TEACHER IMMEDIACY BEHAVIORS AND PARTICIPATION IN COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Few concepts in instructional communication literature have received as much attention as teacher immediacy. However, educational communication scholars have thoroughly studied immediacy behaviors mainly in traditional classrooms and these studies are mostly related to student attitudes and learning. Thanks to some growing attempts, recent research has extended these findings to distance education. The difference of this study is to examine the relationship between teacher immediacy behaviors and participation in an online setting. Results indicated that affective and interactive indicators were the least used immediacy behaviors while cohesive indicators were mostly used by teacher in this case. Also data show that teachers' interactive immediacy behaviors and immediate feedback determine students' participation in asynchronous computer-mediated communication environment.

Keywords: **Teacher immediacy; immediacy behaviors; social presence; participation, online communication; computer mediated communication, social interaction; distance education.**

INTRODUCTION

Online courses and degree programs give opportunities to a wide and diverse population of learners to participate in educational programs in which social, psychological, or geographical constraints once may have been key limiting factors in furthering one's education. However, a major challenge in distance online courses is to develop an effective learning environment where both instructors and students feel connected and responsible for learning. The literature reveals that one of the most important factors of student motivation and achievement is to contact with the instructor and to interact with peers. At this point, professionals stress the important role of teachers' communication behaviors. One of those communication behaviors is "teacher immediacy". Teacher immediacy received unsurpassed scholarly attention in the field of instructional communication over the past three decades (Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006).

TEACHER IMMEDIACY BEHAVIORS

Immediacy concept was first described by Mehrabian (1969) as behaviors that enhance closeness and nonverbal interaction with another person.

Later, Andersen (1979) looked at the role of immediacy in postsecondary education and proposed the following definition for teacher immediacy: "Teacher immediacy is conceptualized as those nonverbal behaviors that reduce physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students" (p. 544). The definition was extended by Gorham (1988) through the inclusion of verbal interaction that increased psychological closeness between teachers and students. Thereafter, teacher immediacy behaviors were distinguished between teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors. Verbal immediacy includes the use of humor, frequent use of student name, encouragement of discussion and following up on student-initiated comments, encouraging future contact with students, and sharing of personal examples; while nonverbal immediacy includes smiling, eye contact, vocal expressiveness, open gestures and body movement behaviors done by the instructor.

In traditional classrooms, researchers found that teachers' immediacy behaviors can lessen the psychological distance between themselves and their students, leading to more effective learning and motivation (Kelley & Gorham 1988; Gorham, 1988; Christophel, 1990; Myers et al., 1998; Menzel & Carrel, 1999).

The immediacy research in traditional classroom has implications for learning through online communication. However, only recently, some research has extended these findings to online education.

Common face-to-face behaviors such as smiling, using gestures, and making eye contact are not available in an asynchronous computer-mediated communication environment. Nevertheless, using first names in online postings, sharing personal stories and examples, responding quickly, writing in a friendly tone, and creating a safe psychological environment for student participation can provide the needed social presence that encourages student engagement (Swan & Richardson, 2003).While nonverbal immediacy is important, verbal immediacy may be more relevant to online learning settings since the instructor is not physically present to provide nonverbal cues. Research by Freitas, Myers, and Avtgis (1998) strengthens this assertion. They found that both the students enrolled in conventional, face-to-face classes and those enrolled in a web-based, synchronous course perceived differences in the amount and quality of (instructor) nonverbal immediacy, but not in verbal immediate behaviors. While Freitas, et al. (1998) viewed such a result as surprising, the stability of verbal immediacy over different instructional mediums may lend itself as a better variable to study when compared to nonverbal immediacy. This study investigates teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors in an online setting.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

Computer mediated communication is unique among distance education media because of its ability to support high levels of responsive, intelligent interaction between and among faculty and students, while simultaneously providing high levels of freedom of time and place to engage in this interactivity. These characteristics make computer conferencing the dominant choice for distance learning in many institutions (Rourke et al. 2001). In addition to the common use of computer mediated communication, how participants of this communication style employ this media is also an important factor to build effective learning community.

In this case, teachers have an important role and responsibility. Teachers' philosophy, attitudes, technical competencies, and ability to interact with learners online have a positive impact on the learners (Tsang et al. 2002). Also the literature on student participation reveals several important points. One of those findings is that students actively participate in online classes where discussion is valued.

