IDENTITY AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: THE CASE OF UCC STUDENTS ON MASTER OF ARTS TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS PROGRAMME

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Abstract

Whether we communicate verbally or non-verbally, we are bound to enact identities for ourselves, or we might be perceived as enacting identities. The main objective of this study is to analyse the kinds of identities that are enacted with some non-verbal cues. Using the identity theory, the researchers examined a data set of four (4) presentations by M. A. Teaching Communicative Skill students. The study identified several non-verbal cues which were further categorized into five main groups - physical appearance, gestures, face and eyes behaviours, vocal behaviours and space environment. These were the parameters used to determine the identities enacted during the presentations. Having used these parameters, researchers observed that each of the presenters A, B, C, and D enacted distinct identities and in some cases common identities.

Keywords: Identity, enactment, non-verbal, communication, gestures.

INTRODUCTION

Quite apart from the verbal communication that humans voluntarily engage in, it is also known that personal communication can be performed through non-verbal means. Communication experts have established the fact that less than a third of meaning transferred from one person to another in a personal conversation comes from the words that are spoken, (O' Rourke 2004).

This emphasizes the fact that the majority of meaning from our day-to-day conversations with others, comes from non-verbal sources, such as: physical appearance, personal space, facial expressions, gestures, posture, touch, eye contact, vocal cues and time. In this regard, nonverbal communication is considered as the transfer of meaning without the use of words, (Butt 2011). In addition, non-verbal communication in the literal sense could mean those actions, objects and contexts that either communicate directly or facilitate communication without using words.

According to Bovee et al (2003), people's actions often do speak louder than their words. Following the assertion of Bovee et al (2003), we can state categorically that many people can hide their own identities or true selves by using words to present themselves to befit the way they want others to perceive them. On the other hand, when a critical examination is conducted on people's body language, facial expressions and vocal characteristics, we can conclusively state that the individual or the self possesses multiple character traits. In connection with the non-verbal cues that the individual is associated with, several character traits are enacted for the individual. This could be termed identity construction or enactment. The fact that the individual has several identities; it is not all of the identities that are relevant. According to Afful and

Mwinlaaru (2010), the individual has a constellation of identities; however, the identities manifest themselves based on situations.

This current study explores the interface between the use of non-verbal cues in students' presentations in class and the identities such cues enact for the individuals involved in the presentations. The concept of identity is regarded as a multidimensional entity that consist of multiple components, called I- position (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon: 1992). The I-position refers to *the self* and the various positions and roles *the self* assumes in any given situation. Identity could be said to be dialogic in nature and is constantly reorganized because of its internal dynamics and context dependency (Markus and Wurf: 1987). The self is defined as a dynamic multiplicity of relatively independent I-positions representing an extensive range of various perspectives, (Hermans: 1996, 2001a, 2002, 2003) which depend on the changes in time and space. Based on the changes in time and space, the self fluctuates among a variety of positions endowing each one with a voice.

The concept of nonverbal communication finds itself operating in the perimeter of *identity* and *the self*. In terms of non-verbal communication, there is a performer who performs the actions and this can be equated to the self. Just as *identity* or *the self* has time, space and context or situation as some of its variables, non-verbal communication also has all these as its variables. According to Batory (2010), the self is inhabited by the individual and collective voices (representing social groups, communal worldview and other shared perspectives) which can be related to the individual and social identity and these are identified with the individual performing the non-verbal cues. It is against this background that this study focuses on identity enactment through non-verbal communication.

Statement of the problem

The study, which is entitled *Identity Enactment through Nonverbal Communication*, attempts to find out the interface between non-verbal communication and identity enactment. Several researches have been conducted solely in the domains of non-verbal communication and in the domains of identity construction or enactment. In the domains of non-verbal communication, mention can be made of Ekman and Friesen (1969). Their work concerns the origin, use, and classification of non-verbal communication. In addition, their work serves as a frame for current researchers. Kahlbaugh and Haviland (1994) also researched into non-verbal communication between parents and adolescents. Their study also focused on the way adolescents approach their parents in some situations and avoid their parents in other situations. The work of Fichten, et al (2001) concentrated on verbal and non-verbal communication cues in daily conversations and dating.

