

Communication Correlates of Teacher Clarity in the College Classroom

Robert J. Sidelinger
West Virginia University

James C. McCroskey
West Virginia University

Teacher clarity was found to be positively correlated with perceived nonverbal immediacy and socio-communicative style of the instructor. It also was found to be associated with enhanced student affect toward the instructor and the course. Students who perceived the verbal and nonverbal communication of their instructors as being clear and understandable also perceived their instructors as being nonverbally immediate, assertive, and responsive.

Much of the recent research in the area of communication in instruction has focused more attention on nonverbal behaviors relating to effective teaching than on verbal behaviors (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). One exception to this trend has been the work on teacher clarity. In much of this work, as noted by Civikly (1992), the focus has been on verbal aspects of teachers' communication behaviors. The present research opted to consider both of these aspects of teachers' communication.

As Civikly (1992) has noted, the conceptual range included in various approaches to teacher clarity has been very broad. Clarity has been taken to include such things as expressiveness, message clarity, explaining effectiveness, teacher explanation, structuring, direct instruction, explicit teaching, teacher elaboration, message fidelity, task structuring, and coaching and scaffolding. Most of this work has centered on what the teacher says; specifically, the style factors in the teacher's messages. This is consistent with the traditional rhetorical approach to clarity in informative messages (the type with which teachers are typically identified). For example, while he argues that clarity is "the primary characteristic of good style" (p. 224), McCroskey (1997) focuses almost all of his attention

Robert J. Sidelinger (M.A., West Virginia University, 1996) is an Instructor of Speech and Mass Communication at Towson State University, Towson, MD 21204. **James C. McCroskey** (D. Ed., Pennsylvania State University, 1966) is Chair and Professor of Communication Studies at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6293. This paper is based on a directed research project conducted by the first author and supervised by the second.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH REPORTS, Volume 14, Number 1, pages 1-10

on verbal factors when explaining how an informative speaker may achieve clarity (pp. 172-175).

Just as McCroskey (1997) argues that message clarity is the central feature of effective rhetorical style, Rosenshine and Furst (1971) argue that teacher clarity is central to teaching effectiveness. For the most part, research in the instructional environment has produced results consistent with these assertions, particularly with regard to cognitive learning and student perceived teacher effectiveness (Anderson, 1984; Book, Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, & Vavrus, 1985; Civikly, 1992; Cruickshank, 1985; 1990; Good & Grouws, 1977; Hines, Cruickshank, & Kennedy, 1985; Murray, 1985; & Smith & Land, 1980). As teacher clarity increases, the student's learning is more likely to be enhanced and the student's evaluation of the teacher is more likely to be positive. Teacher clarity appears to be a key component in facilitating both student and teacher success in the instructional environment.

While the results of research relating to teacher clarity generally have been consistent, there has been no such consistency in either the constituent or the operational definitions of teacher clarity. Since clarity as employed in this work is a communication construct, and most of the research done in this area has been conducted by scholars in education, this inconsistency probably should not be seen as surprising. While most communication researchers would tend to follow the principle that meaning is in the mind of the receiver (hence the teacher is clear if the student understands) not in the messages sources send, this is not a principle with which many educational scholars are familiar. However, both groups of scholars would be likely to be interested in determining what factors in teachers' communication behavior are correlated with such student perceptions.

The view taken in the present research is that student perceptions of teacher clarity are impacted by both oral and written verbal messages in the classroom. Oral communication entails such things as course lectures, content examples, and teacher feedback from student questions. Written communication includes such things as exam questions, the course syllabus, outlines of class projects, and course objectives. These oral and written verbal elements exist within a broader context of nonverbal communication behavior. Both are associated with the overall socio-communicative style of a teacher (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994).

Rationale

To date, research has indicated positive correlations between teacher clarity and student cognitive learning as well as between teacher clarity and student-perceived teacher effectiveness. With the exception of one study (Powell & Harville, 1990, noted below), research in the field of instructional communication has not focused on the relationship between teacher clarity and student affective learning.

Affective learning is the development of positive attitudes toward a subject matter being studied. This affect has been found to be related to the motivation to keep on learning long after a course is finished. It is frequently argued that a primary emphasis of education should be the focus on shaping the learning motivation of students for the rest of their lives, not just gaining immediate student compliance (Richmond, 1990) and low-level cognitive learning. The first purpose of this research was to determine if oral and written teacher clarity in classroom instruction enhances student affective learning. The following research question was posed:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between teacher clarity in classroom instruction and student affective learning?

