

ESL Teachers and Their Facial Expression; A Strategy for Better Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the impact of an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher's facial expression of smiling on the learning outcomes of students. The data for the research was gathered from 16 participants (10 males and 6 females) enrolled in a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates through semi-structured interviews. The results supported the conceptualization of positive psychology and reported that a smile is an important factor that can lead to better learning outcomes. Moreover, it was found that an instructor's smile can lead to a positive classroom atmosphere, increased engagement, and motivation, improved relationship with the teacher, enhanced learning experience, reduced anxiety and stress and increased trust and respect. All of these factors can further lead to better learning outcomes. The conceptual model proposed by this research can be empirically investigated.

Keywords: *Smile, Learning Outcomes, ESL, EFL, Engagement, Learning Experience, Positive Psychology.*

1. Introduction

Teaching is an integral part of the teacher's job, but this job is becoming challenging for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who always face difficulties in satisfying the students (Moses and Mohamad, 2019). Many researchers have pointed out that students' satisfaction and better learning outcomes are the key objectives of teaching and these factors can also predict the efficiency of teachers (Guolla, 1999; Wang and Liao, 2011; Xiao and Wilkins, 2015; Bini and Masserini, 2016; Rahman et al., 2019) but there is a paucity of literature highlighting that which strategies can help the ESL teachers in driving better learning outcomes.

Effective teachers are always seeking out new ideas, student-driven projects, and professional development opportunities (Barr, 1958; Vandiver and Walsh, 2010) that can positively influence the students and leave a lasting impression on them. Abundant literature is available on effective teaching, effective teachers, and common characteristics of teachers (Muijis & Reynolds, 2017; Perrott, 2014; Marshall, 2016), and the majority of them highlighted that effective classroom management is just as important as deep subject knowledge, well-planned lectures, intelligent questioning, and feedback and evaluation (Khadragy et al., 2022a; Salloum, Shwedeh, et al., 2023; Shwedeh, Aldabbagh, et al., 2023). Other unique abilities are necessary for instructors to have and utilize in the classroom, and the list could be extended. Furthermore, the literature highlights the significance of verbal and nonverbal communication as a key attribute. According to Santos (2007), teachers can use nonverbal cues like head nods, hand

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gestures, and facial expressions to supplement or reinforce their verbal messages. Burgoon et al. (2016) suggest that nonverbal communication is essential for building strong interpersonal relationships, as it aids in conveying emotions, initiating conversations, and influencing others. The efficacy of nonverbal communication lies in its ability to persuade, impress, and interpret facial expressions, making it a valuable tool for teachers as well. The impact of teachers' nonverbal communication extends beyond their interactions with students, as it has far-reaching consequences (Alkashami et al., 2023; Shwedeh, Aburayya, et al., 2023).

Non-verbal communication that includes hand gestures, eye contact, expression, spatial distance, and particularly facial expressions can help teachers in attaining better student learning outcomes. The effective adoption and utilization of facial expressions by teachers during the lecture not only make the concept clearer but also it will build their interest (Butt and Iqbal, 2011). The prior studies have focused on different facial expressions used by ESL teachers but there is a dearth of literature on a “smile” which is also an important facial expression that can lead to positive learning outcomes (Ulug et al., 2011). A smile is instant gratification and may instantly ease the tension, especially in schools, where children of all ages may feel uneasy, pressured, or out of place. It guarantees that the students feel safe, comfortable, and understood, all of this in order to promote confidence and a high sense of self-worth. Greater social progress, optimal learning, and personal fulfillment are derived from this (Abdallah et al., 2022; Shwedeh, Malaka, et al., 2023; Shwedeh, 2024).

In the context of education and particularly teaching, many studies have paid consideration to laughter but there is a paucity of research on a smile even though both of these phenomena co-occur in different social situations (Haakana, 2010). Moreover, it's complicated to differentiate these concepts as there is a very thin borderline between them (Andr n and Cekaite, 2016), and mostly smiling is considered a visual phenomenon, it is audibly available to the audience through a smiling voice, thus, laughing and smiling, both are verbal phenomena (Ford and Fox, 2010, Glenn and Holt, 2013). Jakonen and Evnitskaya (2020) highlighted that smiles and laughter, both resources are action resources available to students and teachers in classroom settings. The smile of a teacher increases warmth (Gorham, 1988) and it can also lead to positive student outcomes (Nussbaum, 1992). Neill (1989) argued that the facial expression of a smile strongly affects the reaction of students as it depicts care (Pappamihel, 2004). Therefore, the objective of this research is to explore the impact of ESL teachers' facial expressions of smiling on the learning outcomes of students (Alkashami et al., 2023; Shwedeh, 2021; Shwedeh et al., 2020).