The domain of identity enactment is also explored by some researchers who have made serious contributions in the field. Dowling's (2011) work looked at how identity is constructed in general. In her work, Dowling (2011) discovered that identity could be constructed literally and figuratively. One other researcher who delved into identity construction is de Freitas (2008). In her study, Freitas considered identity enactment through narratives and the processes of the discourse in Mathematics classroom. Her study revealed that identity is a personal site for identity construction. Mention can be made of Winn and Rubin (2001). They looked at enacting gender identity in written discourse. Having reviewed literature on both non-verbal communication and identity enactment or construction, researchers have discovered that no

attention was paid to combining non-verbal and identity enactment, hence, finding the interface between them. Finding the interface between non-verbal communication and identity construction or enactment, is quite interesting because many things about them are brought to the limelight. These domains are *virgin forests* that have been left untouched for so long a time. In this regard, we have decided to combine these two areas and find the converging points for both.

Theoretical framework

This study is rooted in the construction of identity mediated through non-verbal communication. In view of this, we found the identity theory espoused by Stryker (1980) very useful. This theory concerns how social structure influences one's identity. Although, Stryker's theory was meant to apply to texts, it is equally appropriate for non-verbal communication as well. According to Stryker (1980), social psychologists see persons as always acting within the context of social structure in which they (psychologists) and others are labeled in the sense that each recognizes the other as an occupant of position or roles in the society. Similarly, Turner (1978) also thinks in line with Stryker that one assumes a role of identity, thereby merging the role with the person (cited in Afful & Mwinlaaru: 2010). Desrocher et al (2002) also opines that the self consists of multiple identities, each of which is based on occupying a particular role. All these identities manifest in the roles we play externally. However, our non-verbal cues also enact identities for us.

Research questions

The present study proposes to investigate enactment of identity through non-verbal communication. It is guided by the following research questions.

1. What forms of non-verbal cues are used by M.A Teaching Communicative Skills students during their class presentations?
2. What kinds of identities are enacted by M.A. Teaching Communicative Skills students through their use of non-verbal cues during class presentations?

Significance of the study

Both non-verbal communication and identity enactment play indispensable roles in understanding the meanings and contexts of communication in our daily lives as well as who and what we are inwardly. The study explores the identities that are enacted using of non-verbal communication in students' class presentations and the skills involved in doing that. The study promotes the awareness of students' presentation skills, and how others perceive them (students). It would create the circumstance for students to introduce new trends in presenting facts. The study might be useful to students as to the kinds of jobs they would like to do by using the outcome of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the study reviews related literature in the domains of non-verbal communication and identity enactment. According to Barber (1964), non-verbal communication could be classified as arbitrary and non-arbitrary. The non-arbitrary ones refer to those non-verbal cues that are universal and their interpretations are quite the same everywhere. For instance, weeping

denotes a sign of sorrow and blushing is a sign of shyness, shame or embarrassment. All these are understood by people as being caused by emotional states. The arbitrary non-verbal communication concerns the use of personal space, facial expressions, gestures, posture, touch, eye contact, vocal cues among others, because their meanings may be culturally determined. For instance, when a man nods his head to indicate assent (or in some culture's refusal) that is said to be arbitrary and symbolic.

Givens (2002) asserts that the tone of voice reflects psychological arousal, emotion and mood. The tone of voice may even be pregnant with a lot of social information such that the individual could be perceived as being sarcastic, superior, timid, submissive manner of speaking to others. Through the tone of voice, the individual enacts different identities which are socially and culturally known by a social group.

In addition, the human species upholds to engaging in eye contact. The use of eye contact is normally found in conversations with people who are intimate (Mason 2003). The use of eye contact also gives the impression that the individual is confident, showing authority, and showing sincerity. These are some of the identities that the individual could enact for himself/herself. Otherwise, when the individual fails to engage his audiences by using the eye contact, different identities are enacted by the individual.

