

Nonverbal Codes in Online Intercultural EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The rapid shift to online learning environments has transformed the nature of interaction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in intercultural contexts. While verbal communication has been widely examined, nonverbal communication in online intercultural EFL classrooms remains underexplored. This qualitative descriptive case study investigates the types and functions of nonverbal codes used in an online intercultural EFL classroom at the graduate level. Data were collected from recorded synchronous online class sessions involving culturally diverse students and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that nonverbal communication was not diminished in the online setting but rather transformed into digitally mediated forms. The identified nonverbal codes include facial expressions, eye behavior, head and upper-body movements, paralinguistic features, and digital nonverbal cues such as mute-unmute behavior and response timing. These nonverbal codes functioned to express agreement and politeness, demonstrate respect and attentiveness, manage turn-taking, perform face-saving strategies, reflect culturally influenced communication norms, and compensate for the limitations of online interaction. The study highlights the importance of nonverbal awareness in fostering effective intercultural communication and intercultural communicative competence in online EFL classrooms.

Keywords: *Nonverbal Communication, Intercultural Communication, Online EFL Classroom, Digital Interaction, Intercultural Communicative Competence.*

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication is a crucial aspect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it involves culturally constructed meanings, behaviors, and interactional norms (Weda et al., 2021; Bakić-Mirić et al., 2022; Sharma, 2021). In higher education, where students come from diverse cultural backgrounds and online learning environments are increasingly utilized, developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is essential for fostering mutual understanding and minimizing misunderstandings (Kurmanayeva et al., 2025; Podlevska et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023; Akylbek et al., 2023; Nurul et al., 2024). Previous studies highlight that effective intercultural interaction relies not only on verbal communication but also on nonverbal communication (NVC), including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and strategic silence (Liu & Liu, 2021; Bakić-Mirić et al., 2022; Putra et al., 2024). Differences in interpreting nonverbal codes across cultures may cause misperceptions or communication breakdowns, underscoring the need for EFL learners to develop competence in recognizing and producing culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviors (Matthews, 2023; Anderson, 2023).

The shift from face-to-face instruction to online learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed the expression and perception of nonverbal communication. In online classrooms, subtle cues such as body language, eye contact, and facial expressions may be reduced, altered, or misinterpreted (Bin Tuan Ketchik et al., 2025; Moser et al., 2021; Guo & Asmawi, 2024; Knutzen et al., 2025; Taufiq, A., Jubhari, Y., & Amaliah, 2025)). While the research has focused on verbal interactions and collaborative online tools to enhance ICC (Yeh et al., 2023; Toscu & Erten, 2020; Chau et al., 2023), there is limited attention on the role and interpretation of nonverbal communication in online intercultural EFL settings (Sopyanti et al., 2025; Jing & Adelina, 2024).

In digital environments, nonverbal cues may be diminished, misinterpreted, or altered, creating challenges for effective intercultural interaction (Guo & Asmawi, 2024; Knutzen et al., 2025). Despite research on online EFL learning and intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the role of nonverbal codes in online intercultural classrooms remains underexplored (Sopyanti et al., 2025; Jing & Adelina, 2024). This study addresses this gap by examining nonverbal communication in a graduate-level online intercultural EFL class, focusing on how culturally embedded nonverbal behaviors support the development of ICC. It aims to explore how nonverbal codes are expressed, interpreted, and contribute to the development of ICC, providing insights that may inform teaching strategies and improve interaction in digitally mediated EFL contexts. The distinctive position of this research lies in its focus on nonverbal communication within online intercultural settings, bridging a gap in literature that predominantly emphasizes verbal communication or face-to-face environments.

In addition to linguistic knowledge, intercultural communicative competence requires learners to develop cultural awareness, empathy, and the ability to interpret communicative behaviors within specific sociocultural contexts. Nonverbal

communication serves as an important channel through which attitudes, emotions, and interpersonal intentions are conveyed, often complementing or even replacing verbal messages. In intercultural interactions, the same nonverbal behavior may carry different meanings across cultures, making cultural sensitivity essential for effective communication. Therefore, EFL learners need opportunities to observe, interpret, and reflect on diverse nonverbal communication practices to enhance their intercultural understanding and communicative effectiveness in both academic and professional contexts.

