for the second one, and so on. Under each criterion are the participants’ frequency of participation along with their sum total represented with the ‘T’ letter.

The first criterion used for the observation was about the learners’ frequency of participating in classroom discussions, the second one focused on their frequency of asking questions about the lessons, the third one revolved around the frequency of sharing exercises answers, the fourth one emphasized the frequency of participating classroom activities, and the fifth and six criteria targeted the learners’ constructive engagement with their peers and with their teacher respectively. The results indicated that the NVC intervention resulted in an outstanding increase in the participants’ frequency of participating in classroom discussions, asking questions, sharing answers, participating in classroom activities, engaging with peers, and engaging with the teacher. All of the participants were more engaged and more motivated to participate in the different classroom activities, starting from simple acts like greeting the teacher and their peers, to more demanding ones such as engaging in classroom discussions and sharing and comparing answers with their peers and with their teacher. With everything into account, it became evident that the NVC intervention was successful in terms of encouraging learners to participate more in the different classroom activities.

Table 2

Learners’ Participation Frequency before and after the Intervention

Participants	Pre-Intervention Frequency							Post-Intervention Frequency						
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	T	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	T

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P1	0	0	2	0	2	0	4	0	3	7	2	6	7	25
P2	0	1	1	0	1	0	3	0	4	5	1	5	5	20
P3	0	0	1	0	2	0	3	0	3	4	1	5	5	18
P4	0	0	3	0	2	0	5	1	2	7	2	4	4	20
P5	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	1	3	1	5	4	14
P6	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	1	4	6	14
P7	1	2	4	1	7	2	17	2	3	6	3	4	8	27
P8	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	2	3	5	13
P9	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	1	3	7	14
P10	1	1	2	0	2	2	8	1	3	3	2	3	6	18

4.2. Discussion

The results of this study indicate a significant positive impact of NVC on learners' classroom participation. The comparison of classroom participation frequencies before and after the NVC intervention revealed a notable increase across all measured criteria: participating in classroom discussions, asking questions, sharing exercise answers, participating in classroom activities, engaging with peers, and engaging with the teacher. These findings support the hypothesis that the teacher's use of NVC can enhance EFL learners' classroom participation.

The introduction of NVC in the classroom led to substantial improvements in various aspects of learner engagement. For instance, the frequency of classroom discussions increased markedly, reflecting a more open and interactive learning environment. The enhanced participation in discussions suggests that learners felt more comfortable and encouraged to express their opinions and ideas, a key objective of NVC which emphasizes respectful and empathetic communication (Rosenberg, 2015).

Similarly, the frequency of learners asking questions saw a significant rise, indicating that students felt more secure in seeking clarification and engaging with the lesson content. This change aligns with previous research suggesting that effective communication fosters an environment where students feel safe to express their uncertainties and seek help (Cox & Dannahy, 2005).

The increase in constructive engagement with both peers and the teacher also highlights the role of NVC in strengthening relationships within the classroom. By fostering a climate of empathy, respect, and understanding, NVC helps build trust and mutual respect between teachers and students (Hart & Göthlin, 2002). This relational improvement is crucial, as strong teacher-learner relationships enhance student motivation and academic performance.

4.3. Implications for Teaching Practices and for Research

In light of the aforementioned, this study can offer much for researchers and practitioners interested in the same topic of NVC and classroom participation. It sheds light on the strong and positive effects NVC can have on learners' classroom participation. It shows what aspects of classroom participation are affected by NVC and to what extent they are affected. The study also provides a primary explanation to why NVC positively affects learners' classroom participation. Thus, it offers researchers and practitioners valuable insights that can be used to understand the effects of NVC on classroom participation. Such insights can then be translated into practical techniques which we can use with our learners in order to increase their classroom participation frequency and to enhance its quality.

The positive effects of NVC on classroom participation suggest that incorporating NVC principles into teaching strategies can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment. Teachers can benefit from training in NVC to improve their communication

skills, thus enhancing their ability to connect with students and encourage active participation. The observed improvements in student behaviour and engagement also highlight the importance of addressing the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of teaching. By focusing on how teachers communicate, not just what they communicate, educators can foster a more inclusive and dynamic classroom atmosphere. This approach aligns with the broader educational goal of developing learners' academic skills as well as their socio-emotional competencies.

For researchers, this would be another useful block of literature on which they can base further studies, for it would show how NVC affects classroom participation and the degree of this effect. Moreover, the observation criteria offered by this study can be valuable for researchers and practitioners who are interested in further investigating the effects of NVC on learners' classroom participation in general and in EFL classes in particular. They can either use it as it is or adapt it according to what they want to investigate.

4.4. Limitations and Future Research

While the study provides compelling evidence of the benefits of NVC, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small sample size and the specific context of a single school in Morocco may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could involve larger, more diverse samples and explore the impact of NVC in different educational settings and cultural contexts. Moreover, the criteria used to observe learners' classroom participation was not thorough. Thus, future studies can add more aspects of classroom participation to be studied. Additionally, the study primarily focused on quantitative measures of classroom participation. Future studies could incorporate qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, to gain deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of both teachers and students regarding the use of NVC.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, it seems from the results of this study that NVC positively affects the learners' classroom participation. These effects appear to be significant ones, as clearly reflected in the post-intervention substantial increase in learners' frequency of classroom participation. When NVC is used to address the issue of low classroom participation, learners ask more questions about the lessons during the presentation and practice stages, share more exercises and answers with the whole class during the practice stage, participate more in classroom activities during the production stage and engage more in constructive interactions with their peers and with their teacher.

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Appendix 1: The Observation Criteria

Instructions:

Criteria	Student	Frequency						Remarks
		0	1	2	3	4	+5	
Participating in classroom discussions (during the warm up and presentation stages).								
Asking questions about the lessons (during the presentation and practice stages).								
Sharing exercises answers (during the practice stage).								
Participating in classroom activities (during production stage, such as dialogues and presentations).								
Constructive engagement with other students (general interactions with other students, such as asking them questions and comparing answers).								
Constructive engagement with the teacher (general interactions with the teacher, such as saying hello and goodbye).								