In connection with the above, the concept of identity does not come from a single "Me" but is embedded in a complex set of elements, and emerges from multiple experiences (Batory: 2010). This assertion is in line with Givens (2002) and Mason (2003) in which different situations and experiences situate the individual to enact certain identities. In addition, Swann, Chang-Schneider and Mc Clarty (2007) added that there are global and partial senses of self-esteem. The partial self is limited to an individual or a small group of people; however, it could be distinguished theoretically and grasped empirically.

There has been a recent argument that identity construction is governed by particular motivational principles, called identity motives. Research has proved that there are self- esteem, efficacy and continuity, distinctiveness, belonging and meaning, identity, motives (Vignoles et al: 2006, 2008). Identity motives are defined as pressures toward certain identity states which guide the processes of identity constructions (Vignoles: 2006) and these could be said to be distinct from others. Identity elements occupy certain positions in three dimensions of identity structure: 1. Cognitive- perceived centrality of a certain element within identity, 2. Affective-positive affect connected with it and 3. Behavioral- which refers to what Reicher (cited in Vignoles et al, 2006) called identity enactment, which is defined as the extent to which individuals strive to communicate with each of their identity elements to others in everyday life.

The basis of this study is to find the converging point of non-verbal communication and identity enactment. From the literature that is reviewed so far, there appears an emerging trend between non-verbal communication and identity enactment, and this is the main concern of this study.

METHODOLOGY

One basic approach that we find quite useful for this study is the qualitative research approach. In the qualitative research, the researcher is concerned about finding out how people make sense of their lives, experiences and their structures of the world (Creswell, 1994). Punch (1998) also

sees qualitative research analysis as comprising multiple methodologies and research practices for undertaking research of field or life situations that are reflective of everyday life groups, societies and organizations. The qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it seeks to describe, interpret and analyse naturally occurring phenomena and identity enactment through non-verbal communication is no excuse.

The data source considered for this research is the University of Cape Coast, Department of Communication Studies. This research site was selected for two main reasons. First, it is the only University in Ghana that is currently offers the Master of Arts in Teaching Communicative Skills. Second, it presents to students a course that deals with non-verbal communication. In this regard, it is assumed that students have a fair knowledge of the concept of non-verbal communication.

The number of students, offering the course, *Communication in Different Context*, was twenty-four (24). Each of these students was made to do class presentations which were captured as videos. Each student was allowed to present for a maximum of twenty (20) minutes. Using a simple random sampling technique, we sampled four (4) students and filed them according to their order of presentation and selected the 1st, 8th, 16th and 24th. Selecting four (4) students is quite enough because each of the students used quite a number of non-verbal cues which were good enough for the study.

FINDINGS

The results of research question (1) indicated a number of non-verbal cues produced by presenters A, B, C, and D in their class presentations. The non-verbal cues displayed by the presenters were further classified into five major groups, namely physical appearance, gestures, face and eyes behaviours, vocal behaviours and space environment. Categorizing these numerous non-verbal cues into the five main groups reduces many irrelevant non-verbal cues toward the purpose of the presentation.

The results of research question (2) depended on the non-verbal cues to construct meanings that were relevant to the presentations. Using non-verbal cues by each of the presenters, varied degrees of identities have been enacted by the presenters. These are shown in the table below.

Table1: showing non-verbal cues and their corresponding identities of presenters

Nonverbal cues	A	B	C	D
Physical appearance & Space environment	Educator, authority, Superior	Educator authority superior	Educator authority superior	Educator authority superior
Gestures	Innovative	Tactician	a creative person and a fanatic	unfocused
Face and eyes behaviours	Commands attentiveness	Commands attentiveness,	Commands attentiveness	Did not command attentiveness

Vocal behaviours	Orator	Innovative, orator	Orator	Not resourceful, incompetent, inferior,

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section of the study discusses the five main categories of non-verbal communication identified in the four data, and how identities have been enacted by the presenters.

