

# Immediacy in the Classroom: Student Immediacy

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*A body of literature produced through the decades overwhelmingly supports the assertion that nonverbal immediacy plays a vital role in communication. The present study reviewed a substantial portion of the nonverbal immediacy research focusing primarily on communication in the classroom. Research has shown that teacher nonverbal immediacy in the classroom context produces positive learning outcomes for students. The present study examined perceived student nonverbal immediacy behaviors in the classroom with regard to their potential relationship with teachers level of positive affect toward those students. The results of this research found that teachers who perceived their students to be more nonverbally immediate with them in their classrooms expressed more positive affect for the students than did teachers who perceived their students as engaging in less nonverbally immediate behaviors.*

**Keywords:** nonverbal immediacy, teacher affect, nonverbal communication, student immediacy

Immediacy behaviors, as defined by Mehrabian (1969) are the communication behaviors that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another" (p. 302). The immediacy principle, also contributed by Mehrabian (1971), refers to basic behavior patterns people exhibit in communication interactions. The immediacy principle states that "people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (p. 1). Immediacy is produced through communication channels such as eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, postures, and movements. These channels allow people to share thoughts and feelings with each other. Mehrabian reports that liking encourages immediacy, which in turn creates greater liking. The opportunities for immediacy are increased through proximity, meaning people who associate with one another have greater opportunities to increase immediacy which in turn has the potential to increase liking (Mehrabian, 1971).

While the social psychological perspective of Mehrabian viewed immediacy primarily as a manifestation of liking, writers in communication have viewed immediacy as a potential tool to get others to like the communicator-to increase "affinity." McCroskey and Wheelless (1976) introduced "affinity" as a communication construct and defined it as "a positive attitude toward another person . . . another person has affinity for you if that person perceives you as credible, attractive, similar to her or himself, or perceives that you have legitimate power over her or him." More simply stated, "another person has affinity for you if she or he likes you"

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(p. 231-232). They described seven techniques that could be useful in developing affinity.

Bell and Daly (1984) extended the work of McCroskey and Wheelless by developing a typology of 25 affinity-seeking strategies that people may use to generate liking. Nonverbal immediacy was one of the strategies in their typology. Myers (1995) found that communication instructors used 19 of the 25 affinity-seeking strategies (including nonverbal immediacy) in their classrooms. Positive classroom climate was closely related to positive affinity-seeking strategies. This supported earlier research of Frymier and Thompson (1992) which found nonverbal immediacy to be positively related to teacher competence, character, and student motivation. Research over the past two decades has demonstrated that teachers' nonverbal immediacy is highly associated with student affect for teachers (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995) as well as student affective (McCroskey, Fayer, Richmond, Sallinen, & Barraclough, 1996) and cognitive learning (McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996) and motivation toward studying the content the teacher provides (Christophel, 1990; Richmond, 1990). Clearly, research has established that when teachers are immediate with their students, this behavior results in numerous positive outcomes.

Unfortunately, research has been directed almost entirely toward the immediacy of teachers while ignoring the communication behaviors of students. This gap in instructional communication research goes beyond our concern with immediacy. In an extensive literature review, Nussbaum (1992) confirms the fact that research needs to address the effects of student communication behaviors on teachers. The review includes a combination of the literatures from the communication and education fields dating back to 1983. Nussbaum states, "Teachers are viewed as the source and students as the receivers, and no attempt is made to account for mutual influence" (p. 172). As a consequence, both the communication and education fields have virtually ignored the circular interaction of student and teacher in the classroom (Nussbaum, 1992).

One aspect of the circular interaction element of instructional communication is feedback. Feedback has been defined by Bettinghaus (1968) as "any information that the source gains from his [sic] receivers about the probable reception of his [sic] message. Smiles, frowns, attention, inattention, questions, and comments are all examples of feedback" (p. 207). Bettinghaus informs us that the source of a message must be concerned with feedback so that decisions can be made to structure messages appropriately. While teachers may have many goals in the classroom, the primary goal of teachers always is to facilitate learning (McCroskey, 1992). In order to do this most effectively, teachers continuously make judgments to determine whether or not their messages are having their intended effect. They must be able to assess whether students are accurately receiving the information and whether they are reacting positively to it. The teacher must rely primarily on the nonverbal information they receive from the students. Therefore, nonverbal communication of students is crucial to the teacher in the classroom environment. One of the limitations of instructional immediacy research up to this point is that it has not focused on the classroom as a dynamic process. In Gardiner's (1969) theoretical discussion of feedback, communication "is dynamic in that it stresses continuous changes in the source, receiver, purpose, strategy, message, and performance" (p. 7).