2. Literature Review

In the service sector, particularly teaching, there is a high demand for emotionally intelligent employees, the emotional intelligence of teachers can help students in achieving their goals (Alam and Ahmad, 2018). Moreover, the teachers' emotional intelligence indicates their success (Ghanizadeh and Moafian, 2010) as emotionally intelligent teachers know the better use of facial expressions, especially the smile while delivering the lecture, which can reduce or eliminate stress (Nissim, 2019). The studies have revealed that the emotional intelligence of ESL/EFL teachers can help in improving classroom practices (Dewaele et al., 2018) and their own efficacy (Ko ođlu, 2011).

Positive psychologists have highlighted that well-being is promoted by positive emotions (Kristj nsson, 2012) which can be induced by smiling or being happy (Baylis, 2004). Therefore, the smile of a teacher is very important for students (Butt and Iqbal, 2011). According to Kaukomaa et al., (2013) a speaker's smile that starts shortly before and continues during their spoken statement can hint to their emotional posture. The first evident interactional effort for achieving an emotional change (from neutral to positive)

in a discussion can therefore also be represented by such pre-starting smiles. Ergül (2021) indicated that a teacher's smile plays an important role in developing the attention of the student which will ultimately lead to better performance (Dahu et al., 2022; Khadragy et al., 2022b; Ravikumar et al., 2023; Shwedeh et al., 2020). Most teachers know that smiling can have the same impact on students as strict classroom rules or behavioral control strategies, but research shows that only a small percentage of teachers feel that using it is effective. In support of this claim, a comprehensive review of the positive psychology and classroom environment literature showed that smiling is one of the most effective classroom strategies. A positive, cheerful atmosphere promotes learning and reduces student anxiety. Teaching research shows that when teachers smile more, students tend to give better grades, grasp topics better, have more positive feelings about their educational experience and perceive the teacher as being nicer to them (El Nokiti et al., 2022; Ravikumar et al., 2022; Salameh et al., 2022; Shwedeh et al., 2021; Shwedeh, Adelaja, et al., 2023). Based on this premise, teachers who smiled and used more positive and pleasant classroom management strategies outperformed those who were harsher or more negative.

According to Smith (2011), "smiling is one of the most basic, physiologically uniform human expressions" (p. 8). It naturally spreads quickly. In addition, La France (2013) argued that a smile affects both the person who sees it and the person who smiles. In this way, when the teacher smiles at the students, the students will smile back and there will be a positive chain reaction in the classroom. In other words, a pleasant message such as "It was a pleasure to spend time with you", "It was a pleasure teaching you" or "You are a great student". Doff & Jones (2000, p. 101) explained a smile as "universal...easy to see...simple...good for you...and attractive". In this sense, smiles are extremely subtle, and a fake smile can hurt just as much as a real one. While the purpose of this study was not to examine the difference between fake and real smiles, it might be useful to point out that one hallmark of a fake smile is the eyes. It is commonly believed that "when you feel good, your pupils get larger, and when you feel bad, they become small" (Ibid p. 101).

Smiling is an important facial expression that can be very complex to understand in the context of cultures and norms, as the norms for expressing emotions differ among cultures. For example, Russian students studying in the United States complain about their professors that they smile too much, and professors teaching Russian students believe that their students do not actively involve and enjoy their lectures (Gregersen, 2007). In addition, sometimes smiling can be considered teasing (Jakonen and Evnitskaya, 2020). Looney and Kim (2018) highlighted that looking at how students' prior turns align or misalign with the ongoing activity and its expectations for locally suitable student behavior could be a potentially useful feature in trying to analytically grasp the purpose of instructor smiles. The majority of studies focusing on teachers' smile has paid consideration to either overall teachers or specific group of teachers (e.g. Harrington, 1955; Wallace, 2014; Jakonen and Evnitskaya, 2020) but currently, no study up to the author has emphasized English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher's.

4. Methodology

The aim of this study is to highlight the impact of ESL teachers' facial expressions of smiling on the learning outcomes of students enrolled in higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates. In order to explore the aforementioned relation, a qualitative approach is used, as its best for deep-level investigation (Palmer and Bolderston, 2006). Moreover, due to the nature of the study (i.e. qualitative), the interpretivism research paradigm is followed (Campbell, 2014).