Teacher evaluation is the development of positive affect toward an instructor. A positive evaluation of an instructor can often lead to the likelihood of a student taking another course with the same teacher. While affect toward a teacher should not be confused with true affective learning (described above), it is important to understand factors which enhance a student's evaluation of his or her instructor because such evaluations can have a major impact on students' educational motivations. Thus, the following research question was advanced:

RQ2: Is there a relationship between teacher clarity in classroom instruction and students' teacher evaluations?

As we noted above, the verbal message behaviors believed to be associated with teacher clarity exist within the framework of the teacher's nonverbal communication behaviors, which are a manifestation of that teacher's socio-communicative style. Consequently, it is highly probable that nonverbal communication behaviors have a major impact on students' perceptions of teacher clarity. Powell and Harville (1990) examined the effects of teacher oral clarity and immediacy in multicultural classroom environments. They found that both were positively associated with both affective learning and teacher evaluation. The present study looked at perceived nonverbal immediacy in relation to both oral and written teacher clarity and student affective learning. In the Powell and Harville (1990) research, oral teacher clarity consistently maintained a positive and significant relationship with each of the outcome measures. Consequently, the following hypothesis was advanced:

H1: There will be a positive correlation between both oral and written teacher clarity and the nonverbal immediacy of the teacher.

Research has also found positive relationships between the immediacy of the instructor and the two dimensions of socio-communicative style of the instructor (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). Both the assertiveness and responsiveness of an instructor have been related to the perceptions of teacher immediacy. Therefore, if teacher clarity is related to the perceived immediacy of the instructor, and teacher immediacy is also related to the socio-communicative style of the instructor, then teacher clarity should be positively correlated with the socio-communicative style of the instructor. Thus, the following hypothesis was posed:

H2: There will be positive correlations between teacher clarity and the two dimensions of socio-communicative style of the teacher.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A survey containing four measures was issued to a sample of 204 undergraduate college students attending a large mid-Atlantic university. The sample was drawn from a

large-lecture, service course in communication studies. Utilizing the methodology developed by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986), students were told to report on the instructor they had in the class most recently before the class in which they were completing the scales.

Student participants were given four measures. The scales measured teacher clarity in classroom instruction, two indicants of students' affective learning, two indicants of teacher evaluation, perceived nonverbal immediacy of the instructor, and the dimensions of socio-communicative style of the instructor.

Procedures

The 204 students were informed, both verbally and via a cover letter attached to the combined scales, that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed they would receive research credit in the course for participating in the study.

The data were collected late in the semester. This allowed the students the chance to be acquainted with the target instructor's communication in the classroom. This time-frame also insured that the students' affect for the class being surveyed was well formed.

Measurement

Teacher Clarity. Each student's perception of her or his instructor's clarity in the classroom was measured by an expanded version of the scale used by Powell and Harville (1990). The revised scale consisted of 22 items employing a five-point Likert-type scale (see Figure 1). The original scale consisted of ten items which focused on the oral communication of the instructor. Twelve new items were added so that the scale would include both the oral and written communication of the instructor. The lowest response score of one represented strongly agree, while the highest response score of five represented strongly disagree. Scale items 1-10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20, and 21 were reversed coded so that high scores on the measure would represent high clarity. The original scale yielded an alpha reliability estimate of .93 (Powell & Harville, 1990). For this study, the revised scale yielded an alpha reliability estimate of .95 (see Table 1). When analyzed separately, the item totals for oral teacher clarity and written teacher clarity yielded reliabilities of .94 for oral and .86 for written (see Table 1). Factor analysis, however, indicated all items loaded on a single unrotated factor. Hence, a single "clarity" score was computed. Because more oral items than written items appear on this total scale, it should be recognized that the total score is heavily weighted toward oral clarity.

A principal components factor analysis was performed on the revised teacher clarity scale. All items had their highest loading on the first unrotated factor. Also, the scree test indicated the presence of a single factor. Hence, the items were summed (after appropriate reflection) to generate a single "clarity" score. However, for exploratory purposes, the items reflecting oral and written behaviors were summed to produce two sub-scores: "oral clarity" and "written clarity."

