

The Impacts of Open and Closed Postures on EFL Learners' Perceptions of Class Activity

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Abstract

In today's communicative approach-based EFL classrooms, class activity has always been of high importance. Accordingly, the study of the ways by which EFL learners' performance can be affected is also crucial. Keeping this in mind, although the role of bodily behaviors in interpersonal interactions, communication and teaching is more or less investigated, few studies have been done to investigate if bodily behaviors have any intrapersonal impact. Thus, this study aims to investigate whether open and closed postures have impact on EFL learners' perceptions of class activity. To this end, 15 male Iranian EFL students were assigned to open and closed postures in six 90-minute sessions. The data were gathered through making use of participants' self-reports. The qualitative analysis of self-reports demonstrated that bodily postures can influence learners' perceptions with open postures associated with more positive perceptions of class activity while closed postures were associated with negative perceptions of class activity.

Keywords: Class Activity, Closed posture, High power posture, Low power posture, Open posture.

1. Introduction

How are you sitting right now while reading this article? Are you hunching your body and sitting slouched forward on your seat with arms crossed on your chest? Or you might be sitting straight up and pushing out your chest. In other words, do you have a closed or an open posture?

When it comes to nonverbal behavior, the first thing that comes to mind is the impacts of these bodily behaviors on interpersonal interactions and on how other people think and feel about the person assuming them. Accordingly, there are a number of studies exploring the roles nonverbal behaviors play in interpersonal communication (e.g., Mehrabian, 1971; Pease, 1981). Surprisingly, Mehrabian (1971) takes the stance that 93% of communication is nonverbal while only 7% of it is verbal.

On the other hand, it is found out that one's bodily behaviors can have impact on his/her internal feelings. That is to say, not only do our nonverbal behaviors facilitate interpersonal communication and interactions, but also they can influence the ways we feel and think about ourselves meaning that they have impact on our moods, and feelings (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010; Schnall & Laird, 2003; Zabetipour, Pishghadam, & Ghonsooly, 2015) as well as performance in doing cognitive tasks (Riskind & Gotay, 1982). Wilson (2002) states that one's bodily behaviors play a central role in influencing and shaping his emotional and cognitive processes. In other words, specific bodily behaviors can lead to specific feelings (Schnall & Laird, 2003; Zabetipour et al., 2015). For instance, if you smile, you will feel happy and if you scowl, you will get angry (Schnall & Laird, 2003). In sum, there seems to be a strong relationship between our external behavior and internal states.

Assuming this, Darwin (1890), who studied the impacts of physical behavior on emotional states, took the stance that emotional states can be manipulated by the way people express their emotions. Likewise, Espenak (1972) states that moving muscles can trigger emotional experience. In the same vein, Berger (1972) suggests that the emotional experience and states can be decreased by relaxing muscles and stopping firming them. Keeping this in mind, it is found out that open and closed postures have impact on the moods and feelings of the person assuming them (e.g., Carney et al., 2010; Cuddy, Wilmoth, & Carney, 2012; Huang, Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Guilory, 2011; Zabetipour et al., 2015). For instance, Riskind (1984) showed that slumped and upright postures are not just indicators of emotional states, but can influence emotional states, too. Bernstein (1973) states that when a person wants to have less contact with the environment he assumes a closed posture, while open bodies help the person release memories, emotions, and moods. Keeping this in mind, in their 1982 study, Riskind and Gotay indicated that closed, restrictive postures make the person feel more helpless and stressful than a person assuming an open, upright posture.

On the other hand, open, expansive postures help the person perform better in doing cognitive tasks, experience higher power-related emotions in a word completion task (Huang et al., 2011), and experience more positive moods (Zabetipour et al., 2015), as well as decreased cortisol and elevated testosterone levels (Carney et al., 2010). Generally, it has been indicated that assuming

an open posture leads to positive moods and emotions while assuming a closed one leads to negative moods and emotions (Zabetipour et al., 2015). In addition, generally, possessing high power is reflected through erect expansive postures (Cuddy et al., 2010), which are associated with power-related feelings (Riskind & Gotay, 1982). Carney et al. (2010) state that not only do open and closed postures reflect powerfulness and powerlessness, but also they produce and generate such feelings.

Basically, open/high power postures increase one's risk-taking levels (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), feelings of power, and testosterone hormones (Carney et al., 2010), influence one's thought abstraction (Huang et al., 2011) and performance in social evaluations (Cuddy et al., 2009), help the person be more intelligent and organized in doing cognitive tasks (Guinote, 2007), perform better in social interactions, and finally experience more positive emotions (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). Moreover, Anderson, John, Keltner, and Kring (2001, as cited in Zabetipour et al., 2015) take the stance that those people who tend to have higher power are more extrovert, talk more and interrupt others more. In sum, expansive postures induce power, increase risk tolerance (Cesario & McDonald, 2013), and decrease anxiety and stress levels (Huang et al., 2011). In contrast, low power is displayed and generated by closed, slumped postures (Carney et al., 2010). Such postures are associated with the activation of the inhibition system, and more anger as well as negative emotions (Andersen & Berdahl, 2002). Surprisingly, those who possess low power ignore speaking even when they are given the chance (Andersen & Berdahl, 2002). In a recent study where EFL students were assigned to open/high power and closed/low power postures, it was found out that assuming open postures lead to the elevation of positive moods while closed postures increase negative moods (Zabetipour et al., 2015).

