

## DIFFERENTIATING THROUGH POSTURE AND PROXEMICS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

Cette contribution s'intéresse à la réalisation multimodale de la différenciation dans les relations ou les interactions enseignant-élève. Il s'agit de montrer en quoi et comment la posture physique et le comportement proxémique de l'enseignant de langue participent au processus de différenciation dans l'apprentissage des langues. Un double point de vue prenant en compte la perspective du chercheur ainsi que celle d'élèves est retenu puisque notre analyse s'appuie tant sur des vidéos de classe que sur des commentaires d'élèves concernant la posture et la proxémie de leur enseignant. Nos résultats permettent de mettre en exergue le rôle que ces ressources kinésiques peuvent jouer dans le processus de différenciation au niveau psycho-affectif et dans le travail d'entrainement. Nous argumentons en faveur d'une prise en compte de ces pratiques proxémiques dans la formation des enseignants, pour en faire une stratégie d'enseignement consciente et intentionnelle.

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focuses on foreign language teacher education within a multimodal perspective (i.e. teaching gestures, multimodal classroom interactions, and multimodal discourse in interaction analysis). His research interests also encompass the analysis of teachers' and students' identities as constructed processes in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

#### Introduction

Differentiated instruction is neither a recent concept, nor a contemporary topic (Kahn, 2010; Feyfant, 2016; Meirieu, 2016). Over time, various definitions have been proposed and we examine Perrenoud's (1992) statement: "Différencier, c'est organiser les interactions et les activités de sorte que chaque élève soit *constamment* ou du moins *très souvent* confronté aux situations didactiques les plus fécondes *pour lui*" (1992, italics by Azaoui). That is, these activities and interactions need to be adapted to the students' characteristics, be they cultural, linguistic, motivational, or related to the students' cognitive styles, learning strategies or abilities.

In this paper, we decided not to focus on the adaptation of the lesson contents and activities to the students' needs, but rather on its non-verbal realisation during classroom interaction. In other words, we will focus on how individualised scaffolding is implemented at the interactional level. Though this differentiating practice is often regarded as a spontaneous one, being spontaneous

does not necessarily mean that there is a conscious pedagogical intent. It may mistakenly be considered as "natural" and consequently not worthy of discussion and training. This is precisely what makes our goal to observe and analyse the interactional differentiation resources from a non-verbal perspective all the more relevant. It enables us to make visible the invisible through informing readers about the use of proxemics and body posture as differentiating resources during the teaching-learning process.

To do so, our work and reflection are supported by the analysis of secondary school students' answers to a written questionnaire showing teachers' proxemic and postural situations, and various video corpora (classroom filmed observations and video-stimulated recall interviews of students) which we analysed multimodally. This data set allows for various perspectives on this issue and enables us to answer the following questions: to what extent could we say that posture and proxemics participate in the differentiation process? How do they help

foreign language teachers differentiate instruction?

## 1. Posture and proxemics in educational contexts

For almost 50 years, and regardless of the theoretical perspective (be it social semiotics, cognitive sciences, gesture studies or embodied cognition), research has gradually shown that classroom interactions and the teaching-learning process could not be analysed without considering a kinetic dimension. Nonetheless, while learners listen and *watch* their teachers speaking and gesturing, the verbal dimension is traditionally privileged in the reflection regarding language teaching. The teacher's gestures, gaze and body in general contribute not only to the meaning making process in (foreign language) classes, but also to the organisation of interactions (McCafferty & Stam, 2008; Azaoui, 2014). Proxemics and postures are considered as relevant and worth analysing as gestures and facial mimics, yet the body of research dedicated to these, let alone teachers' physical postures, is scarce (Azaoui, forthcoming; Forest, 2006; Moulin, 2004).

Regarding postures, the topic first fell within the field of ethology before it came to be of interest for human communication. Globally speaking, postural configurations – including body orientations – are indicators of the speakers' attitude and status in an interaction, but also of the organisation of an activity the participants are doing together (Streeck, 2009: 20-21).

To our knowledge, there exist but few studies analysing the role of the instructors' postures in the teaching and learning experience. Following Hall's (1963) system for the notation of proxemics, Forest (2006) mentioned the postural dimension as an element of the distances. But there is still a lot left to say on the impact of the teacher's postures on the teaching-learning process and on the interaction with the students.