Furthermore, the increasing integration of digital technologies into higher education has created new forms of intercultural engagement that extend beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Online platforms enable students from different cultural backgrounds to interact in real time; however, these environments also present unique challenges related to the interpretation of nonverbal cues. Limited visual access, varying camera usage practices, and differences in online communication norms may influence how messages are conveyed and understood. Consequently, investigating nonverbal communication in online intercultural EFL classrooms is essential to understand how students negotiate meaning, build relationships, and develop intercultural communicative competence in technologically mediated learning environments. Such understanding can contribute to the design of more culturally responsive and interaction-oriented online language learning practices.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore nonverbal communication in an online intercultural EFL classroom. The approach allowed in-depth understanding of naturally occurring nonverbal behaviors and their functions in context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Data were obtained from recorded sessions of one graduate-level online EFL class at Universitas Negeri Makassar. Participants were culturally diverse EFL students selected through purposive sampling, ensuring active involvement in intercultural online interaction. Two to three recordings with active teacher–student interaction were analyzed. Data were collected using an observation checklist to document nonverbal codes (facial expressions, eye behavior, gestures, body movement, pauses, silence, camera use, mute/unmute, chat participation) and an intercultural communication framework to interpret their social and cultural functions (Hall, 1976; Byram, 1997; Bakić-Mirić et al., 2022).

Thematic analysis was applied to categorize nonverbal behaviors and interpret their communicative functions in managing interaction, engagement, politeness, and intercultural responsiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis linked observed codes to their role in supporting intercultural communicative competence in online EFL classrooms.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed data triangulation by comparing observations across different recorded sessions and examining the consistency of emerging patterns. Field notes were also used to complement the observation checklist by providing contextual information

regarding participants' responses, interactional dynamics, and situational factors that might influence the interpretation of nonverbal behaviors. This process enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how nonverbal communication was enacted in the online intercultural classroom.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the use of recorded classroom sessions for academic analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing any identifying information from the data and reporting findings using pseudonyms or generalized participant descriptions. These measures were taken to ensure that the research respected participants' privacy while maintaining the integrity and rigor of the qualitative inquiry

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section consists of argumentation of the article regarding to answer the research problems. Subheadings consist of detailed analysis of the object of research with consideration of the approach and theory used in analyzing. Each subheading presents a thick descriptive account of nonverbal codes observed in the online intercultural EFL classroom, supported by selected video transcript excerpts and interpreted within the framework of intercultural communication and nonverbal behavior theories. The discussion links observed nonverbal behaviors to their communicative functions, including meaning-making, interaction management, politeness, engagement, and culturally influenced norms in digitally mediated learning environments

1. Types of Nonverbal Codes Identified

Analysis of recorded online intercultural EFL classroom sessions showed that nonverbal communication adapted to the digital environment rather than diminished. Both lecturers and students relied on nonverbal codes to support verbal interaction, regulate participation, and construct shared meaning, particularly in intercultural contexts where linguistic hesitation and cultural norms shape communication (Bakić-Mirić et al., 2022; Yang, 2017).

1.1 Facial Expressions

Facial expressions, including smiling and nodding, were frequently observed and reinforced verbal confirmation, politeness, and engagement. Lecturer's smiling reduced anxiety and encouraged participation, compensating for minimal verbal output (Matthews, 2023; Anderson, 2023).

Table 1.1: Facial Expressions Analysis Online Intercultural EFL Classroom

Type of Nonverbal Code	Description / Occurrence	Transcript Example	Interpretation / Function
Smiling & Nodding	Students smiled and nodded while listening, especially during confirmation	Lecturer: "Bisa dipahami?" Students: "Bisa, sir." (several students	Signals comprehension, politeness, and agreement; reduces tension; supports

	or evaluation moments	nodding and smiling)	engagement
Lecturer's Smile	Lecturer smiled while explaining complex concepts	Lecturer: "Pendekatan itu bisa digabung." (smiles)	Encourages participation, reduces student anxiety, enhances approachability

1.2 Eye Behavior

Direct gaze toward the camera indicated attentiveness, confidence, and respect, while gaze avoidance often reflected cognitive processing or cultural norms of humility (Yang, 2017; Bakić-Mirić et al., 2022).

