

Teachers' Perceptions and Awareness of Nonverbal Communication in Algerian EFL Classrooms

تصوّرات الأساتذة ووعيهم بالتواصل غير اللفظي في
أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في الجزائر

Perceptions et conscience de la communication non verbale chez les
enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère en Algérie

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Abstract

This qualitative exploratory study investigates how Algerian teachers of English as a foreign language perceive, interpret, and pedagogically use the “silent language” of classroom interaction. It focuses on three dimensions of nonverbal communication—kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage—and examines their role in identifying learners’ engagement, hesitation, comprehension, and affective states. Data were collected through a semi-structured online questionnaire completed by ten Algerian EFL teachers, most of whom work in higher education. The findings reveal strong practical awareness of visible cues, including gestures, gaze, facial expressions, posture, and classroom movement. Participants also demonstrate an emerging, though less systematic, understanding of silence, spatial positioning, and vocal qualities as pedagogically meaningful signals. Teachers use these cues to clarify meaning, regulate interaction, sustain attention, and adapt instruction in real time. However, their nonverbal competence appears to have developed primarily through professional experience rather than formal training. The study therefore highlights the need to integrate nonverbal communication more explicitly into EFL teacher education in Algeria, particularly in multilingual and affectively demanding classroom contexts.

Keywords

nonverbal communication; kinesics; proxemics; paralanguage; EFL teacher education

الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة النوعية الاستطلاعية في كيفية إدراك أساتذة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر لـ «اللغة الصامتة» في التفاعل الصفّي، وتأويلهم لها وتوظيفهم البيداغوجي لمؤشراتّها. وتركّز على ثلاثة أبعاد من التواصل غير اللفظي، هي التواصل الحركي، والتواصل المكاني، واللغة المصاحبة للكلام، مع بيان دورها في استكشاف انخراط المتعلمين وتردّدهم وفهمهم وحالاتهم الانفعالية. جمعت المعطيات بواسطة استبيان شبه موجّه عبر الإنترنت، شارك فيه عشرة أساتذة جزائريين للإنجليزية، يعمل أغلبهم في التعليم العالي. أظهرت النتائج وعياً عملياً واضحاً بالإشارات المرئية، ولا سيما الإيماءات، والنظرات، وتعبير الوجه، والوضعيّات الجسدية، والحركة داخل القسم. كما كشفت عن وعي نامٍ، وإن كان أقل انتظاماً، بدلالة الصمت والتموضع المكاني والخصائص الصوتية. ويستخدم الأساتذة هذه المؤشرات

لتوضيح المعنى، وتنظيم التفاعل، والحفاظ على الانتباه، وتكييف التدريس أثناء الحصة. غير أن هذه الكفاءة تشكّلت أساساً من خلال الخبرة المهنية، لا عبر تكوين منظم. وتبرز الدراسة، تبعاً لذلك، ضرورة إدماج التواصل غير اللفظي بوضوح أكبر في برامج تكوين أساتذة الإنجليزية في الجزائر، ولا سيما في السياقات الصفية المتعددة اللغات والغنية بالأبعاد الانفعالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الكلمات المفتاحية: التواصل غير اللفظي؛ التواصل الحركي؛ التواصل المكاني؛ اللغة المصاحبة للكلام؛ تكوين أساتذة الإنجليزية

Français

Cette étude qualitative exploratoire analyse la manière dont les enseignants algériens d'anglais langue étrangère perçoivent, interprètent et mobilisent pédagogiquement le « langage silencieux » de l'interaction en classe. Elle porte sur trois dimensions de la communication non verbale — la kinésique, la proxémique et le paralangage — et examine leur rôle dans l'identification de l'engagement, de l'hésitation, de la compréhension et des états affectifs des apprenants. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'un questionnaire semi-structuré en ligne auprès de dix enseignants algériens d'anglais, exerçant majoritairement dans l'enseignement supérieur. Les résultats révèlent une conscience pratique affirmée des indices visibles, notamment les gestes, le regard, les expressions faciales, la posture et les déplacements en classe. Ils mettent également en évidence une attention croissante, quoique moins systématique, au silence, au positionnement spatial et aux qualités vocales. Les enseignants utilisent ces indices pour clarifier le sens, réguler l'interaction, soutenir l'attention et adapter leur enseignement en temps réel. Cette compétence résulte toutefois davantage de l'expérience professionnelle que d'une formation explicite. L'étude souligne ainsi la nécessité d'intégrer plus systématiquement la communication non verbale dans la formation des enseignants d'anglais en Algérie, en particulier dans les contextes multilingues et affectivement exigeants.

Mots-clés

communication non verbale ; kinésique ; proxémique ; paralangage ; formation des enseignants d'anglais

Introduction

Language teaching research has long privileged speech, grammar, lexical mastery, and the observable products of verbal performance. Yet classroom communication cannot be reduced to what is explicitly said. In actual teaching situations, meaning is also negotiated through posture, gesture, gaze, tone, pacing, silence, distance, movement, and the tacit rules that organise presence and interaction. In multilingual EFL classrooms, where linguistic insecurity, uneven proficiency, and culturally shaped expectations of teacher-student relations coexist, these nonverbal resources often become indispensable rather than merely supportive.