Turning to proxemics, the ground-breaking work of anthropologist E. T. Hall (1990) serves as the basis of most research related to this field – how human beings unconsciously use and perceive inter-individual space. The author proposes to organise distance into four zones<sup>1</sup> (Hall, 1990: 116-123):

> Intimate (<40 cm): "the presence of the other person is unmistakable and may at times be overwhelming because

of the greatly stepped-up sensory inputs";  
> Personal (45-125 cm): "It might be thought of as a small protective sphere or bubble that an organism maintains between itself and others";

> Social (1,2-3,6 m): "Intimate visual detail in the face is not perceived, and nobody touches or expects to touch another person unless there is some special effort". It marks the limit of domination present in the personal distance;

> Public (> 3,6 m): "is well outside the circle of involvement".

Basically, a certain distance will induce a certain type of interaction, and a specific interaction will require a certain distance. For example, if you want to tell someone a secret you will not stand at a public distance from your interlocutor.

If we now turn to the issue we are concerned with, research teaches us that both posture and proxemics can be considered as differentiating resources in instructional contexts. Forest's (2006) analysis of a primary school teacher's multimodal orchestration offers an outside perspective that shows posture as a differentiating resource. He observed how the teacher's dissociation of gestures, gaze and postural behaviour enabled the teacher to be simultaneously attentive to all the students and to some of them more specifically. Arguably, then, this result shows that the intimate distance shown in Figure 1 is not the only criterion to differentiate instruction.

To pursue this reflection, we asked ourselves how the posture and proxemics of foreign language teachers helped differentiate instruction. Answers to this question needed to have a cross perspective that would allow to collect the learner viewpoint. Consequently, and as far as our research methodology is concerned, we resorted to three types of data sets: (1) video-recorded foreign or second language classroom interactions; (2) questionnaires (screenshots from classroom interactions showing a teacher in various interpersonal distances and postures were distributed to ten secondary school classes and 200 comments collected); (3) video-stimulated recall interviews with secondary school students. The various data sets were analysed following discourse analysis criteria. The video corpora were more specifically analysed from a multimodal perspective. That is, since we consider language as being intrinsically multimodal, verbal and non-verbal

<sup>1</sup> Hall (1990: 116) pointed out that his category was not meant to be applied as it is to other contexts, let alone to the instructional context which, as any context, has its own specificity and constraints. For an adaptation of Hall's typology for this specific context, see Forest (2006).

dimensions have no supposedly hierarchical relationship (Krafft & Dausendschön, 2001).

## 2. Differentiating through postures and proxemics

As mentioned in the introduction, a focus on student-teacher interactions was privileged. Our analysis and the results presented hereafter consider how postures and proxemics contribute to the differentiation process in its interpersonal and psycho-affective dimensions.

### 2.1 Differentiating through postures – showing individual help

Among the ten screenshots in the questionnaire, Figure 1, which shows a teacher crouching beside her students' desk, with her head resting on her hands on the desk, was selected by the majority of students, boys and girls, from both the lower and higher secondary schools as representative of a teacher's concern for the pupils' individual need.

Figure 1: Teacher crouching



Most of these students mentioned the fact that the teacher looked “attentive” and “intéressée”. The posture was linked to differentiating inasmuch as the teacher seemed to be “à notre hauteur”, as one student put it. This posture and proxemics create a benevolent atmosphere where the students may feel at ease and apt to mention the difficulty they are having. In other words, differentiation occurs in the elaboration of interpersonal teacher-student relationships, which may play a motivational role in the student's engagement in the learning process.

In line with the example in Figure 1, posture can also refer to the orientation or bending of a body. In Figure 2, the French as a second language teacher has walked close to her student to check whether she has understood the task.