Table 1.2: Eye Behavior Analysis in Online Intercultural EFL Classroom

Type of Nonverbal Code	Description / Occurrence	Transcript Example	Interpretation / Function
Direct Gaze	Students looked at camera when responding	Lecturer: "Siapa yang tadi berkomentar?" Student: "Amelia Sari, sir." (looks at camera)	Shows attentiveness, confidence, and respect
Gaze Avoidance	Students looked away during complex explanations	Lecturer: "Pendekatan apa yang cocok untuk deaxis?" (students look away)	Indicates cognitive processing, humility, or cultural norm of respect

4.1.3 Head and Upper-Body Movement

Nodding, tilting the head, and slight forward leaning functioned as backchannel cues to acknowledge understanding and maintain social presence in online settings (McArthur, 2021).

Table 1.3 Head and Upper-Body Movement

Type of Nonverbal Code	Description / Occurrence	Transcript Example	Interpretation / Function
Nodding	Students nodded during explanations	Lecturer: "Pendekatan itu tergantung rumusan masalah." (students nod)	Backchannel cue; shows understanding without interrupting
Leaning forward / Posture	Students leaned closer to screen	During discussion on research paradigms	Signals attention and engagement; maintains social

4.1.4 Paralinguistic Features

Pauses, silence, and laughter were used to emphasize points, provide cognitive space, and foster a relaxed classroom atmosphere, supporting intercultural politeness and rapport (Kokkonen et al., 2022; Wello, 2017).

Table 1.4 Paralinguistic Features

Type of Nonverbal Code	Description / Occurrence	Transcript Example	Interpretation / Function
Pauses	Lecturer paused to emphasize points	Lecturer: "...ini tergantung rumusan masalah kita..." (pause)	Highlights key points, invites reflection
Silence	Students remained silent before answering	Lecturer: "Deixis itu pendekatan apa?" Student: "Pragmatic, sir."	Cognitive processing; face-saving; respect
Laughter	Occasional laughter during informal moments	Lecturer: "Kalau begitu, siapa yang mau coba?" (students laugh)	Builds rapport; softens hierarchical boundaries

1.5 Digital Nonverbal Cues

Mute/unmute behaviors, camera use, and brief chat responses served as digital nonverbal signals indicating readiness, respect, and participation norms in online classrooms (Akutsu et al., 2023; Lu & Sun, 2022).

Table 1.5 Digital Nonverbal Cues

Type of Nonverbal Code	Description / Occurrence	Transcript Example	Interpretation / Function
Mute / Unmute Behavior	Students unmuted only when invited to speak	Lecturer: "Ada yang mau menambahkan?" Student unmutes: "Iye, sir."	Signals readiness, respects turn-taking norms
Camera On/Off	Students sometimes turned cameras off	-	Controls visibility; may signal privacy or disengagement
Chat Participation	Brief textual responses	Student types: "Understood, sir."	Provides asynchronous nonverbal feedback;

2. Functional of Nonverbal

Nonverbal codes played a crucial role in supporting communication and interaction in the online intercultural EFL classroom. Their functions extended beyond mere support for verbal communication, serving as essential tools for meaning-making, relational management, and culturally appropriate interaction. The observed functions include

2.1 Expressing Agreement and Politeness

Nodding, smiling, and affirmative facial expressions were consistently used by students to signal agreement while maintaining interactional harmony. These nonverbal actions allowed students to participate without verbally interrupting the lecturer, which is particularly important in hierarchical or high-context intercultural classroom settings. Such behaviors also reflected culturally informed politeness strategies, helping students demonstrate respect for authority and avoid potential face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hofstede, 2011).

Table 2.1. Examples of Nonverbal Codes: Expressing Agreement and Politeness

Example from Video Transcript	Function / Interpretation
Lecturer: "Kalau pendekatannya kualitatif, datanya bisa berupa transkrip." Students: (nod and smile) "Iye, sir."	Nodding and smiling acted as non-intrusive agreement. Maintained interactional harmony, showed respect for authority, and provided culturally appropriate feedback in intercultural EFL settings.