Edward T. Hall's concept of the "silent language" remains especially productive in this respect because it directs attention to those implicit communicative patterns through which social relations are organised and interpreted (Hall, 1959). In the classroom, the silent language is not peripheral ornamentation. It is part of the communicative infrastructure of teaching itself. It helps teachers signal authority or openness, encouragement or dissatisfaction, urgency or patience. It also allows students to communicate understanding, hesitation, confusion, fatigue, distance, embarrassment, or engagement even when verbal participation is reduced.

In the Algerian EFL context, this issue deserves closer attention for at least three reasons. First, English is taught in a multilingual educational environment where Arabic, Tamazight, French, and local repertoires intersect; comprehension and interaction therefore depend on more than verbal coding alone. Second, classroom relations are shaped by cultural norms governing eye contact, distance, respect, and the expression of uncertainty. Third, teacher education and classroom research in Algeria have more often prioritised linguistic competence, methodology, assessment, or technology than the ordinary but decisive dynamics of implicit classroom communication.

The relative absence of sustained work on nonverbal communication in Algerian EFL studies creates an important empirical and pedagogical gap. Without attention to the silent language, one misses part of what teachers actually do when they read the classroom, infer students' states of mind, adjust explanations, or try to preserve a workable affective climate for learning. The issue is therefore not simply descriptive. It concerns professional judgement, relational competence, formative diagnosis, and the conditions under which learners feel able—or unable—to participate.

This article investigates how Algerian EFL teachers perceive and interpret the silent language embedded in their classroom practices, and how this perception affects teaching, classroom management, assessment-related decisions, and student engagement. More specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do Algerian EFL teachers perceive and make sense of the “silent language”—particularly kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage—in their classroom interactions?
- RQ2. How do these unspoken dimensions of classroom discourse influence teachers’ instructional strategies, classroom management practices, and ways of engaging students?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of classroom communication in Algerian EFL settings. It also suggests that sensitivity to nonverbal interaction should not remain a tacit ability acquired only through experience. It deserves to be named, discussed, and recognised as a domain of professional knowledge in teacher education.

1. Literature Review

This section situates the study within the conceptual and empirical literature most directly relevant to classroom nonverbal communication. It first clarifies the heuristic value of Hall’s notion of the “silent language”, then reviews the pedagogical functions of kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage, before turning to the Algerian EFL context and to recent work on immediacy, rapport, and classroom silence.

1.1. The silent language as an analytical lens

Research on nonverbal communication has consistently shown that human interaction is structured not only by words but also by bodily, vocal, spatial, and temporal cues. Hall (1959) used the expression “silent language” to designate those culturally organised forms of meaning-making that operate beneath or alongside explicit speech. His work is particularly useful in educational contexts because it reminds us that interaction is always embodied and socially framed. The classroom is therefore not only a place where language is transmitted; it is also a space where communicative norms are enacted through implicit behavioural patterns.

Subsequent scholarship has deepened this perspective by examining the multiple channels through which nonverbal communication operates. Ekman and Friesen (1969) demonstrated that facial expression, posture, and bodily conduct are central to the signalling of affect and intention. Birdwhistell (1970) emphasised the patterned nature of body movement, while Knapp and Hall (2010) synthesised decades of work showing that communication is inseparable from the visual, spatial, and paralinguistic organisation of interaction. In pedagogical settings, such work suggests that effective teaching depends not only on what is taught, but also on how presence, proximity, rhythm, and responsiveness are embodied.

1.2. Kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage in EFL pedagogy

Kinesics—gestures, facial expressions, head movement, and posture—has been widely associated with clarity, affective support, and interactional regulation in language classrooms. Gestures can function as visual scaffolding, making vocabulary, instructions, and abstract explanations more accessible to learners (Lazaraton, 2004; Gullberg, 2008). In EFL contexts, where learners may not always possess the lexical resources needed for sustained verbal negotiation, the teacher's body often supplements, anticipates, or reinforces verbal input.

Proxemics concerns the use of physical space and the management of distance. Hall (1966) showed that spatial norms are culturally variable and socially meaningful. In the classroom, the teacher's position at the front, movement across rows, approach toward individual students, or choice to remain behind a desk can all communicate degrees of authority, accessibility, surveillance, or solidarity. Such spatial behaviour is especially relevant in settings where student participation may be inhibited by hierarchy or language anxiety. Proxemics can either reinforce symbolic distance or soften it without erasing professional authority.

Paralanguage—including tone, pitch, volume, rhythm, hesitation, and voice quality—constitutes another major dimension of pedagogical communication. A calm tone can reassure; varied intonation can maintain attention; a harsh rhythm can inhibit participation. In many cases, students respond affectively to how something is said before they fully process what is said. This is particularly important in speaking-oriented or listening-oriented EFL tasks, where the teacher's voice becomes part of the learning environment itself. For this reason, paralanguage should be treated not as an incidental accompaniment to speech but as one of the media through which pedagogical meaning is produced.

1.3. Nonverbal communication in the Algerian EFL context

Within Algerian EFL research, attention to nonverbal communication remains relatively limited compared with work on linguistic performance, classroom methods, assessment, or motivation. The studies that do exist nevertheless show that body language, gaze, and tone of voice matter greatly for student motivation, classroom atmosphere, and the intelligibility of instruction in local EFL settings (Srairi, 2019; Zouhir, 2019). They also point to an important cultural issue: the same behaviour may not carry the same meaning for all students. Direct eye contact, for instance, may be read as confidence in one case and as discomfort or excessive directness in another.