Viewing communication in this manner acknowledges that sources and receivers of messages are never the same due to continuous change. Although we have made great strides toward understanding the impact of nonverbal teacher behaviors, research needs to determine more about the possible implications that student nonverbal behaviors have for teachers.

One attempt to address the impact of students' behavior on teachers was made in 1978 by Rosoff. Based on the feedback literature, Rosoff (1978) hypothesized that students who provide positive feedback as opposed to neutral or negative feedback, will be perceived more positively by their teachers on credibility, attraction, solidarity, homophily, and potential for educational success. The general hypothesis was supported. Teachers did perceive students more positively in response to positive feedback (operationalized as nonverbally immediate behavior). The results overwhelmingly indicated that when positive feedback and immediacy were viewed as the same construct students were perceived positively on numerous dimensions. Rosoff found that immediacy played a major role in the classroom with respect to teacher perceptions of students.

A small sample size (26 randomly selected students and 26 confederate students) in the Rosoff (1978) study limited the generalizability of his results. A larger sample size would have enabled the study to be more generalizable to the population. Although a larger sample size was intended in his original design, response rate was very low. Rosoff suspected that some of the teachers were reluctant to participate, thinking they were the subjects under investigation. In addition, the study used the help of confederates. Results indicated that observers saw no statistically significant differences in nonverbal behavior between the confederates and the randomly selected students in relation to the variables in question. Although Rosoff (1978) suggested that future replication of the study include confederates who are more thoroughly trained, it appears that the use of confederates is unnecessary. The variability observed within the randomly selected students was sufficient to permit testing between highly and lowly immediate student behaviors in the naturalistic environment, presuming a larger sample could be obtained.

Although the Rosoff study involved too few participants to permit confident generalization, it did provide a strong pilot study which permitted advancement of hypotheses for the present research. This research was designed to build on the effort of Rosoff (1978) within the context of the nonverbal and instructional research which has been completed in the ensuing twenty years.

### Hypotheses

Our first two hypotheses related to interpersonal perceptions of credibility and attraction. They were:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Student immediacy will be positively correlated with credibility scores.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Student immediacy will be positively correlated with attraction scores.

Both of these hypotheses were supported in the Rosoff (1978) study. More recent research has also been supportive. Frymier and Thompson (1992) found that nonverbal immediacy was one of 12 affinity-seeking strategies positively associated with student perceptions of the competence and trustworthiness dimensions of credibility of teachers. Buhr, Clifton, and Pryor (1994) examined the effects of public speakers' immediacy on perceptions of the speech and the speaker. Their findings

indicated that increased immediacy enhanced perceptions of both competence and character as well as liking of the speaker.

Our third and fourth hypotheses related to teacher affect toward the student and motivation to instruct the student. They were:

H<sub>3</sub>: Student immediacy will be positively correlated with affect scores.

H<sub>4</sub>: Student immediacy behaviors will be positively correlated with teachers' motivation scores.

Hypothesis 3 was supported in the Rosoff (1978) study, but he did not include a measure appropriate to hypothesis 4. More recent research has been supportive of both hypotheses when tested with student responses to teachers. Numerous studies have found teachers to be more positively evaluated when exhibiting more immediacy behaviors, both in this culture and in other cultures (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; McCroskey et al., 1995). Similarly, a strong positive association between student perceptions of teacher immediacy and student motivation has been a consistent observation (Christophel, 1990; Richmond, 1990). Our rationale, based on the theoretical observations of Mehrabian, was that such relationships probably are reciprocal. Hence we should expect outcomes for student immediacy to be similar to those for teacher immediacy.

Our final hypothesis was related to teacher perceptions of student achievement potential. It was:

H<sub>5</sub>: Student immediacy will be positively correlated with projected success scores.

This hypothesis was supported in the Rosoff (1978) study. While projected success in a given class or success more generally are not equivalent to actual achievement, the importance of this hypothesis is drawn from the extensive body of research which indicates teachers' expectancies for students often are confirmed as accurate and frequently are suspected to function as self-fulfilling hypotheses (Dusek & O'Connell, 1973). Presumably, therefore, it is in students' best interests to project a positive image upon which teachers might build positive expectations.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants in this study were 129 professors and graduate teaching assistants across 35 disciplines at a large mid-Atlantic university. In order to voluntarily participate, they were required to currently be teaching a course of 35 or fewer students. This restriction was implemented to increase the probability that the instructors would have had an opportunity to have contact with a randomly selected student in their classes. Since a very large proportion of the service courses at the university are taught in large-lecture format, this restriction made it impossible for many potential participants to be involved in the study. Instruments were distributed to all people scheduled to teach a class during the semester in which the data were collected, a total of 528 individuals. Approximately one-quarter of the potential participants responded with completed questionnaires. This rate is not unusually low for a mailed survey. It probably should be considered a high return rate since any instructor with more than 35 students was instructed not to complete the questionnaires for the study.