2.2 Showing Respect and Attentiveness

Silence, gaze avoidance, and minimal facial expressions functioned as protective strategies in moments of uncertainty or cognitive challenge. By delaying verbal responses or reducing expressive behavior, students could process information without risking immediate error, thus preserving their own and others' face. This practice was particularly salient in intercultural EFL contexts, where linguistic anxiety or cultural norms discouraging overt assertiveness can influence classroom participation (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kokkonen et al., 2022).

Table 2.2. Examples of Nonverbal Codes: Showing Respect and Attentiveness

Example from Video Transcript	Function / Interpretation
Lecturer: "Perhatikan bedanya linguistik dan sastra dari objek kajiannya." Students: (upright	Sustained gaze, posture, and nodding conveyed attentiveness, engagement, and respect. Aligned with high-context

posture, gaze at screen, occasional nods)	communication norms common in intercultural classrooms.
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2.3 Managing Turn-Taking

Nonverbal codes played a key role in regulating turn-taking and interactional flow in the online environment. Pauses, strategic use of mute/unmute functions, and carefully timed verbal responses helped prevent overlap and maintain orderly communication. These behaviors reflected students' awareness of online classroom norms and their ability to navigate the technical and social aspects of mediated communication while respecting cultural hierarchies (Akutsu et al., 2023).

Table 2.3. Examples of Nonverbal Codes: Managing Turn-Taking

Example from Video Transcript	Function / Interpretation
Lecturer: "Siapa yang mau jawab?" (pause; one student unmutes microphone) Student: "Saya, sir."	Mute/unmute behavior and pauses signaled readiness to speak. Helped regulate interaction flow, prevented overlap, and maintained orderly online classroom communication.

2.4 Performing Face-Saving Behaviors

Silence, gaze avoidance, and minimal facial expressions functioned as protective strategies in moments of uncertainty or cognitive challenge. By delaying verbal responses or reducing expressive behavior, students could process information without risking immediate error, thus preserving their own and others' face. This practice was particularly salient in intercultural EFL contexts, where linguistic anxiety or cultural norms discouraging overt assertiveness can influence classroom participation (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kokkonen et al., 2022).

Table 2.4 Examples of Nonverbal Codes: Performing Face-Saving Behaviors

Example from Video Transcript	Function / Interpretation
Lecturer: "Kalau topiknya pragmatik, pendekatannya apa?" Students: (silent, gaze downward) Student: "Pragmatic, sir."	Silence, gaze avoidance, and minimal expressions allowed cognitive processing and reduced anxiety. Provided face-saving strategies, particularly in moments of uncertainty.

2.5 Reflecting Cultural Norms

Students' nonverbal behaviors revealed underlying cultural communication norms, particularly in high-context and collectivist learning cultures. The reliance on nodding, smiling, and waiting for explicit invitations to speak illustrated a preference for implicit participation, respect for authority, and maintaining social harmony.

These behaviors reflected how students navigated their roles and identities in accordance with culturally mediated expectations (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2011).

Table 2. 5. Examples of Nonverbal Codes: Reflecting Cultural Norms

Example from Video Transcript	Function / Interpretation
Lecturer: "Ada tambahan?" Students: (nod but remain muted)	Nonverbal behavior reflected high-context, collectivist norms emphasizing respect, harmony, and implicit participation rather than direct verbal intervention.

2.6 Compensating for Online Limitations

Digital nonverbal cues, including facial expressions, head movements, and mute/unmute behaviors, compensated for the absence of physical proximity and restricted bodily cues in online learning. These adaptations ensured the continuity of interaction, supported engagement, and allowed students to communicate affective and cognitive responses effectively. Such compensatory strategies highlight the flexibility and creativity of learners in maintaining meaningful intercultural communication in digitally mediated EFL classrooms (Anderson, 2023).

Table 2.6. Examples of Nonverbal Codes: Compensating for Online Limitations

Example from Video Transcript	Function / Interpretation
Students: (nodding, smiling, leaning slightly forward)	Facial expressions, head movements, and digital cues compensated for limited physical presence, enabling sustained interaction and intercultural communication online.