This cultural dimension is crucial. The same gesture or spatial move may be interpreted differently depending on age, institutional culture, gender norms, and previous classroom experience. As a result, nonverbal competence in EFL teaching cannot be reduced to generic behavioural advice borrowed from other contexts. It must be understood as context-sensitive, relational, and culturally

mediated. Investigating Algerian teachers' own interpretations therefore makes it possible to access not only what they do, but also the interpretive frameworks through which they read classroom behaviour.

The present study is situated in this gap. Rather than testing a pre-established behavioural scale, it explores teachers' own perceptions, categories, and interpretive habits. This exploratory orientation is appropriate because the issue is not only how often certain nonverbal behaviours occur, but how teachers make sense of them in practice and how that sense-making guides pedagogical action.

1.4. Recent research on teacher immediacy, rapport, and classroom silence

Recent EFL research has reinforced the idea that teacher immediacy is not a marginal stylistic ornament but a predictor of affective and interactional outcomes. Large-sample studies have linked immediacy and related interpersonal variables to affective learning, perceived teacher understanding, academic engagement, and willingness to communicate in foreign-language settings (Sun & Shi, 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Hu & Wang, 2023; Yuan, 2024). These findings do not erase contextual variation, but they strengthen the claim that nonverbal and relational dimensions of teaching are pedagogically consequential wherever verbal participation is affectively fragile.

Recent work on classroom silence similarly complicates any simplistic opposition between speech and participation. Silence may of course index uncertainty or disengagement, but it may also signal cognitive processing, face protection, politeness, strategic withholding, or culturally shaped caution in public speaking (Nguyen, 2024). For classroom research, the implication is methodological as well as pedagogical: interpreting nonverbal conduct requires attention to local meaning, relational context, and the interactional ecology of the lesson rather than decontextualised body-language formulas. This perspective supports the present study's decision to privilege teachers' situated interpretations of classroom cues.

2. Methodology

This section presents the research design, participant profile, data collection instrument, procedure, ethical safeguards, analytic approach, and criteria used to support the trustworthiness of the interpretation. The sequence has been intentionally regularised so that the methodological logic is explicit and each component performs a distinct rhetorical function.

2.1. Research design

The study adopts a qualitative exploratory-descriptive design suited to examining teachers' perceptions, situated judgements, and professional sense-making in relation to an under-researched dimension of classroom interaction. Rather

than seeking measurement or causal generalisation, it aims to identify recurrent interpretive patterns and pedagogical logics in teachers' accounts of nonverbal communication. Such a design is especially appropriate when the first task is to document how a phenomenon is perceived, named, and understood before broader explanatory claims are advanced. In this sense, the value of the inquiry lies less in statistical representativeness than in the analytic relevance and informational adequacy of the corpus (Creswell, 2014; Malterud et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

2.2. Participants

Ten Algerian EFL teachers participated in the study. Recruitment combined convenience and availability sampling through the circulation of an online questionnaire within professional networks. Nine participants taught in higher education and one at the secondary-school level. Their experience ranged from early-career teaching to senior-level practice, which made it possible to capture differentiated pedagogical repertoires and interpretive habits. The sample remains numerically limited and strongly weighted toward tertiary education; accordingly, the findings are most directly relevant to university EFL settings and should be read as context-bound exploratory insights rather than as generalisable claims about all Algerian EFL classrooms. Even so, the corpus remains methodologically relevant because it is sufficiently information-rich for the focused aim of the study (Malterud et al., 2016).

2.3. Data collection instrument

Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The instrument combined a small number of closed prompts with predominantly open-ended questions designed to elicit teachers' own wording, examples, and interpretive categories. This choice was methodologically deliberate: because the study sought perceptions, judgements, and pedagogical meanings rather than frequencies alone, participants needed enough discursive space to express nuance, hesitation, ambivalence, and context-dependent interpretation. The online format was both pragmatic and analytically acceptable for geographically dispersed participants, even though written survey responses are usually briefer and less dialogically elaborated than interview data (Fraser, 2024).

2.4. Procedure

The questionnaire was circulated electronically to eighty teachers across different Algerian regions. Participation was entirely voluntary. Ten complete responses were returned and retained for analysis, while incomplete returns were not used. The data collection period extended over approximately two weeks, after which the responses were downloaded, organised, and prepared for interpretive coding. No incentives were offered, and the procedure remained limited to voluntary

professional participation. This procedural framing is important because it clarifies both the modest scale of the dataset and the conditions under which the responses were produced.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Before responding, participants were informed of the academic purpose of the study, the anonymous treatment of their responses, their right not to answer any question they did not wish to address, and the strictly research-oriented use of the material provided. Participation therefore implied informed consent to the use of anonymised responses for scholarly analysis. The study focused exclusively on teachers' professional perceptions and did not involve direct classroom observation, audio or video recording, or the collection of personally identifying information about students. The ethical risk was therefore limited, but not absent: reporting illustrative excerpts still required careful anonymisation and a restrained interpretive stance, since the corpus reflects teachers' accounts of classroom life rather than directly observable interaction.