Physical appearance was one of the main non-verbal cues identified in the class presentations of M.A. Teaching Communication Skills students. This form of non-verbal cue could not be discussed without talking about space and the environment. With regard to physical appearance, researchers paid attention to the posture the presenters assumed in readiness for the presentation. All other forms of physical appearances, such as the mode of dressing among others were not considered since they did not have any direct bearing on the presentation exercise. Posture in this case is the position the presenter assumes in the course of the presentation. The space and environment in this case refers to the setting of the presentation. The spaces or environments for the presenters and the audiences were specially designated. The audiences know where they were supposed to be as well as the presenters. Having watched the videos of the presentations carefully, the researchers drew various conclusions about each of the presenters indicating the identities the presenters enacted for themselves.

Presenter A positioned herself in front of her audiences. She was standing in front and faced her listeners. The way she positioned herself in front of her audiences gave the indication that she was there to pass on information. The identities that she enacted for herself in front of her audiences could be those of educator, authority, superior, and etc. These mean that at that very moment, she was found performing a superior role while her audiences were found performing subordinate role. At that moment, a kind of authority was reposed in her to perform a function. Presenter B also positioned himself in front and faced his listeners. The posture he also assumes in front of the class indicated that he was there to impart knowledge. The identities he also enacted for himself could be those of educator, authority, superior etc. The implication of the posture assumed by B in front of the class also means that he was there to perform a superior role and the listeners assumed the subordinate role. At that moment, B has the power to influence his listeners based on his recognized knowledge or expertise.

Similarly, presenter C positioned himself in front and faced the class. His presence in front of the class indicated that he was also there to convey a message. The identities he enacted for himself could be those of a teacher, authority, superior etc. This also suggests that C's physical appearance meant that he was there to perform a superior role and the listeners were performing subordinate roles. At that moment also, C was recognized by his listeners as one who could educate them, hence, they reposed in him the power to present. Presenter D also positioned himself in front of the class and faced the listeners. His presence suggested that he was about to perform a function quite distinct from the role of his listeners. The identities he enacted for himself could be those of educator, authority, superior etc. C's presence in front of the class

signaled that he was there to perform a superior role and the audiences were performing the subordinate role.

The next non-verbal cue used in the presentations was gesturing. This has to do with the use of body parts to communicate. The frequently used gestures in the data pointed at objects and audiences, complementing verbal communication with gestures, touching the body parts, etc. From the data, it was observed that the presenters' use of gestures spiced up the verbal communication to enhance better understanding to the audiences. Presenter A was found using many gestures most of which were timely which enabled the audiences to follow the message. The use of the gestures rather stimulates and reinforces the understanding of the audiences. This enacted for the presenter the identity of *innovativeness* in that she had to adopt various strategies that enhanced audiences' understanding of the message. Presenter B was also found using many gestures that were interesting, timely and educating. The use of the gestures energizes, reinforces, sustains and motivates the interests of the audiences to continue listening to the presenter until the end of the presentation. These strategies enacted for the presenter the identity of a *tactician*.

Furthermore, presenter C also employed many gestures which were timely, but the boisterous rate at which the presenter delivered the gestures turned the class into a concert center. Even though the class was continually entertained, audiences were motivated and reinforced. The identity enacted for the presenter could be *a creative person* and *a fanatic*. Naturally, the presenter is that type of an aggressive person and that was translated into his presentation. Presenter D was also found using gestures which marred the entire presentation. This was because the presenter could not map the gestures with the words. Most of the gestures did not really make any meaning. These made his presentation very dull and uninteresting. His presentation was not an enticing one that could engage the audiences to continuously listen to him. In this regard, such a presenter was perceived as *an unfocused person*.

In addition to the above-mentioned non-verbal cues, one other non-verbal cue to be discussed is *face and eye behaviours*. These include: facial expressions, eye contact, and so on. Presenter A really wore smiles, in some cases and more often fixed her gaze on her audiences. The use of this form of non-verbal cue enables the audiences to be attentive throughout the presentation and the identity enacted by the use of this non-verbal cue was *one who could command attentiveness*. Presenter B also employed the *face and eyes bahaviours* and this was delivered very accurately. The use of this non-verbal cue by the presenter also made the audiences to be involved in the presentation. By the use of this, he was also found to be *one who could command attentiveness*. Presenter C also used the *face and eyes behaviours* which were well delivered. The use of this non-verbal cue by the presenter engaged the audiences to continue taking active part in the presentation. This presenter also enacted the identity of *one who could command attentiveness*. On the contrary, presenter D could not keep the pace set by the first three presenters. He stayed glued to reading everything from his laptop and failed to relate to his audiences. He rather turned sideways rather than facing his audiences. This made the audiences uninvolved in the presentation. Most of the audiences were found doing their own things and others appeared to be dozing off. This could suggest that the presenter failed to manage his audiences. On this note, the presenter enacted for himself the identity of *not being able to command attention*.