Affective Learning. Affective learning is defined as the student's liking of a subject or content of a course. Affective learning includes likes and dislikes, attitudes, valuing, and beliefs (Richmond & Gorham, 1992). The most used measure to determine students' affect toward learning is two sets of bipolar scales (McCroskey, 1994). Each set consists of four items which are used to determine the student's level of affective learning. Each scale has

FIGURE 1
Teacher Clarity Measure

Please indicate below the numerical response which best represents your perception regarding the instructor you had most recently to this class. There are no right or wrong answers. 1=strongly agree 2=agree 3=neutral 4=disagree 5=strongly disagree

- ___ 1. My teacher clearly explains the objectives for each assignment.
- ___ 2. My teacher clearly defines major concepts. (Explicitly states definitions, corrects partial or incorrect student responses, refines terms to make definitions more clear.)
- ___ 3. My teacher uses clear and relevant examples. (He/she uses interesting, challenging examples that clearly illustrates the point. He/she refines unclear student examples. He/she does not accept incorrect student examples.)
- ___ 4. My teacher provides a sufficient number of examples and allows time for students to provide relevant examples.
- ___ 5. My teacher relates examples back to the concept or rule. (He/she explains or lets the students explain why the example matches the rule.)
- ___ 6. When my teacher speaks, he/she is easy to understand. (He/she speaks in complete sentences which contains complete thoughts.)
- ___ 7. My teacher uses specific language. (When appropriate, he/she uses concrete rather than abstract terms which are easy to understand.)
- ___ 8. In general, I understand my teacher.
- ___ 9. My teacher gives students the opportunity to apply knowledge to different problems than the presented problems. (He/she asks questions to determine how students are reasoning through problems.)
- ___ 10. In general, I would say that my teacher's classroom communication is clear.
- ___ 11. My teacher is ambiguous when setting guidelines for the class.
- ___ 12. My teacher's syllabus for the course is understandable.
- ___ 13. My teacher is straightforward in her or his lecture.
- ___ 14. My teacher is clear when defining guidelines for out of class assignments.
- ___ 15. My teacher's objectives for the course are clear.
- ___ 16. My teacher strays from the subject matter during her or his lecture.
- ___ 17. My teacher is not clear when defining guidelines for out of class assignments.
- ___ 18. My teacher's syllabus for the course is ambiguous.
- ___ 19. Projects assigned for the class have unclear guidelines.
- ___ 20. My teacher's exam questions are understandable.
- ___ 21. My teacher is explicit in her or his instruction.
- ___ 22. My teacher's answers to student questions are unclear.

four, seven-step bipolar adjectives. One set measures the "attitude about content in the class." The other set measures "the likelihood of actually enrolling in another class with similar content." Alpha reliability for the affective learning scores in this study were .89 and .95 respectively.

Table 1
Reliabilities, Means, and Standard Deviations for Measures

Measure	Alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teacher Clarity	.95	83.2	17.0
Oral Clarity	.94	46.0	11.0
Written Clarity	.86	23.0	4.6
Affective Learning 1	.89	21.5	5.2
Affective Learning 2	.95	22.0	6.5
Teacher Eval. 1	.97	20.3	7.6
Teacher Eval. 2	.98	21.0	8.2
Nonverbal Immediacy	.86	29.1	7.3
Assertiveness	.88	35.2	7.0
Responsiveness	.94	35.3	8.4

Evaluation of Teacher. Evaluation of teacher focuses on the student's attitude toward the instructor. The measure used to determine the students' evaluation of their instructor consists of two sets of bipolar scales (McCroskey, 1994). Each set consists of four items which have four, seven-step bipolar adjectives. One set measured the "attitude about the instructor." The other set measured "the likelihood of taking another course with the same teacher." Alpha reliabilities for the teachers' evaluation scores in this study were .97 and .98 respectively (Table 1).

Nonverbal Immediacy. Immediacy refers to the degree of physical or psychological distance between individuals. An immediate relationship between a teacher and her or his students is one in which both the teacher and the student perceive each other as being approachable and responsive to the other (Richmond, 1992). The more approach and responsive behaviors a teacher uses, the more the teacher will be perceived as immediate by her or his students (Richmond, 1992).

Nonverbal immediacy behaviors are sometimes controlled by non-conscious aspects of a person's personality (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). An individual's nonverbal behaviors reflect internal emotions or feelings. People often put more emphasis on another person's nonverbal behavior than the person's verbal behavior when interpreting messages.

The outcomes of teacher immediacy include an increase in liking, affiliation, and affect on the part of the students (Richmond, 1992). When immediacy is enhanced in the interpersonal setting there is also an increase in liking, affiliation, and affect (Mehrabian, 1981). Mehrabian's findings are also true for the classroom setting. Immediate teachers are much more liked than nonimmediate teachers (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992).