2.6. Data analysis

The responses were analysed through qualitative content analysis informed by principles of reflexive thematic analysis. The analytic process involved repeated reading of the dataset, first to identify meaning-bearing segments, then to group related codes around recurrent issues such as gaze, gesture, silence, spatial positioning, affective reading, and classroom management, and finally to refine broader interpretive themes in relation to the research questions. The aim was not to quantify each response mechanically, but to identify patterned ways in which teachers make sense of the "silent language" in classroom practice (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

2.7. Trustworthiness of the analysis

To strengthen trustworthiness, the analysis relied on transparency of procedure, close return to participants' wording, coherence between interpretive claims and textual evidence, and cautious alignment between thematic inference and the limited scale of the dataset. Because the dataset consisted of relatively brief written responses rather than extended interviews, interpretive caution was essential: the themes were treated as recurrent tendencies within the corpus, not as exhaustive representations of teacher cognition. No inter-coder reliability procedure was undertaken. This is consistent with a reflexive rather than coding-reliability orientation and places the emphasis on interpretive rigour, reflexive accountability, and evidential plausibility rather than on mechanical coder agreement. The principal limitations of sample size, self-reporting, and questionnaire depth are therefore addressed explicitly in the Discussion, where they can be related more directly to the scope and evidentiary status of the findings.

3. Findings

This section presents the main findings in relation to the two research questions. In order to preserve the empirical density of the questionnaire and avoid reducing the data to an overly abstract thematic synthesis, the analysis remains relatively close to the sequence of questions posed to participants. This choice is deliberate: in a qualitative exploratory study, the way teachers formulate their perceptions is itself part of the evidence.

3.1. Participants' background and educational context

The participants in this study comprised ten Algerian EFL teachers with differentiated professional experience. The descriptive profile below summarises the distribution of participants by teaching experience and educational context.

Table 1. Teaching experience of participants

Experience band	Share of participants
Four to ten years	30%
Eleven to twenty years	60%
More than twenty years	10%

This distribution reveals a predominance of teachers with substantial classroom experience. Such a profile is analytically valuable because it means that many of the responses are anchored in long-term pedagogical practice rather than in purely theoretical opinion. At the same time, the presence of less experienced teachers broadens the perspective by introducing voices shaped by more recent pedagogical exposure and possibly more explicit attention to classroom interaction.

Table 2. Educational context of participants

Educational level	Share of participants
Primary school	0%
Middle school	0%
Secondary school	10%
Higher education	90%

The dominance of higher-education participants means that the findings speak most directly to tertiary EFL classrooms. These settings are often marked by lecture-based delivery, heterogeneous proficiency, and relatively formal teacher-student relations. The limited presence of secondary-school teachers suggests that the nonverbal dynamics of earlier stages of learning remain underexplored and deserve separate inquiry.

3.2. RQ1 – Teachers’ perceptions and awareness of the silent language

- Q1. When you hear the term “silent language” or “nonverbal communication” in the context of your classroom, what specific things immediately come to mind?

Teachers displayed a broad practical awareness of nonverbal communication, but their first associations were overwhelmingly linked to visible and immediately noticeable behaviours. Most participants spontaneously mentioned gestures, hand movements, facial expressions, and eye contact. This suggests that, in classroom experience, the silent language is first apprehended through kinesic cues—that is, through the most readable surface of bodily conduct.

This result matters because it shows that teachers do recognise the existence of a silent dimension in classroom interaction. At the same time, they do not all conceptualise it in equally differentiated ways. Their understanding seems to come primarily from practice rather than from formal theoretical categories. Gestures and facial expressions stand out because they are readily observable and because teachers use them every day to adjust explanations, examples, and instructions. In that sense, classroom experience itself functions as a form of situated training.

Several participants noted that visible cues help them determine whether students are attentive, confused, comfortable, or disengaged. Such cues are used to decide whether to repeat an explanation, vary an example, or simplify instructions. This confirms the pedagogical relevance of kinesics already emphasised in previous studies (Lazaraton, 2004; Gullberg, 2008).

At the same time, fewer teachers spontaneously mentioned less visible aspects of nonverbal communication, such as posture, spatial arrangement, pauses, silence, or vocal modulation. Tone and volume of voice were acknowledged, but less frequently and usually after visible behaviour had been discussed. This uneven distribution suggests that the silent language is often understood through what can be seen first, while proxemics and paralanguage remain more weakly theorised.

A small number of teachers also referred to cultural interpretation, especially with regard to eye contact. They observed that avoiding gaze may sometimes signify respect rather than disengagement. This point is crucial because it indicates that teachers do not read nonverbal behaviour as a transparent code; they are aware, at least implicitly, that meaning is culturally mediated. Overall, the responses show a practical but partial understanding of the silent language—strong in the domain of visible cues, less stable in relation to space, silence, and culturally variable interpretation.

- Q2. Which aspects of the silent language do you pay the most attention to during classroom interaction?

The responses to this question confirm and refine the pattern observed above. Algerian EFL teachers reported paying greatest attention to gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. These cues were described as the most reliable indicators of understanding and engagement. One participant noted that a student's face often reveals whether an explanation has been understood more clearly than verbal feedback does. Another explained that sustained eye contact helps maintain trust and interaction, whereas a sudden withdrawal of gaze may signal confusion or a need for reformulation.

Posture and bodily movement were also frequently mentioned. Teachers interpreted leaning forward, nodding, or sitting upright as signs of involvement, while slumping, playing with objects, or bodily withdrawal were taken as signs of loss of attention, discomfort, or fatigue. Such interpretations show that teachers do not merely observe the body; they actively convert bodily signs into hypotheses about learning states.

Paralinguistic features—tone, hesitation, pitch, and volume—were mentioned by a considerable number of participants, but with more caution. Teachers recognised that voice quality can reveal confidence, uncertainty, or nervousness, yet some admitted that these signs are more difficult to track in large or noisy classrooms. Silence was the least frequently foregrounded dimension. When it was mentioned, it often appeared as an ambiguous sign oscillating between processing time and misunderstanding.