Finally, vocal behaviours were some of the non-verbal cues to be discussed in this write-up. This includes the pitch, the intonation, etc. by the presenters. The vocal behaviours kept audiences to continue listening to the presenters. Presenter A used the vocal behaviours to sustain the interest of her audiences since the vocal behaviours produced some sort of musical effect-rise and fall of voice- to the audiences. On the other hand, the use of intonation could indicate the mood of the presenter. This could be determined by the diction of the presenter. In this case, the presenter has to simulate the mood that the word conveys. Having employed this non-verbal cue, the presenter enacted for herself the identity of *a competent presenter*, *a resourceful presente*r and *a good orator*. Presenter B also adopted the vocal behaviour in his presentation. This presenter employed all that he could to make the presentation joyous. He had successfully executed that very well, which threw the class into complete ecstasy. His use of pitch and intonation presented to the audiences the kind of mood the topic he was handling meant to convey to the audiences. By so doing, the presenter was perceived to have enacted for himself the identity of *a good orator*. He had been able to do this by contacting other resource materials and adding his competence or intelligence to it. This also enacted for him the identity of *innovativeness*.

Again, presenter C also used the vocal behaviours. He also discharged his duties as perfectly as possible to enhance the intended meaning and understanding. His use of pitch and intonation also created a musical effect and mood respectively. The way the presenter executed all these vocal bahaviours made the researchers perceive that the presenter was *a good orator*. This implies that the presenter applied the necessary methods to make the presentation a success. Finally, presenter D also made use of the vocal behaviours. Even though he was audible enough, he appeared as if he did not have the full grasp of the content of the topic he was handling. For that matter, the pitches and intonations were found to be irrelevant to the topic he was handling. Due to this, he enacted some identities for himself as *not resourceful*, *inferior*, and *incompetent*. From the study so far, it was observed that non-verbal communication and identity can co-occur to a large extent.

CONCLUSION

This research aims at exploring the interface between non-verbal communication and identity enactment. By this intent, the researchers found identity theory espoused by Stryker (1980) appropriate for the study. Four videos of presenters who were students pursuing the M.A. The Teaching Communicative Skills program was studied and concrete results were found.

From the presentations, many non-verbal cues were identified. These were further categorized into five main groups as physical *appearance, Space and environment, Gestures, Face and eyes behaviours, Vocal behaviours*. These were mapped against each of the presenters to arrive at the distinct identities each enacted for himself or herself. Having studied the various identities that each of the presenters enacted for himself or herself, the researchers came up that in terms of physical appearance & space and environment, all the presenters enacted their identities as teachers/educators, authorities and superiors. In terms of gestures, presenter A enacted her identity as *an innovative person*, presenter B as *tactician*, C as *a creative person* and *a fanatic* and D as an unfocused person. In terms of face and eyes behaviours, presenter A, B and C enacted their identities as *people who could command attentiveness* and D enacted his identity as one who could not manage his audiences, hence was perceived as *one who could not command attentiveness*. Finally, in terms of vocal behaviours, A was perceived as a good orator, B, as good

orator and innovative, C also as a good orator and D as *not resourceful*, *inferior*, and *incompetent.* To arrive at these conclusions, researchers had to agree with cogent reasons why the identities were the way they are now. Furthermore, views of others were sought to ascertain the objectivity of our findings. This was to reduce researchers' biases toward the presenters.

The present study has some implications which relate to the theory, and future research. Regarding the theory, the analytical framework, identity theory proposed by Stryker (1980) was found very useful as it enabled the researchers to identify various social structures of identities. This study contributes to the scholarship on both non-verbal communication and identity theory.

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