The revised version of the Perceived Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (Thomas, Richmond,

& McCroskey, 1994) was used to determine the students' perception of the instructors' nonverbal immediacy in the classroom environment. Items 2, 5, 7, and 9 were reverse coded so that higher scores would represent nonverbally immediate teachers. As Table 1 indicates, the alpha reliability for this 10-item measure has been reported to be .83 (Thomas, et al., 1994). The alpha reliability estimate in the present study was .86.

Socio-Communicative Style. The socio-communicative style construct encompasses both assertiveness and responsiveness. Assertiveness is the tendency to make requests, actively disagree, express positive or negative personal rights and feelings, initiate, maintain, or disengage from conversations, and stand up for oneself in an interpersonal setting. An assertive individual can be described as interpersonally dominant. Responsiveness is the ability to be sensitive to another person's communication, to be an active listener, and to recognize the needs of others. A responsive person can be described as sensitive and sympathetic with other people. Research has suggested that both assertiveness and responsive are essential components of instructional communication competence (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). Hence, both should be positively related to teacher clarity.

The students completed a 20-item measure of socio-communicative style on their instructors (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). The scale includes 10 items for assertiveness and 10 items for responsiveness. Alpha reliabilities of the two dimensions have been reported to be .90 for assertiveness and .91 for responsiveness (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). For this study, the alpha reliability estimates were .88 and .94 for assertiveness and responsiveness respectively (Table 1).

RESULTS

Significant relationships were found related to the research question, "Is there a relationship between teacher clarity in classroom instruction and student affective learning?" The affective learning scores positively correlated with teacher clarity (Table 2). Significant relationships were also found for the research question, "Is there a relationship between teacher clarity in classroom instruction and students' teacher evaluations?" The teacher evaluation measures positively correlated with teacher clarity at significant levels. As noted in Table 3, when clarity was divided into its oral and written forms, both were found to be positively related to affective learning.

Table 2
Correlations between Clarity and Affective Learning*

	Teacher Clarity	Oral Clarity	Written Clarity
Affective Learning 1	.60	.60	.45
Affective Learning 2	.71	.71	.55

* All correlations significant, $p < .0001$.

Table 3
Correlations Between Clarity and Teacher Evaluation*

	Teacher Clarity	Oral Clarity	Written Clarity
Teacher Evaluation 1	.50	.50	.33
Teacher Evaluation 2	.70	.71	.51

* All correlations significant, $p < .001$

Hypothesis one predicted there would be a positive correlation between perceived nonverbal immediacy of the instructor and teacher clarity. That is, it was anticipated that as the instructor would be perceived as more clear, he or she would also be perceived as more nonverbally immediate by the students. The results indicated a significant, positive relationship between perceived nonverbal immediacy and teacher clarity (Table 4). When clarity was examined in its oral and written forms, both were found to be positively related to immediacy.

TABLE 4
Correlations Between Teacher Clarity and
Nonverbal Immediacy, Assertiveness, and Responsiveness*

	Teacher Clarity	Oral Clarity	Written Clarity
Nonverbal Immediacy	.60	.60	.41
Assertiveness	.42	.41	.32
Responsiveness	.58	.59	.43

* All correlations significant, $p < .0001$.

Hypothesis two stated that there would be a positive correlation between the socio-communicative style of the instructor and teacher clarity. That is, it was anticipated that as the instructor would be perceived as more clear, he or she should also be perceived as more assertive and responsive by the students. The results yielded significant relationships between teacher clarity and the socio-communicative style of the teacher (Table 4). Teacher clarity was separated into its two components: oral teacher clarity and written teacher clarity. There was a positive relationship of both forms of teacher clarity with both assertiveness and responsiveness.

DISCUSSION

The relationships of oral teacher clarity were much higher with the other variables in this study than were the relationships with written teacher clarity. However, when considering teacher clarity, it is important to address both the instructors' oral communication and written communication in the classroom because it is essential for effective teachers to be clear and understandable in both. If students have an instructor who is clear and understandable in both areas of communication, the students' learning will be enhanced. When students' learning and understanding are enhanced, their affect for the

course and instructor probably will also increase.

Student affective learning was found to be substantially and positively correlated with teacher clarity. Both of the affective learning measures proved to be positively related to the teacher clarity scale. The two scales which measured evaluation of the instructor also correlated highly with teacher clarity. Students who rate their instructor as clear and understandable in the classroom indicated a higher degree of affect toward that instructor. Teacher clarity appears to be an important aspect of establishing student affect for both the content and the instructor.