Generally, affective factors within a language learner as well as active and effective communication and participation in language classrooms are of high importance in language learning (Brown, 2007). Moreover, an increase in EFL learners' confidence and risk taking levels, as well as a decrease in their anxiety and stress levels help them overcome the psychological obstacles banning their success in effective communication and participation. In other words, most learning happens in a both relaxed and focused state (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thus, the aim of this study is to find out what perceptions EFL learners may have regarding their class activity after assuming open and closed postures.

2. Method

Fifteen male EFL students took part in this study. Their age ranged between 15 and 25. They were studying English at Shokouh Language School, Mashhad, Iran, and were in a same class and a same level of language proficiency, i.e. intermediate. These fifteen EFL learners were selected based on an achievement test taken before the beginning of the semester to confirm the participants of the study were of same language proficiency. Data for the study were collected in six sessions during which students assumed open/high power and closed/low power postures meaning that each posture was practiced and examined in three 90-minute sessions. In the first three sessions, the students were asked to assume open/high-power postures during the class, and

in the next three sessions, they assumed closed/low-power postures. The open and closed postures the participants assumed were those Carney et al (2010) used in their study. To gather the data, at the end of each session, the students were asked to write down their perceptions of class activity in self-reports. Data were analyzed qualitatively and are presented in details in the next section.

3. Results

3.1. Closed/Low power Posture

In most of the cases, the negative impacts mentioned by the students in closed/low power posing sessions included reduction of class activity: One student wrote: *Such a posture is not suitable for a foreign language classroom where you should always speak and participate in class activities.* Another student wrote: *This kind of posture makes us feel uncomfortable and that is why we soon get tired of both learning and class activity.*

Another mostly-stated issue describing the participants' opinions about the effects of closed postures on their performance is the fact that this kind of posture makes them feel sleepy and thus, reduces their class activity: *After few minutes, I felt drowsy and I felt I needed to sleep.* Another student wrote: *In this session, I became exhausted, didn't understand the lessons well.* One student said: *At first, I was very energetic, but soon afterwards, I lost half of my energy which made me not be active anymore.* Likewise, another student argued: *This posture makes the person feel impatient, tired, and not be in mood of speaking with others or be active in oral activities.* Similarly, in another comment it was written: *Although when I came to the class I was pretty hopeful and energetic, this kind of posture automatically made me unwilling to both learn the lessons and listen to the teacher.* In addition, participants' levels of interest were also affected negatively after assuming closed/low power postures: *After few minutes, I really wanted to leave the class and walk in the yard as I was not in mood of listening to the teacher anymore.*

Comments like *I was not eager to speak anymore and participate in the class activities or volunteer to answer the questions* reflected the students' unwillingness to participate in class activities. For instance, one student wrote: *I did not know what had happened to me; I did not feel like participating in class activities anymore. At first, everything was good, but after few minutes, I became unwilling to speak.* Another student wrote: *Due to getting tired soon, I ran out of energy in middle of the class which made me not be in mood of participation anymore.* In Addition, one more learner reported: *When I sat like this, I felt psychologically weak which made me participate less in class activities.* In another comment one student wrote: *I myself was not in mood of being active, especially in those occasions where my classmates volunteered to answer a question; I preferred to be only a meek listener.*

3.2. Open/High power Posture

Among the comments found in self-reports about open postures, willingness to be active and to participate in activities were the most prominent. In one comment one student wrote: *In this manner, one can learn and understand the lessons better; I volunteered and participated more in this session.* Moreover, they reported that sitting in an open, expansive posture helped them not

feel tired very soon so that they could be more active: *sitting openly helps you not feel tired sooner since your body is erect, which helps you not lose your energy; the more energy you have, the more active you can be.* One student wrote: *I could understand the lessons better, and be more active in this session.* One more learner mentioned: *I felt less tired and more cheerful; these two are enough to encourage you to learn.* In another comment it was mentioned: *This posture affects you internally and removes boredom and tiredness, makes you relaxed, and eventually leads you to more participation.*

Another student wrote: *After adopting that posture, I became more interested to learn and speak; today was more interesting than previous sessions.* In another comment one student mentioned: *I felt pretty good, understood the lessons well, and could participate more in class activities.* Another student stated that he was induced by his classmates' cheerfulness and dynamicity and that high-power posture has more and better impacts on overall performance of the class: *Today, my classmates were more cheerful and happy so that I felt happy, too, and participated in class activities along with them.*