No demographic data is available on the participants because extreme caution was taken to insure participation was voluntary and anonymous, since teacher

evaluations of individual students were involved. The university where the data were collected enrolls predominantly Caucasian students and the balance between females and males is approximately equal. The faculty also is predominantly Caucasian with males outnumbering females approximately two to one.

### Data Collection

All faculty members and graduate teaching assistants at the institution for whom addresses could be obtained were mailed a questionnaire containing the research instrument and a cover letter briefly explaining the voluntary nature of the study and requesting their confidential participation. Included in the mailing was a self-addressed, campus-mail return envelope.

Course instructors were asked to complete the questionnaire while keeping a randomly selected student in mind. The number of the student on the class roll was determined by use of pre-assigned numbers. That is, on the research forms, the numbers between 1 and 35 were entered. The participant was instructed to respond to the next student on the class roll if the randomly selected student had withdrawn from the class, had not been attending, or if the instructor could not recall who the student was.

### Measurements

*Immediacy.* A 10-item measure used by McCroskey, et al. (1996) was used to assess teacher perceptions of student immediacy. This instrument was originally designed to enable students to report on the nonverbal immediacy of their teachers. For the purpose of this research, it was reworded to reflect the teacher's perception of the student. The coefficient Alpha in this study for the student immediacy scale was .79. This reliability is very similar to that found for the original form.

*Credibility.* An 18-item measure was used to assess teachers' perceptions of student credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Three dimensions of credibility are included in the scale. Each is measured by six bi-polar scales. The dimensions are competence, good-will, and trustworthiness. Competence items on the scale yielded an Alpha of .87 in this study. Coefficient Alphas for the good-will and trustworthiness items were .87 and .94 respectively. This is the most recent version of the instrument originally developed by McCroskey (1966) which was used in the Rosoff (1978) study.

*Interpersonal Attraction.* Two dimensions of interpersonal attraction were measured by using a 12-item bi-polar scale designed for this purpose (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Social and task attraction were each measured with six items. Alpha reliability in this study for the social attraction scale was .81. The reliability for task attraction was .90. This is the same instrument that was used in the Rosoff (1978) study.

*Affect.* Affect toward the student was measured by using six bi-polar scales. This instrument was developed as a generalized measure of evaluation (McCroskey & Richmond, 1989). It has consistently be found to be highly reliable (>.90) across a wide range of evaluative (affect/attitude) topics. Coefficient Alpha for the affect scale in this study was .94. This instrument was employed instead of the instrument employed by Rosoff (1978) because of its increased reliability.

*Teacher Motivation.* A six-item version of the Student Motivation Scale (Richmond, 1990) was modified for use in this study to assess teacher motivation as it relates to teaching the specific student in the study. Coefficient Alpha for the motivation scale

was .90 in this study. No measure directly designed for this purpose was located in the literature and Rosoff (1978) did not include this variable in his study.

*Achievement.* The teachers' projection of achievement of the students was measured using the same two bi-polar scales employed in the Rosoff study (1978). Each scale asked the respondent to estimate student success (from very high = 9 to very low = 1). One scale referenced "this class" and the other referenced "future education." The coefficient Alpha for the achievement measure in this study was .85.

### Data Analyses

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each scale and each item. The five hypotheses were analyzed using simple correlations to determine the magnitude of the relationships between immediacy and the teacher perception measures of student credibility, attraction, affect, motivation, and achievement. Statistical significance was tested at the .01 level due to the number of tests conducted.

### Results

Correlational analyses were performed to test all five hypotheses (see Table 1 for all means and standard deviations). Hypothesis one predicted that student immediacy would be positively correlated with participants' perceptions of the students' credibility. The results on the three credibility dimensions were: competence,  $r = .50, p < .01$ ; good-will,  $r = .54, p < .01$ ; and trustworthiness,  $r = .53, p < .01$ . Hypothesis one was supported on all three dimensions of credibility.

Hypothesis two predicted that student immediacy would be positively correlated with participants' perceptions of the students' interpersonal attractiveness. The results on the two attractiveness dimensions were: social attraction,  $r = .44, p < .01$ ; and task attraction,  $r = .52, p < .01$ . Hypothesis two was supported on both dimensions of interpersonal attraction.

Hypothesis three predicted that student immediacy would be positively correlated with participants' general affect for or evaluation of the student. Hypothesis three was supported,  $r = .55, p < .01$ . Hypothesis four predicted that student immediacy behaviors would be positively correlated with teachers' motivation to teach the student. Hypothesis four was supported,  $r = .58, p < .01$ .