The nonverbal immediacy and the socio-communicative style of the instructor were also found to be positively correlated with teacher clarity at significant levels. Teachers who were perceived as clear in their instruction were also perceived as more nonverbally immediate by the students. Responsiveness correlated with teacher clarity more so than assertiveness. However, both more assertive and more responsive instructors were perceived as more clear and understandable in their classroom instruction.

Teacher clarity is an important component of teacher effectiveness. Clarity in instruction enhances student cognitive learning, and it also increases student affect for both the instructor and the subject matter. Also, an instructor who is perceived as clear and understandable by her or his students is also perceived as nonverbally immediate, assertive, and responsive. At this point it is assumed that immediate, assertive, and responsive communication behaviors lead to perceptions of greater teacher clarity. The present research, of course, does not establish that casual relationship. However, it does indicate that these variables are substantially related and suggests future research probing the causal element involved would be of value.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, L. M. (1984). The environment of instruction: The function of seatwork in a commercially developed curriculum. In G. Duffy, L. Roehler, & J. Mason (Eds.) *Comprehension and instruction: Perspectives and suggestions*. New York: Longman.
- Book, C., Duffy, G., Roehler, L., Meloth, M., & Vavrus, L. (1985). A study of the relationship between teacher explanation and student metacognitive awareness during reading instruction. *Communication Education*, 34, 29-36.
- Bush, A., Kennedy, J., & Cruickshank, D. (1977). An empirical investigation of teacher clarity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 28 (2), 53-58.
- Civikly, J. M. (1992). Clarity: Teachers and students making sense of instruction. *Communication Education*, 41, 138-152.
- Cruickshank, D. R. (1985). Applying research on teacher clarity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 36, 44-48.
- Cruickshank, D. R. (1990). The search for knowledge about effective teaching. *Research that informs teachers and teacher educators*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan.
- Good, T.L. & Grouws, D.A. (1977). Teaching effects: A process-product study in fourth-grade mathematics classrooms. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 28, 49-54.
- Hines, C., Cruickshank, D., & Kennedy, J. (1985). Teacher clarity and its

relationship to student achievement and satisfaction. *American Educational Research Journal*, 22, 87-99.

McCroskey, J. C. (1994). Assessment of affect toward communication and affect toward instruction in communication. In S. Morreale and M. Brooks (Eds.) *Assessing college student competency in speech communication* (pp. 55-71). Annandale, VA: SCA.

McCroskey, J. C. (1997). *An introduction to rhetorical communication*, (7th ed.) Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

McCroskey, J.C. & Richmond, V.P. (1992). Increasing teacher influence through immediacy. In V.P. Richmond & J.C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Power in the classroom: Communication, control, and concern* (pp. 101-119). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Mehrabian, A. (1981). *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*, (2nd ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Murray, H.G. (1985). Classroom teaching behaviors related to college teaching effectiveness. In J.G. Donald & A.M. Sullivan (Eds.), *Using research to improve teaching*, (pp. 21-34). San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Plax, T., Kearney, P., McCroskey, J.C., & Richmond, V.P. (1986). Power in the classroom VI: Verbal control strategies, nonverbal immediacy, and affective learning. *Communication Education*, 39, 368-379.

Prisbell, M. (1985). Interpersonal perception variables and communication satisfaction in the classroom. *Communication Research Reports*, 2, 90-96.

Powell, R. G. & Harville, B. (1990). The effects of teacher immediacy and clarity on instructional outcomes: An intercultural assessment. *Communication Education*, 39, 368-379.

Richmond, V.P. (1992). *Nonverbal communication in the classroom*. Edina, MN: Burgess International Group.

Richmond, V.P. (1990). Communication in the classroom: Power and motivation. *Communication Education*, 39, 181-195.

Richmond, V.P. & Gorham, J. (1992). *Communication, learning, and affect in instruction*. Edina, MN: Burgess International Group.

Richmond, V. P. & McCroskey, J.C. (1990). Reliability and separation of factors on the assertiveness-responsiveness measure. *Psychological Reports*, 67, 449-450.

Richmond, V. P. & McCroskey, J. C. (1992). *Power in the classroom: Communication, control, and concern*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Rosenshine, B. V. & Furst, N. (1971). Research in teacher performance criteria. In B. O. Smith (Ed.), *Research in teacher education* (pp.37-72). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Smith, L.R. & Land, M.L. (1980). Student perceptions of teacher clarity. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72, 670-675.

Thomas, C.E., Richmond, V.P., & McCroskey, J.C. (1994). The association between immediacy and socio-communicative style. *Communication Research Reports*, 11, 107-114.