The responses therefore reveal a clear hierarchy of attention: visible cues are central, vocal cues are secondary but meaningful, and silence remains difficult to stabilise interpretively. This hierarchy is pedagogically understandable in contexts marked by large classes, pressure to keep lessons moving, and limited formal training in nonverbal analysis. It nonetheless indicates that teachers would benefit from professional development capable of expanding their interpretive repertoire beyond the most immediately visible signs.

“A student's facial expression can tell me whether my explanation was clear or not. I often rely on these visual signs more than on verbal feedback.”

“When students look at me while I speak, I feel they are following; when they avoid my gaze, I know I have to rephrase or simplify.”

- Q3. How do you usually interpret the following student behaviours: head down or leaning on the desk; avoiding eye contact; long silence after a question; crossed arms; constant movement; frowning or narrowing the eyes?

This question invited teachers to interpret a set of recurrent classroom behaviours, and the answers show that most participants do not assign single, fixed meanings to such cues. Rather, they recognise their ambiguity and often attribute several

possible interpretations to the same behaviour. This is an important result because it reveals that teachers read nonverbal behaviour contextually, not mechanically.

Head down or leaning on the desk was frequently associated with tiredness, boredom, or lack of motivation, but several teachers also allowed for the possibility of cognitive effort. One participant remarked that students sometimes lower their heads because they are quietly processing ideas rather than withdrawing from the task. This ambivalence is instructive: the same visible gesture can index both disengagement and inward concentration.

Avoiding eye contact generated similarly differentiated interpretations. Some teachers associated it with shyness, fear of error, low self-confidence, or anxiety. Others added that it may also be culturally linked to respect or to the wish not to challenge teacher authority through excessive directness. Such responses suggest that gaze is read not only as an attention signal but also as an affective and socio-cultural marker.

Long silence after a question was usually interpreted as confusion, uncertainty, or lack of readiness to answer, although a few teachers recognised it as possible thinking time. Crossed arms tended to be associated with defensiveness, discomfort, or disinterest. Constant movement was read in various ways: restlessness, need for refocusing, preference for more active learning, or even a sign that the class rhythm required adjustment. Frowning or narrowing the eyes was most often understood as concentrated effort or confusion—a sign that the learner was either trying hard to understand or struggling with the task.

Taken together, these interpretations show that teachers are often quite skilled at reading the classroom, but their reading remains largely intuitive. They formulate plausible meanings, yet these meanings are not anchored in explicit professional training. This partly explains why some cues are read generously and contextually whereas others still trigger rapid negative assumptions.

“Sometimes students put their head down because they are lost or tired, but sometimes they are just quietly processing ideas.”

- Q4. In your opinion, how important is nonverbal communication in effective classroom interaction?

On this point, participants were nearly unanimous. Half of the respondents described nonverbal communication as “very important” and the other half as “essential,” with only one respondent adopting a more moderate position. The collective tendency is clear: teachers do not see nonverbal communication as decorative or secondary, but as constitutive of effective classroom interaction.

Several participants explicitly connected nonverbal cues with pedagogical efficiency. They argued that gestures, facial expressions, gaze, and tone of voice help students understand when words alone are insufficient, especially in EFL contexts where learners may hesitate to speak or may lack lexical resources. One teacher stated that a look or gesture may reveal understanding, confusion, or a

desire to contribute before the student can verbalise it. Another emphasised that attention to students' faces and body language makes lessons more interactive and relationally connected.

These responses suggest that teachers conceive the silent language as a pedagogical resource at several levels simultaneously: it supports meaning-making, affects classroom atmosphere, facilitates feedback, and strengthens teacher-student rapport. The result also confirms that the issue is not marginal in practitioners' eyes. What remains lacking is not awareness of importance, but the institutional recognition and formal development of this dimension within teacher education.

"Sometimes a student's look or gesture tells me all I need to know—whether they understood, whether they are lost, or whether they want to say something but cannot yet formulate it."

3.3. RQ2 – The influence of the silent language on teaching practice and student engagement

- Q5. How does your awareness of nonverbal communication influence your teaching or classroom management?

Participants overwhelmingly described a direct connection between nonverbal awareness and effective teaching. Most stated that their attention to body language, gaze, facial expression, classroom movement, and tone of voice shapes both their instructional delivery and their classroom management. In other words, awareness of nonverbal signs is not experienced as an optional sensitivity but as part of the practical work of teaching.

Teachers repeatedly explained that gestures and facial expressions help them clarify meaning, maintain attention, and regulate behaviour without verbal over-correction. One respondent noted that eye contact, gestures, and facial expression allow them to encourage participation while also maintaining discipline. Another underlined that posture, gesture, and tone often communicate more than words, especially when the goal is to remain present, calm, and attentive while students are speaking.

Several teachers also stressed that nonverbal awareness enables them to read students' emotional states in real time. By observing facial tension, hesitation, posture, or withdrawal, they infer whether students feel lost, anxious, reluctant, or ready to contribute. This ongoing reading then guides immediate pedagogical decisions: revisiting a difficult point, inviting participation differently, or reducing pressure. Such comments show that the silent language functions as a diagnostic resource embedded in everyday teaching.

At the same time, a few respondents described the influence of nonverbal awareness as only moderate, which suggests differences in confidence, training, or deliberate use. The general tendency nonetheless remains strong: Algerian EFL

teachers see nonverbal competence as central to interactional control, relational climate, and the intelligibility of instruction.