A convenience sample of 16 students was recruited for participation in this research. It was ensured by every participant in the beginning that they must have completed at minimum three semesters. Two higher educational institutes in UAE were shortlisted for

the collection of data. The participants of the focus group discussion were the students of the targeted/ selected higher educational institution (Aburayya et al., 2023; Shwede, Aburayya, et al., 2022). They were divided into different segments based on their gender, for example, males and females. This was done to ensure interactive participation among the member of the groups. The detail of the participants is given in table 1.

Table 1: Number of Participants

Number of Participants	
Males	Females
10	6
Total: 16 Participants	

In order to gather data, semi-structured interviews were used to explore the impact of smile on learning outcomes, as its most appropriate and frequently used interview method (Taylor, 2005). In such interviews, following a proper and strict structure is not advised and is considered inappropriate (Kallio et al. 2016), therefore, the questions for the interview were not structured and, they were prepared before the meeting (Salloum, Al Marzouqi, et al., 2023; Shwede, Hami, et al., 2022).

5. Findings

The data analysis provided emerged six main themes including a positive classroom atmosphere, increased engagement and motivation, improved relationship with the teacher, enhanced learning experience, reduced anxiety and stress, and increased trust and respect. Their depiction is given in figure 1.

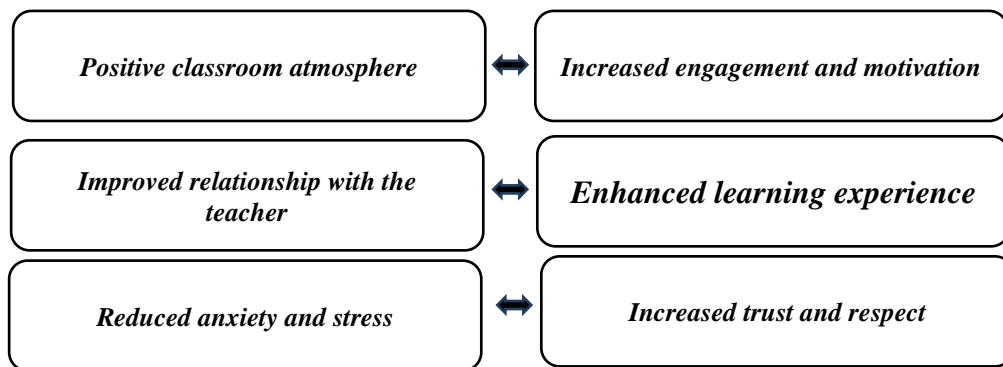


Figure 1: Themes

5.1 Positive Classroom Atmosphere

Many participants reported that their EFL teacher's smile created a positive and welcoming atmosphere in the classroom, which made them feel more comfortable and motivated to learn. This suggests that the teacher's smile may have a positive impact on the overall classroom climate and the students' sense of belonging and well-being.

5.2 Increased Engagement and Motivation

Several participants mentioned that their EFL teacher's smile helped to increase their engagement and motivation in the class. This suggests that the teacher's smile may serve as a nonverbal cue that conveys enthusiasm and encouragement, which can in turn boost the students' motivation and involvement in the learning process.

5.3 Improved Relationship with the Teacher

A number of participants noted that their EFL teacher's smile helped to improve their relationship with her and made them feel more connected to her. This finding highlights the importance of building positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students, as this can have a significant impact on the students' learning experience and outcomes.

5.4 Enhanced Learning Experience

Several participants reported that their EFL teacher's smile made the learning experience more enjoyable and meaningful. This suggests that the teacher's smile may contribute to a more positive and enjoyable learning environment, which can facilitate the students' engagement, retention, and overall learning outcomes.

5.5 Reduced Anxiety and Stress

A few participants mentioned that their EFL teacher's smile helped to reduce their anxiety and stress levels during class. This finding highlights the role of the teacher's nonverbal cues in shaping the students' emotional state and their ability to cope with stress and anxiety in the learning environment.

5.6 Increased trust and respect

Some participants noted that their EFL teacher's smile increased their trust and respect for her. This suggests that the teacher's smile may serve as a nonverbal indicator of her credibility, competence, and authenticity, which can enhance the students' perception of her and their willingness to trust and respect her as an authority figure.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that the EFL teacher's smile can have a positive impact on the student's learning experience, by creating a positive classroom atmosphere, increasing engagement and motivation, improving the teacher-student relationship, enhancing the learning experience, reducing anxiety and stress, and increasing trust and respect. The proposed model based on the findings is shown in figure 2.

