

Eyes Talk

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I was personally sensitized to the importance of eye contact for the first time when I felt marginalized by the professor's neglect of my presence in a refresher course. The trainees of the course, in batches, were required to sit in a graduate class of a university as a course requirement. To my surprise, the professor fixed his attention to his graduate students to the exclusion of the trainees. Taking cognizance of the fact that few of the previous trainees had struck serious attitudes towards the training program, I could understand his behavior. However, I would not acquiesce in its perpetuation because my previous experience told me that teaching and learning activities in the classroom should communicate enthusiasm and communication without eye contact is deficient.

Soon my efforts to attract his attention were repaid; yet this experience set me reflecting on my own teaching practice. Did I neglect any of my students, especially those who take an attitude of self-effacing modesty? Though my neglect might not be deliberate, marginalization was the inevitable corollary. When I returned from the course, I talked with my colleagues about the functions of eye contact in classroom communication. And I also discussed them with my students, who were trainee teachers. The following is a summary of our discussion.

- 1 It is respectful, looking somebody in the eye, be it as addressee or addresser. Listening with eye contact shows interest and attention while speaking with eye contact demonstrates sincerity and earnestness.
2. Eye contact serves the purpose of triggering contributions from hesitant participants. An interviewee in my dissertation research on reticent students told me that students with shy dispositions need a teacher's solicitation; sometimes an expectant wink might work. A study conducted by Ishida (cited in Williams & Burden, 1997) provides evidence that students also use eye contact to ask for teacher assistance. This is supported by Cook (1989), that eye contact is an efficient non-linguistic means of signaling for turn-taking.
3. Through the window of the soul, we get on-line feedback from each other during classroom interaction. Not only can the teacher decide whether to proceed, stop for modification and elaboration, paraphrase, slow down, or speed up, by reading their students' eye expressions; students can also feel noticed and valued.

4. By establishing eye contact, Tice (1997) maintains, we can get all the students involved. As a necessary strategy in classroom interaction, it compensates for the limitations of speaking and writing, and helps create a non-discriminative atmosphere, which is conducive to learning.
5. Non-verbal participants contribute to classroom interaction because an experienced teacher can read their interest, affinity, (dis)approval, or apathy from their eyes. In the same light, by eye contact a teacher can show his/her approval of their contribution and respect for their sympathetic responses.

Taking on board the fact that it is the so-called low-/non-verbal participants who are usually neglected, I have taken the following measures to prevent potential marginalization caused by uneven distribution of eye contact.

- *Class contract*, which stipulates the teacher's and students' roles respectively in establishing a non-discriminative atmosphere. The teacher, resembling an orchestra conductor, mobilizes each individual student's talents in classroom activities; students are empowered to enjoy equal opportunity in participation either in teacher-directed activities or in self-governed group work.
- *Awareness-raising*, which can paradoxically be realized by deliberately neglecting some students and then asking them to tell their feelings of being deprived of the teacher's attention. In this way, I encourage them to attract the teacher's attention by showing their interest.
- *Group work*, in which the teacher has a smaller number of students to spread his/her attention to than in whole class activities. In group work I suggest assigning tasks amongst high-participants and non-/low-participants so that everybody contributes.
- *One-to-one tutorial*, which is not a common practice in China as yet, is compensative for inadequacy of in-class communication. In addition, through one-to-one tutorials, I can be better informed of my students' previous learning experience, family background, interests and so on, which helps me with choice of teaching activities; it is a good opportunity to give them encouragement specific to each student's disposition as well.
- *Catering to low-/non-participants*, can happen at turn-taking intervals and during waiting time for responses to questions. I consciously show my expectations of low-/non-participants' responses, which may otherwise be neglected.
- *Soliciting participation of hesitant students*. Be alert to their responsive impulse to speak and give them timely expectant looks or signals, or even call on them. Alternatively, ask for their confirmation

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of their eye expressions, for example, 'You seem to disagree with him, don't you?' 'Silence doesn't necessarily mean acquiescence or agreement, does it, Jack?'

Above all, any strategies presuppose a teacher's awareness of the importance of eye contact. My colleagues told me that most of them just had subconscious or unconscious eye contact with their students; no one had experienced being marginalized and empathizing with the neglected. Such was my case prior to the refresher course.

References:

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