“My understanding of nonverbal communication helps me control my classroom more effectively. I use gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions to clarify meaning, encourage participation, and maintain discipline.”

- Q6. When students’ nonverbal signals show that they are not following, what do you usually do?

Teachers generally reported treating students’ nonverbal cues as a form of pedagogical feedback. Confused faces, blank stares, frowning, silence, or visible withdrawal were not described as passive background behaviour; they were interpreted as signals requiring instructional response. The most frequently mentioned strategy was to ask checking questions in order to verify comprehension and draw students back into interaction.

Many respondents also said that they slow down, rephrase, simplify, or restate the main point when they perceive confusion. One teacher explained that when students seem lost, the first reflex is to pause and reformulate the idea in simpler terms. Others reported relying on examples, visual support, or brief tasks designed to reconnect students with the lesson. Some even described using more challenging or more engaging questions in order to reactivate participation.

These answers are important because they show that the silent language enters directly into decision-making. It serves as an informal assessment mechanism, allowing teachers to adapt instruction before misunderstanding becomes entrenched. In this respect, nonverbal communication acts not only as an interpersonal phenomenon but also as a resource for formative regulation. What remains striking, however, is that teachers employ these strategies mostly on the basis of experience and intuition rather than through a formally articulated framework of classroom diagnosis.

“When I see confused faces, I immediately ask questions to check for understanding and to bring students back into the conversation.”

- Q7. After asking a question, how do you interpret a period of silence?

Responses to this question reveal that silence is one of the most ambiguous signs teachers have to interpret. All participants acknowledged at least one potentially positive meaning, and many stated that silence can indicate thinking, processing, or searching for an answer. One teacher described silence as the moment when students organise their thoughts or try to retrieve what they want to say. Such answers suggest that some teachers are beginning to recognise silence as an active communicative state rather than mere absence.

At the same time, many respondents also associated prolonged silence with confusion, uncertainty, or lack of comprehension. For some, if the pause lasts too

long, intervention becomes necessary through reformulation or the provision of hints. A smaller number interpreted silence as boredom, lack of motivation, or insufficient background knowledge. The classroom meaning of silence therefore remains unstable: it can be read as cognitive processing, emotional hesitation, or disengagement depending on duration, context, and teacher expectation.

This ambiguity is pedagogically important. In communicative classrooms, silence should not automatically be equated with failure to understand. It may also represent the temporal condition of thought. Yet the pressure of classroom pacing and the fear of leaving students embarrassed often push teachers toward rapid intervention. The data thus reveal both an emerging awareness of the productive value of silence and an enduring discomfort with waiting.

“Silence usually means they are organising their thoughts or trying to remember something before they respond.”

- Q8. How do you usually respond to this silence?

Most teachers reported that, when silence follows a question, they respond by reformulating the question, simplifying it, or offering clues. Their goal is usually to reduce the difficulty of the task and protect students from prolonged discomfort. One participant explicitly admitted disliking long waiting time because it may increase student embarrassment. This comment is revealing: the management of silence is not only cognitive but also affective and relational.

A few respondents stated that they do try to wait briefly in order to give students time to think. However, this was less common than immediate reformulation or guided prompting. The prevailing tendency is therefore to treat silence as useful feedback that calls for teacher mediation. In practice, silence becomes a trigger for scaffolding.

These answers confirm a productive but tense relationship to silence. Teachers do not simply punish or ignore it; rather, they work around it by adjusting the task. Yet the low tolerance for extended wait time indicates that classroom silence is still often managed under the sign of urgency. Training on questioning strategies and wait time could therefore help teachers distinguish more systematically between productive reflection and genuine breakdown in understanding.

“I do not like to wait too long because the longer I wait, the more embarrassed some students become.”

- Q9. What does it signal to you when a student chooses to sit at the back of the classroom?

Most teachers considered seating choice, especially sitting at the back, to be a meaningful nonverbal sign. Many interpreted it as a desire to avoid attention or reduce exposure. Others linked it to low motivation, need for personal space, or broader social and affective issues. One teacher even noted that the question itself drew attention to a behaviour that had not previously been analysed con-

sciously. This remark is valuable because it shows that some proxemic dimensions of classroom life remain under-reflected until they are explicitly problematised.

The responses indicate an emerging awareness of proxemics as a genuine part of classroom communication. Seating is not read neutrally: it is understood as an index of how students position themselves in relation to the teacher, the task, and peer visibility. In teacher-centred or formally structured classrooms, back-row positioning may express reluctance to be drawn into direct interaction. It may also function as self-protection for students who fear speaking publicly in English.

At the same time, one should avoid over-reading such positioning. A back seat may signal distance, but it may also reflect habit, comfort, group affiliation, or practical constraints. The merit of the participants' responses lies not in fixing one definitive meaning, but in showing that spatial distribution is part of the interpretive field through which teachers understand engagement.

- Q10. How do you interpret a student who consistently avoids eye contact?

The majority of participants interpreted persistent avoidance of eye contact primarily as a sign of low confidence. Others associated it with shyness, anxiety, or fear of making mistakes. Only one respondent treated it mainly as apathy or lack of engagement. This distribution is notable because it shows that most teachers read gaze avoidance through an affective rather than moralising lens. They tend to see insecurity rather than laziness.

In the Algerian EFL classroom, such an interpretation is plausible. Speaking in a foreign language exposes learners to evaluation, self-correction, and public risk. Avoiding eye contact may therefore function as a defensive strategy in situations of linguistic vulnerability. It may also reflect cultural norms governing deference and restraint in formal pedagogical relations. The point is not that gaze always means the same thing, but that teachers recognise its intimate relation to emotional safety.