The findings of this study demonstrate that nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in sustaining interaction and meaning-making in online intercultural EFL classrooms. Rather than diminishing in digital settings, nonverbal codes are transformed into adaptive resources that complement verbal communication and support instructional flow. Facial expressions, eye behavior, pauses, silence, and digital cues such as mute/unmute practices functioned as key mechanisms for expressing agreement, politeness, attentiveness, and respect. These patterns are consistent with politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and high-context communication frameworks (Hall, 1976), which emphasize indirect and implicit strategies in hierarchical and intercultural academic contexts. In online environments where physical presence is limited, such nonverbal behaviors become especially important for maintaining engagement and social presence (Satar & Wigham, 2020).

Moreover, nonverbal codes functioned as essential tools for managing turn-taking, performing face-saving behaviors, and reflecting culturally influenced communication norms. Pauses, silence, gaze avoidance, and digital interaction practices enabled students to regulate participation, manage uncertainty, and avoid face-threatening acts, particularly in cognitively demanding moments. These findings align with previous research highlighting the role of nonverbal communication in intercultural interaction and online learning environments (Akutsu et al., 2023; Kokkonen et al., 2022; Anderson, 2023). The study confirms that nonverbal communication serves not only as a compensatory mechanism for the limitations of online interaction but also as a culturally embedded resource that supports effective intercultural communication in EFL classrooms.

Another important finding is that nonverbal communication contributed significantly to the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in online EFL learning. Students demonstrated their ability to interpret culturally appropriate behaviors through facial expressions, eye contact management, and strategic silence, which helped them navigate intercultural interactions more effectively. This finding supports recent studies emphasizing that ICC extends beyond linguistic competence and includes the ability to understand and respond appropriately to culturally embedded communicative behaviors (Zhang et al., 2023; Podlevska et al., 2024). In online learning environments, where opportunities for spontaneous interaction are often limited, nonverbal communication serves as a valuable resource for fostering empathy, mutual understanding, and intercultural awareness among learners.

The findings also suggest that digital nonverbal communication has evolved into a unique form of interaction in virtual classrooms. Features such as camera activation, mute and unmute practices, reaction icons, and participation in chat functions can be interpreted as digital manifestations of nonverbal behavior that influence classroom engagement and interactional dynamics. This result is consistent with recent research indicating that technology-mediated communication creates new forms of social presence and interaction that shape learners' participation and sense of belonging in online educational settings (Guo & Asmawi, 2024; Knutzen et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding digital nonverbal cues has become increasingly important for both teachers and students in achieving effective communication within virtual learning spaces.

Furthermore, the study highlights the pedagogical importance of integrating nonverbal communication awareness into EFL instruction. While language teaching has traditionally focused on grammar, vocabulary, and speaking skills, the findings suggest that explicit attention to nonverbal and intercultural communication strategies can enhance students' communicative effectiveness in diverse contexts. Similar conclusions have been reported by Matthews (2023) and Anderson (2023), who argue that successful intercultural communication depends on learners' ability to interpret both verbal and nonverbal messages appropriately. Consequently, EFL

educators should design learning activities that encourage students to reflect on cultural differences in nonverbal behavior and practice these skills in both face-to-face and online intercultural interactions

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that nonverbal communication remains an essential component of interaction in online intercultural EFL classrooms. Although physical co-presence is limited, nonverbal codes are transformed into digitally mediated forms that support meaning-making and interaction management. Facial expressions, eye behavior, body movements, paralinguistic features, and digital nonverbal cues contribute to maintaining engagement and regulating classroom interaction. These findings also indicate that nonverbal behavior is culturally influenced, as pauses, silence, and minimal verbal responses function as strategies of politeness, reflection, and face-saving rather than disengagement.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single postgraduate EFL classroom and reliance on observational data. Future research is encouraged to examine diverse online EFL contexts using mixed methods to enhance generalizability. It is also recommended that future studies explore learners' and lecturers' perspectives on nonverbal communication through interviews or questionnaires to gain deeper insights into intercultural interaction.

Practically, this study recommends that EFL educators integrate nonverbal and intercultural awareness into online teaching practices. Lecturers are encouraged to explicitly acknowledge digital nonverbal cues, such as silence, response timing, and facial expressions, as indicators of engagement. Professional development programs should also include training on interpreting culturally influenced nonverbal behavior to foster more inclusive and effective online intercultural learning environments.

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