Figure 2: Teacher's posture change

As she starts the explanation, she bends forward, her head and that of her student are quite close and facing



each other, and the teacher's voice is lowered. The actual posture of the two participants (the student has bent her head) reinforces the impression of a one-on-one instruction where both the teacher's and the student's gazes are on the worksheet while the teacher reformulates the instruction:

Extract #1

Teacher: *alors, tu vas essayer de relier l'image au texte. Camping, tu sais ce que c'est camping?*  
 Student: <nods><sup>2</sup>  
 Teacher: *Interdit. Quelle image?*

The last utterance is analogous to foreigner talk and is meant to simplify the input; it is completed by the teacher's gestures on the worksheet to make her verbal instruction more explicit.

### 2.2 Differentiating through proxemics

The previous examples confirm that posture and proxemics need to be considered simultaneously. The analysis of the posture in the aforementioned situation would not have been the same if teacher and student had been at another interpersonal distance.

Similarly, the observation of video corpora of English as a foreign language classes supports the idea that proxemics allows the teachers to answer specific questions or supervise how the students are coping with a specific task (Figures 3 and 4). The close interpersonal distance allows the teachers from our corpora to have a look at the student's copybook, which serves as a mediating tool and facilitates joint attention.

Extract #2

Student: X for the question  
 Teacher: for the question, for the first question? So you have to say *when* <prosodic emphasis + teacher gesturally indicates the word on the note-book> *gothic* appeared. A time. You have it <shows other documents>

Figure 3: Teacher's proxemic behaviour #1



Extract #3

Teacher: can I have a pen  
 Student: yes  
 Teacher: <reads the text the student has written> Are you sure it's *have*? <circles the word “have” on the copybook> You start with “in the cathedral of France” <reads the text while indicating with pen the words she is reading>

Figure 4: Teacher's proxemic behaviour #2



In these two extracts, individualised and multimodal scaffolding is facilitated by the teacher's being close to the student. Words that are keys to the explanation are emphasized and made more explicit through gestural/graphic (deictic or circling of the word) or vocal (prosodic emphasis) indications produced simultaneously with the verbal utterance. Moreover, it is highly possible that the reduction of the interpersonal distance participates in the face-work process since the teacher's assistance is made invisible to the eyes and ears of the other students.

Answers to the questionnaire we circulated corroborate the analysis of extracts #2 and #3 above. Indeed, while commenting a screenshot similar to Figure 3, most students said that the teacher's posture demonstrated a helpful attitude: “*[l'enseignante] montre direct le cahier et parle direct à ses élèves*” “*[elle] paraît plus apte à aider son élève*” “*[elle] explique gentiment*” “*[elle] aide en montrant précisément quelque chose*”

Various terms refer to a positive perception by the students of the teaching function close interpersonal distance may play: “*direct*”, “*gentiment*”, “*plus apte*”, and “*précisément*”. They also refer implicitly to the individualised assistance offered by the teacher to the students.

In continuation, the following example from a French as a second language class for newcomers in France illustrates how proxemics facilitates differentiating remediation.

During a one-minute exchange with his teacher, a student showed difficulty pro-

nouncing the sound [z] in the French word “chose” (“thing”), which initiated multimodal remediation from the teacher. That is, she walked closer to him and started a series of multimodal corrective phonetic exercises adapted to his needs (Azaoui, 2014: 201).

Figure 5: Proxemics and teacher’s phonetic remediation



The relevance of proxemics here is manifold. Thanks to close interpersonal distance and face-to-face interaction, the teacher is visually and aurally attentive to the student’s mispronunciation, and so is the student to the teacher’s vocal and gestural remediation. Scaffolding elaborated through personal guidance and appropriate assistance is tailored to the student’s individual characteristics. An extract from an interview with this same student points out his understanding of his teacher’s strategy:

*“Par exemple, j’ai demandé quelque chose. Même si elle m’a pas répondu encore, si, par exemple, je dis “chof[z]”, lo digo mal<sup>2</sup>, et elle dit que c’est cho[z], alors elle reste avec sa conversation jusqu’à je sais le dire et après elle me dit la réponse. Donc elle encourage”*

This individualised help generates a dual exchange within a multi-participant interaction. As previously mentioned (see analysis for extracts 3 and 4), we believe that the face-work it allows is rather valuable in class given the symbolic risk learners take when they speak in a foreign language.