This sensitivity matters pedagogically. When gaze withdrawal is interpreted as insecurity rather than defiance, teachers are more likely to respond supportively – through encouragement, reduced pressure, or more inclusive interactional framing. Eye contact, in this perspective, is part of the classroom ecology of trust.

- Q11. How do you use your own nonverbal communication to engage and manage students?

Participants reported conscious use of their own nonverbal behaviour for both engagement and control. Eye contact and smiling were repeatedly presented as ways of creating a welcoming atmosphere, signalling availability, and encouraging participation. Teachers viewed these behaviours as relational investments that make students feel seen without necessarily putting them under excessive pressure.

Gestures and movement were likewise described as tools for maintaining attention and clarifying meaning. Several teachers indicated that they move around the classroom to remain present and accessible, or that they use gesture to support explanation when language alone may not suffice. Tone of voice was also widely mentioned: changes in intonation, volume, or rhythm were used to highlight important points, keep students alert, and convey enthusiasm.

A few respondents further explained that approaching students physically—without invading their space—can help include quieter learners and manage behaviour discreetly. The overall pattern is clear: teachers do not merely observe the silent language, they actively perform it. Their own bodily and vocal conduct forms part of their pedagogical repertoire, whether to motivate, reassure, clarify, or regulate.

- Q12. Has your ability to notice and interpret the silent language changed with experience?

Most teachers stated that their ability to notice and interpret nonverbal cues had improved significantly over time. Experience was repeatedly described as a process of learning to read the room more accurately. Participants explained that years of classroom exposure had made them more sensitive to facial expressions, hesitation, posture, gaze, and silence. One teacher remarked that they can now often infer what students are thinking before anyone speaks; another noted that cues once missed have become increasingly legible through practice.

A smaller group reported only moderate change, usually because classroom management demands still make it difficult to interpret every cue confidently. One respondent mentioned no substantial change at all. These responses indicate that experience matters greatly, but not uniformly. It sharpens interpretive perception, yet it does not guarantee explicit conceptualisation or perfect certainty.

The broader implication is important: nonverbal competence is not automatically given at the outset of a teaching career. It develops through repeated interaction, reflection, and exposure to classroom variability. This supports the idea that professional growth includes an embodied and relational dimension that teacher education should take seriously rather than leaving entirely to experience.

“With experience, I can tell what students are thinking just by their expressions or body language, even before they speak.”

- Q13. Have you ever received formal training or professional development on nonverbal communication or classroom management focused on these implicit cues?

All participants reported that they had never received formal training specifically devoted to nonverbal communication or to the pedagogical interpretation of implicit classroom cues. This unanimous result is one of the strongest findings

of the study. It establishes a clear gap between the practical importance teachers attribute to the silent language and the institutional training they actually receive.

Earlier answers had already shown that participants rely heavily on experience to decode students' nonverbal behaviour and to regulate their own. The absence of formal preparation means that this domain of competence remains largely tacit, individually acquired, and unevenly theorised. Teachers may become skilled through practice, but they do so without shared analytical tools, structured reflection, or explicit pedagogical frameworks.

This finding has major implications for teacher education in Algeria. If communication in EFL classrooms is both linguistic and affective, both verbal and embodied, then programmes that privilege only methodology and language systems risk leaving teachers underprepared for a central part of classroom life. The data strongly support the integration of modules, workshops, or reflective training sequences on body language, classroom space, voice, gaze, silence, and culturally variable interpretation.

- Q14. Is there anything else you would like to add about how you perceive the unspoken dimensions of classroom interaction?

In the final open comments, teachers returned insistently to the idea that non-verbal communication is not peripheral but essential. Several stated that the unspoken side of interaction often reveals what teachers and students feel or think more clearly than words do. Such comments show that participants understand the classroom not only as a space of language transmission but also as a social and emotional environment in which meanings circulate through bodies, looks, silence, and atmosphere.

A recurrent theme in these concluding remarks was the need to give greater curricular attention to the silent language. One respondent argued that it should be taught explicitly as an important component of professional preparation. Others emphasised that reading posture, eye contact, and micro-expressions helps teachers understand whether students are motivated, anxious, confused, or emotionally distant. Another teacher noted that such signs should not be taken personally, but rather treated as feedback that can improve teaching.

These final reflections reinforce the overall thrust of the study. Algerian EFL teachers do not regard nonverbal communication as a supplementary embellishment to speech. They view it as a core dimension of pedagogical competence, classroom climate, and interpretive judgement. What they are asking for, explicitly or implicitly, is the institutional recognition of a competence that they already practise but have had to build on their own.

“We should give greater focus to silent language. It should be treated as an important module in teacher preparation.”

4. Discussion

The findings provide a clear answer to the first research question. Algerian EFL teachers do perceive the silent language as a meaningful dimension of classroom interaction, but this perception is unevenly developed. It is strongest when cues are highly visible—gestures, gaze, facial expression, posture—and less stable when the relevant signals are spatial, vocal, or temporal. This is understandable, since visible behaviour often offers the quickest basis for pedagogical inference. At the same time, it shows that nonverbal competence, as currently developed, remains partial.