Hypothesis five predicted that student immediacy would be positively correlated with participants' projections of future achievement on the part of the student. Correlations were computed separately for the two items on the achievement measure. The results were: success in the current class,  $r = .50, p < .01$ ; success in future,  $r = .47, p < .01$ . Hypothesis five was supported.

### Discussion

This study sought to expand upon the work of previous research directed toward the impact of student immediacy on the perceptions of teachers (Rosoff, 1978). Correlations in the present study in comparison to Rosoff's study mirror each other (see Table 2). While several of the present correlations were substantially larger than those reported by Rosoff, none of the comparisons were statistically significantly different. The power of these tests was reduced as a function of the small sample in the Rosoff study. Since low power results in less-stable estimates of correlations, the true correlations probably are better estimated in the current study.

TABLE 1  
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF MEASURES EMPLOYED

Measures	Mean	S.D.
Immediacy	25.4	6.5
Competence	30.7	6.5
Good-Will	28.3	6.1
Trustworthiness	34.0	6.3
Social Attraction	22.0	4.1
Task Attraction	24.2	4.7
Affect toward Student	34.5	6.3
Motivation to Teach Student	33.8	6.9
Success in Class	7.1	2.0
Success in Future	7.0	2.0

In any event, given the results of the present study in conjunction with the Rosoff study, it is reasonable to conclude that students who are perceived as immediate (compared to those that are less immediate) also are perceived more positively in other ways by their teachers. Previous research has indicated that immediate teachers are also perceived more positively by their students. It appears tenable to hypothesize that both teachers and students may be able influence each other through the use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. The present research suggests that if students wish to be perceived more positively by their teachers they should engage in such previously identified immediate behaviors as sitting closer to teachers, establishing eye contact with teachers, smiling at teachers, leaning forward toward teachers, engaging in positive head nods toward the teacher, and being vocally expressive when talking to teachers.

Teachers reported that they are more motivated to teach the students they perceive as more immediate. In accordance with previous research findings that student motivation levels were modified in the classroom through the use of immediacy (Christophel, 1990; Richmond, 1990), it seems reasonable that the student may have the ability to influence teacher motivation as well. Perhaps more motivation on behalf of the teachers enables the facilitation of learning more effectively. As noted by Rosoff (1978) immediate behaviors may indicate that the student is interested in what the teacher has to share. We are more likely to continue and be more interested in sharing when we perceive that others are listening to what we have to say. Students ultimately may benefit through a positively enhanced classroom environment.

TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF IMMEDIACY CORRELATIONS WITH THOSE REPORTED BY ROSOFF

Measure	Present Correlations*	Rosoff Correlations*
Caring	.54	.35
Competence	.50	.31
Trustworthiness	.53	.44
Social Attraction	.44	.49
Task Attraction	.54	.45
Affect	.55	.29
Achievement**	.49	.51

\*All z-tests for differences (Rosoff vs. present) were non-significant for the above correlations.

\*\*Combination of two success items for both studies.

Engaging in immediate nonverbal behaviors with teachers may generate more positive affect and perceived task and social attraction. As immediacy generates liking, so too does liking generate immediacy. This study serves as an attempt to account for at least part of the mutual influence of teachers and students in the classroom context through exploring teachers' perceptions of students. In addition, this study confirms for students that which previous research has learned about teachers. Immediacy is associated with positive outcomes for both parties. The rule of reciprocity may account for much of the immediacy that takes place in the classroom (Cialdini, 1993). When someone is immediate with us, our response often is to be immediate in return. If a student is immediate or shows liking toward a teacher, the teacher may unconsciously feel obligated to reciprocate immediacy and liking toward the student. Therefore, student immediacy may produce more teacher immediacy which in turn produces more liking. The outcomes of immediacy appear to be positive for not only teachers, but students as well. It is reasonable to assume that both students and teachers would generally want to be liked by the other. Thus, immediacy may lead to mutually positive outcomes for both teachers and students.

It is important to view the positive results of this study in the context of the limitations of this type of study. This was a correlational study, not an experiment. Hence, it is impossible to establish causation (either directional or reciprocal) with this study alone. This study was based on the assumption that what is good for the teacher may be good for the student. The extensive body of research on teacher nonverbal immediacy, both experimental and correlational, indicates that as teachers engage in more nonverbally immediate communication behaviors, they are perceived more positively on many levels by their students (who also learn more both affectively and cognitively).

This study and Rosoff's (1978) study were the initial attempts to test our underlying assumption of the applicability of the research on teacher communication to student communication. Five hypotheses were drawn from our basic assumption. All five hypotheses were supported by moderately high correlations ( $r = .44$  to  $r = .55$ ). These results indicate that our underlying assumption is tenable. Contrary results would have indicated the assumption was invalid. The next step in this research is to test the impact of student immediacy on teacher perceptions under carefully controlled experimental conditions.

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