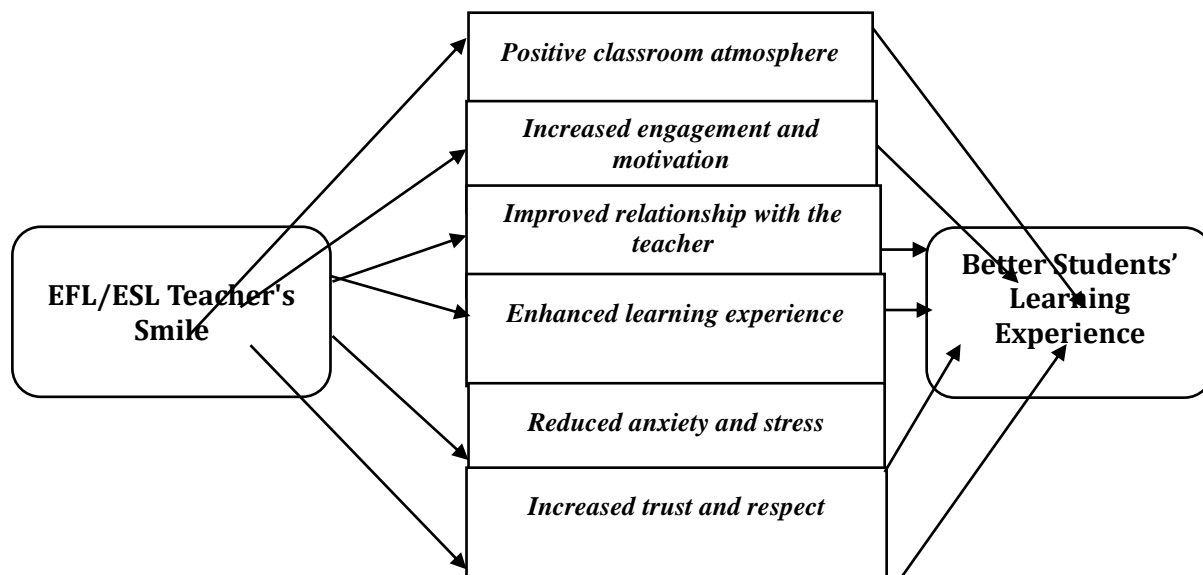


Figure 2: Proposed Model for EFL/ESL teachers' smile and student learning experience.

6. Discussion

The facial expressions of teachers play an important role in enhancing learning outcomes as they are the most effective tools (Butt and Iqbal, 2011; Leung and Chan, 2022) and essential components of all social interactions (Brackett and Katulak, 2013). Among these expressions, the teacher's smile is the most critical factor that can develop the students' attention which is an indicator of performance (Ergül, 2021). Therefore, this research aimed to explore the impact of ESL teachers' smiling on the learning outcomes of students. The results revealed that students' perceptions of their EFL teacher's smile are significantly related to their attitudes towards their teacher and the learning environment. This aligns with previous research on the impact of nonverbal communication on student-teacher relationships and classroom dynamics (Krauss et al., 1995; Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967). The EFL teacher's smile can have a range of positive impacts on student learning and motivation, as well as student social and emotional well-being. It is important for EFL teachers to be aware of the power of their nonverbal communication, including facial expressions, in shaping the learning experiences of their students.

The students' misbehavior in the classroom is related to both; teachers' and students' teaching/ learning styles, personalities or social background. Breaux & Whitaker (2010) state that the best teachers "know that it is extremely difficult for a student to misbehave when his teacher is smiling at him" (p. 70). It is not hard to smile at your students when you put yourself in their places. All teachers went through that horrible time where they were students and their teachers only yelled at them or at other students and turned the classroom into a prison with an open door rather than a place of positive learning. A smile is not costly. A teacher can greet his/her students, encourage their little efforts, or give them feedback and leave the class with a simple smile. This might seem awkward to some teachers, but in reality, it is very useful and powerful. At least, it does not have any side effects.

It's worth noting that in addition to the above studies, there is a wealth of literature on the impact of teacher nonverbal communication, including facial expressions, on student learning and motivation. For example, research has shown that teacher enthusiasm, which can be conveyed through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures, can have a positive impact on student learning and motivation (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Additionally, research has demonstrated that teacher immediacy, or the ability to create a sense of proximity and connection with students through nonverbal communication, can enhance student motivation and learning (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995).