The results also show that teachers do not interpret nonverbal behaviour in a rigid or deterministic way. Many of them assign several possible meanings to the same cue. A lowered head may indicate fatigue or thought; silence may signal reflection or confusion; avoidance of eye contact may index anxiety, respect, or withdrawal. This contextual reading should be seen as a strength. It suggests that teachers are not merely applying ready-made body-language formulas. They are engaged in situated interpretation. The difficulty is that such interpretation is not formally taught and therefore remains uneven and strongly dependent on experience.

In relation to the second research question, the study shows that teachers' awareness of nonverbal cues has practical consequences for teaching. Teachers use the silent language to adjust explanations, check comprehension, maintain attention, regulate participation, sustain a positive atmosphere, and manage behaviour without relying exclusively on verbal correction. Nonverbal awareness therefore contributes at once to instruction, assessment, and classroom management. It serves as an interactional bridge between what students say and what they reveal without saying.

These results resonate with both foundational and recent literature on teacher immediacy, rapport, and affective learning. Nonverbal cues such as gaze, gesture, smiling, movement, and vocal modulation can reduce psychological distance and strengthen students' sense of inclusion (Mehrabian, 1972; Richmond et al., 2003). Recent EFL studies likewise show that immediacy and related relational variables are positively associated with affective learning, perceived teacher understanding, academic engagement, and willingness to communicate (Sun & Shi, 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Hu & Wang, 2023; Yuan, 2024). The present study extends this line of work by foregrounding teachers' own interpretive practices rather than students' ratings alone.

A further contribution of the study lies in highlighting the role of silence. Classroom silence is often treated reductively as a lack of participation. The data show a more complex picture. Teachers increasingly recognise that silence may correspond to processing time or cautious thinking, yet many still feel compelled to intervene quickly. This tension reflects a wider pedagogical dilemma: how to

sustain lesson flow while respecting the temporal demands of thought, especially in EFL contexts where language anxiety, face concerns, and uneven proficiency shape participation. Recent work on EFL silence supports this non-deficit reading and shows that silence may function as thinking time, self-protection, politeness, or strategic participation rather than simple withdrawal (Nguyen, 2024).

The proxemic findings are also noteworthy. Seating choice, back-row positioning, and teacher movement were all interpreted as communicatively meaningful. This suggests that classroom space should not be seen as a neutral container for teaching but as part of the pedagogical message. Space organises visibility, exposure, safety, and access to participation. In contexts where hierarchical expectations are still salient, subtle adjustments in spatial behaviour may matter greatly for whether students feel invited into interaction.

The most striking structural finding, however, remains the absence of formal training. All participants stressed the importance of nonverbal communication, yet none had received professional development specifically devoted to it. This discrepancy is pedagogically consequential. Teachers are thus expected to manage embodied, affective, and culturally nuanced classroom communication without real institutional support. A competence that is essential to successful teaching therefore remains tacit, under-theorised, and unequally distributed across careers.

For teacher education, the implication is quite direct. Nonverbal communication should be integrated into pre-service and in-service programmes not as a marginal communication-skills add-on, but as a core component of pedagogical expertise. Such training should include at least four dimensions: an analytical vocabulary for describing nonverbal behaviour; reflective work on cultural variability and possible misinterpretation; pedagogical strategies for using gesture, voice, space, and wait time; and guided observation of classroom interaction. Recent studies on teacher support, empathy, rapport, and immediacy suggest that these interpersonal dimensions belong to the affective infrastructure of language learning rather than to its optional margins (Sun & Shi, 2022; Wang & Kang, 2023).

These implications should nevertheless be read in light of the study's limitations. The data are based on teachers' self-reports rather than direct classroom observation; the online questionnaire format reduced opportunities for probing, clarification, and interactional follow-up; and the small sample, largely drawn from tertiary education, restricts broader transferability. These constraints do not invalidate the study, but they do define its evidentiary status. Future work could therefore extend the sample to other educational levels, compare novice and experienced teachers more systematically, and combine questionnaires with observation, stimulated recall, or video-based micro-analysis. Such approaches would make it possible to examine not only what teachers say they perceive, but also how the silent language actually unfolds in situated interaction.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Algerian EFL teachers perceive the silent language of classroom interaction and how that perception shapes their teaching. The findings show that teachers attribute major pedagogical significance to nonverbal communication. They rely on it to read comprehension, gauge emotional states, regulate participation, maintain attention, and adapt instruction in real time. They also use their own nonverbal conduct—gaze, gesture, movement, smile, and tone—as part of the ordinary craft of teaching.

At the same time, the study shows that this competence is largely experiential. Teachers learn to read the classroom through years of practice, reflection, and exposure to varied student behaviours, not through formal preparation. This creates a clear paradox: one of the most decisive dimensions of classroom communication remains largely absent from institutional training. The result is a pedagogy that is often perceptive in practice but insufficiently supported at the level of professional formation.

Because the study is exploratory and based on a small sample, its findings should not be generalised mechanically to all Algerian EFL settings. Even so, they clearly show that the silent language is not a peripheral issue. It forms part of the conditions under which teaching becomes intelligible, relationally effective, and affectively sustainable. Recognising this dimension more explicitly would strengthen not only classroom communication but also the human quality of EFL pedagogy in Algeria. From a research perspective, the article also suggests that future Algerian EFL studies would benefit from clearer methodological triangulation and from closer dialogue with recent international work on immediacy, rapport, support, silence, and affective learning.

In this sense, the article argues for a change of perspective: nonverbal communication should be treated as an essential component of teacher expertise, one that deserves conceptual clarification, research attention, and structured pedagogical training.

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