This student’s comments echo those of other students we met during video-stimulated recall interviews. Though these students were not specifically talking about their foreign language teachers, their remarks (e.g., “on comprend mieux” / “elle ne nous néglige pas”) emphasised the idea that proxemics can offer teachers the opportunity to encourage student engagement in the lesson and activities and help them build confidence alongside facilitating scaffolding at a cognitive

level. This is also exemplified in extract #4 from an English language teacher/student interaction:

#### Extract #4

Teacher: alors, tu en es où, toi? Est-ce que tu as une trousse?<sup>4</sup> <the teacher rearranges the student’s belongings and organises his desk for him to start to work>

Student: oui

Teacher: allez, c’est parti, on sort la trousse!

It could be argued that this differentiation is not related to the teaching and learning of the language *per se*. However, it certainly is a way to help specific students engage into the activities, which is known to facilitate learning (Ellis, Worthington & Larkin, 1994).

While this exchange is going on, the English teacher has come close to her student, and has put away his jacket to rearrange his desk so as to make it easier for him to work on it. And it is only by pacing around the classroom and by adapting one’s proxemic behaviour that this can be achieved.

Again, beyond the differentiating process that proxemics facilitates, attention needs to be paid to the psycho-affective role of this non-verbal resource. Students feel they are being acknowledged in the mass of the class. Differentiating is not just a question of adapting tasks or instructions to needs, but also of making a learner feel that s/he exists. Differentiating through proxemics is instrumental in acknowledging the *person* behind the student. And this is quite significant in language classes as language learning impacts one way or another the student’s identity (re)construction process (Azaoui, 2013).

### 3. Raising language teachers’ awareness on non-verbal differentiation

However relevant and effective these forms of non-verbal differentiation may prove, my experience as a teacher trainer and researcher shows that they are barely considered in language teacher training sessions in France. Various reasons may account for this. First, despite recent studies analysing the teachers’ actions at a non-verbal level, this research field is a relatively new one. Second, if multimodal and interactional differentiating may be promoted in institutional texts or in training sessions, there is little work showing how it really works. Third, it

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<sup>2</sup> Transcription convention : <...> : non-verbal indication; X: inaudible word; italics : prosodic emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> The student is a Spanish speaker.

<sup>4</sup> Although this is an English class, the exchange is in French. It may be due to the basic level of English in this class (a general and vocational adapted learning section).

may be viewed as a “natural” form of differentiation that needs no awareness raising.

Yet, should we pay attention only to the students’ comments, it is clear that learners are attentive to their teachers’ differentiating non-verbal behaviour and that it has some importance to them. While it could be admitted that some teachers spontaneously use these non-verbal resources to adapt to students’ individual needs, some of them may not *consciously* do it. Hence, there is little doubt they have never reflected on these actions’ implications at an interpersonal and psycho-affective level.

To address this issue, and because we observed how the students’ feedback can inform us about teachers’ practice, it may be relevant to carry out video-stimulated metacommunication with learners to collect their viewpoint on interactional differentiation and use – with parental consents – these video data sets as corpora for teacher training sessions. This aspect in particular could be used to initiate a discussion on the reception and perception by the students of this specific situated non-verbal scaffolding.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have made the case for the use of proxemics and posture as non-verbal resources for differentiating both cognitively and psycho-affectively in language classes.

It has been shown that posture and proxemics may appear to be convenient teaching resources to adapt one’s scaffolding and answers to a student’s specific needs and to encourage engagement in classroom activities. Besides, by making assistance somehow invisible or at least less public, proxemics allows to protect the face of students who may be shy to participate for fear of being mocked because of mistakes or of supposedly irrelevant questions. All in all, our analysis revealed how differentiating through proxemics and posture could impact the psycho-affective dimension of the language teaching-learning experience as they participated in the construction of a benevolent atmosphere and the intersubjective dimension of teaching. Students

feel they are being individually cared for with great care.

Given this, if we drift from *foreign language* teaching as such and think more globally, it can be stated that posture and proxemics as differentiating resources contribute to a momentary deconstruction of the mass education that has been carried out at least in France since the early twentieth century. They help re-establish a one-on-one relationship to learning and knowledge. In addition, the symbolic and statutory distance that exists between teacher (i.e., knowledge) and students being physically reduced, knowledge is symbolically made more accessible.

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