Other studies have focused on the role of teacher facial expressions in creating a positive classroom climate and enhancing student well-being. For example, a study by Denham, Zoller, and Couchoud (1994) found that teachers who used more positive facial expressions, such as smiles, had students who reported feeling more positive emotions and a greater sense of belonging in the classroom. Similarly, a study by Hamre and Pianta (2005) found that teachers who used more positive nonverbal communication, including facial expressions, had students who reported feeling more socially and emotionally supported in the classroom. The results of current research have also identified the factors that are related to the smile of EFL teachers. It can lead to a positive classroom atmosphere, increasing engagement and motivation, improving the teacher-student relationship, enhancing the learning experience, reducing anxiety and stress, and increasing trust and respect. Based on these factors, this research has developed a conceptual framework that can be considered by further studies for empirical investigation.

7. Implications

The main focus of this research is on EFL teachers and their facial expressions of smile. Therefore, the study has provided several implications for both EFL teachers and researchers. In the context of theoretical implications, the research has suggested that students view their EFL teacher's smile as an important nonverbal cue that can significantly impact their learning experience. This highlights the importance of teachers being mindful of their facial expressions and nonverbal communication in the classroom, as it can have a significant impact on students' perceptions and learning outcomes. In addition, the study has indicated that students who perceived their EFL teacher as smiling more frequently had a more positive attitude towards their teacher and the learning environment. This suggests that teachers who are able to create a positive and welcoming classroom environment through the use of nonverbal cues such as smiling may be more effective at engaging and motivating their students. This research is significantly different from prior studies, as they either focused on the smile of specific teaching groups or considered all facial expressions.

Besides, theoretical implications, the study has also provided practical implications for policymakers and professional development programs' developers. It is crucial for policy makers to understand the significance of a positive classroom environment and its impact on student learning outcomes. To that end, schools and educational institutions should invest in teacher training programs that focus on creating a positive learning environment that fosters student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Professional development programs should emphasize the importance of nonverbal communication, such as the facial expression of smiling, in creating a positive learning environment. Furthermore, such programs should encourage instructors to focus on building relationships with their students, reducing anxiety and stress levels, and promoting trust and respect, all of which are critical to student success. By emphasizing the significance of a positive classroom atmosphere, schools and educational institutions can improve learning outcomes and support the success of their students. In addition, people who experience happiness or other joyful emotions usually smile. However, when the demands of teaching or institutional work are unbearable and disruptive students dominate the classroom, teachers may not know how to have one or both of these feelings. In order to make your facial expression attractive to others, you have to actually feel the urge to smile. However, the concept of smiling in this article as it relates to the teacher-student relationship does not address the complexities surrounding smiling from a scientific or psychological perspective. It simply communicates the teacher's goal of introducing themselves to students through a simple smile, building bonds of trust, and encouraging optimism and self-esteem. With less social anxiety about shyness, students can be more open and confident with their teachers. Additionally, if students have the confidence to be open and honest, they will be more able to accept teacher feedback and improve.

8. Limitations and Recommendations

The study has provided detailed implications for researchers and practitioners but still, it has some limitations that can be considered by future studies. First, the study has highlighted that EFL teachers should be mindful of their nonverbal communication, including their facial expressions and smile, in the classroom. This may involve self-monitoring or seeking feedback from colleagues or students on their nonverbal cues. Therefore, further research can be conducted to explore the relationship between teachers' nonverbal cues and students' learning outcomes, using a larger and more diverse sample of students and institutions. This could help to better understand the complex factors that contribute to student learning and inform the development of effective teaching practices. Secondly, the study has only focused on the smile, but in future the detailed research is

required to explore the relationship between teachers' nonverbal cues and students' learning outcomes. This could involve examining the impact of other nonverbal cues, such as eye contact or gestures, on students' perceptions and learning experiences. Thirdly, it is important to note that the relationship between teachers' nonverbal cues and students' learning outcomes is likely to be complex and multifaceted. Other factors, such as the teacher's language proficiency and pedagogical knowledge, may also impact students' perceptions and learning experiences. Fourthly, the study has considered a small sample of students at a single institution, and further research is needed to examine the generalizability of these findings to other contexts and populations. Fifthly, the conceptual model drawn from findings is not testing, thus, studies in the future can empirically examine the model for quantitative results.

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