Some students compared their feelings at the end of open/high-power and closed posture sessions in terms of the level of class activity: *I think the negative impacts of closed postures on one's feelings and class activity are higher than the positive impacts of open postures.* One student reported: *In comparison with high-power (open) and ordinary posture sessions, in low-power (closed) posture sessions, I participated less in oral activities because of tiredness, boredom, and lack of self-confidence.* In addition, several students stated that high-power posing does not have excessive impact on one's feelings and performance, whereas low-power posing does; for instance, one student wrote: *Open postures have no impact on your inner feelings and it only affects your physical body.*

4. Discussion

According to Finney (2002, p. 69) "language is communication"; therefore, language learners should develop their ability of effective communication in different contexts through effective participation in language classrooms. Accordingly, communicative approaches to teaching have become dominant since 1980s (Richards & Renandya, 2002), and due to this fact class activity and participation are of high importance for language learners as sometimes participation counts for half or even a little more than a half of the grade. On the other hand, and as mentioned earlier, affective factors are also of high importance in language learning (Brown, 2007). Basically, it can be concluded that the more positive moods and feelings one has, the better performance he can have. In fact, it is like a two-way street indicating there is a firm mutual relationship between mood and class activity and performance.

As already pointed out, this study highlights how EFL learners' perceptions of class activity are affected after assuming open and closed postures. According to the findings of this study, closed/low power postures had big negative impacts on EFL learners' perceptions of class activity. As it was expected, since closed/low power postures generate anxiety, boredom, and

impatience, EFL learners' perceptions of class activity were also negatively affected as they stated that such postures had negative effects on their overall performance. On the other hand, open/high power postures increased students' learning enthusiasm, made them feel more dynamic, and led to a more productive performance and higher levels of class activity. Accordingly, it can be concluded that students' postures have impact on how well they participate in classroom activities and how well they do their tasks.

Considering the fact that in today's communicative approach-based EFL classrooms, participation is of uttermost importance, and also being mindful of the fact that if language learners overcome the negative psychological obstacles like anxiety and stress and boost their self-confidence and risk-taking levels, they can achieve a higher level of class activity, and also bearing in mind that open postures lead to positive moods (Zabetipour et al., 2015), and high risk-taking levels (Carney et al., 2010), it can be concluded that assuming an open posture in an EFL classroom can have positive effects on EFL learners' class activity.

Thus, first and most importantly, this finding adds support to the early theories of James (1980), and Darwin (1890), who stated that postures manipulate subjective emotional experiences. Secondly, these findings are in line with previous works which examined the effects of closed and open postures on implicit activation of power, the taking of action, and abstraction (Huang et al., 2011) as well as risk-taking levels (Carney et al., 2010). In the same vein, these findings are in harmony with previous studies which indicated closed postures increase unpleasant moods (Huang et al., 2011; Zabetipour et al., 2015).

Moreover, the participants claimed that closed/low power sitting postures decreased their class activity, interest, and willingness to learn. The quality of concentration and attention learners should pay to their classmates and teachers were also negatively affected while and after assuming closed postures. Participants noted that in closed/low-power posture sessions, they were less eager and interested to participate in classroom activities, and in comparison with high-power posture sessions, they volunteered less. They also reported that they could not concentrate on the course and the tasks they were asked to do. These findings are in line with the studies done by Riskind and Gotay (1982), Bernstein (1973), Riskind (1984), and Carney et al. (2010). For example, Carney et al. (2010) suggested that low-power postures lower risk-taking levels in mind. Moreover, participants reported that they had felt helpless and could not be as much active as they were in high-power posture sessions. This finding gives the seal approval to the assertion Riskind and Gotay (1982) made. They showed that assuming a slumped and depressed posture is associated with feeling more helpless as their participants showed lower persistence in a standard learned helplessness task.

On the other hand, as previous related studies showed, open/high power postures lead to positive moods (Zabetipour et al., 2015), and it has also been found out that positive moods have impact on students' performance in processing information (Febrilia, Warokka, & Abdullah, 2011), play a facilitating role in memory process and retrieval of long-term memory (Weiss, Nicholas, & Daus, 1999), and executive tasks (Phillips, Bull, Adams, & Fraser, 2002). In addition, positive

moods improve cognitive processes leading to a better learning performance, and facilitate complex cognitive functions such as memory, decision-making and learning (Febrilia et al., 2011). Moreover, it was found out that open/high-power postures make one feel more confident and help him have a more captivating speech (Cuddy et al., 2012) and that his cognition would also be affected positively (Riskind & Gotay, 1982). Keeping this in mind, the participants of this study also indicated that they were more eager to learn, understood the lessons better, and could participate more in class activities. It was also found that high-power posing had positive impacts on risk-taking levels of participants as they reported that they were more interested to participate in class activities, volunteered more and had higher levels of self-confidence. This fact that students volunteered more in doing class activities shows that open high-power postures had affected their risk-taking level. In sum, these findings on the effects of open and closed postures on EFL learners' perceptions of class activity suggest that not only do one's bodily behaviors display emotions, but also they can have impact on one's own self-perceptions and actions.

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