They create social presence with the help of the nature and content of their participation, and social presence seems to be an important element of both satisfaction and learning (Wallace, 2003). The perception of social presence is related to two components; intimacy and immediacy (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

The immediacy behaviors in text based computer mediated communication settings are seen in messages which teachers and students have sent in discussion board. In this study, only teachers' messages were analyzed to identify teachers' immediacy behaviors and its relation to participation in asynchronous discussions. At this point, following questions were tried to be answered;

1. **What kind of teacher verbal immediacy behaviors are seen in asynchronous discussions?**
2. **Are teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors determining factors in student participation?**
3. **Does the immediate feedback from teachers increase student participation?**

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected from the asynchronous discussions that took place in two graduate level courses given online in the 2006-2007 semester in Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty in English Language Teaching Program. In that semester, students need to complete five courses during the third class.

Among these five courses, two were selected because of their relatively higher participation rates. One of that courses titled "Introduction to Linguistics" was selected because of having the highest number of messages sent, the other titled "English Language Teaching Methodology" was selected because of having the fewest number of messages sent. Both courses consisted of twenty four units. Each unit ran sequentially across two semesters and for every unit there were threaded discussion sessions.

The discussion sessions are facilitated by four or five tutors. In two courses, 613 messages sent by tutors out of total 1662 messages were examined.

In order to examine teacher verbal immediacy behaviors, a coding schema which was developed by Rourke, et al.'s (2001) and extended by Swan, et al.'s (2001), were used in this study. According to that coding schema, three categories of indicators were identified. Also the duration of teachers' response message was recorded in order to determine immediate feedback.

Table: 1
Verbal Immediacy Indicators

Affective Indicators	Definitions
Paralanguage (PL)	Features of text outside formal syntax used to convey emotion (ie., emoticons, punctuation, capitalization)
Emotion (EM)	Use of descriptive words that indicate feelings (ie., love, hate, sad)
Value (VL)	Expressing personal values, beliefs and attitudes
Humor (HM)	Use of humor – teasing, cajoling, understatement, irony, sarcasm
Self-disclosure (SD)	Sharing personal information, expressing vulnerability
Cohesive Indicators	
Greeting & Salutation (GS)	Greetings and closures (ie., hi, hello)
Vocatives (VO)	Addressing people by name
Group Reference (GR)	Referring to the group as we, us, our
Social Sharing (SS)	Phatics, sharing information unrelated to the course
Course Reflection (CR)	Reflection on the course itself
Interactive Indicators	
Acknowledgement (AK)	Referring directly to the content of others' messages; quoting from others message
Agreement/Disagreement (AD)	Expressing agreement or disagreement with others' message
Approval (AP)	Expressing approval, offering praise, encouragement
Invitation (IN)	Asking questions or otherwise inviting response
Personal Advice (PA)	Offering specific advise

Affective indicators (Swan, et al., 2001) are personal expressions of emotions, feelings, beliefs, and values (Rourke, et al., 2001). Affective indicators might be considered as ways of projecting personal immediacy/social presence into online discourse, and as ways of compensating for the lack of gestures, facial expressions, and/or intonation in face-to-face communication. The affective indicators include the use of paralanguage, expressions of emotion, statements of values, humor, and self-disclosure (Swan, 2002).

Cohesive indicators (Swan, et al., 2001) are verbal immediacy behaviors that build and sustain a sense of group commitment or group presence/immediacy (Rourke, et. al., 2001). Cohesive indicators support the development of community. Cohesive indicators include greetings and salutations, the use of vocatives, group reference, social sharing, and course reference (Swan, 2002).

Interactive indicators (Swan, et al., 2001) provide evidence that the other party is attending (Rourke, et. al, 2001), and might be thought of as suggesting interpersonal presence/immediacy. Interactive indicators support interactions among communicators. Interactive indicators included acknowledgement, agreement, approval, invitation, and personal advice (Swan, 2002). All of these indicators and their definition are listed in Table: 1.

Intercoder reliability was used to determine the reliability. Intercoder reliability is the widely used term for the situations in which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion. To specify the reliability coefficient, two researchers coded transcriptions of online discussions for each of the total fifteen affective, cohesive, and interactive indicators. The reliability coefficient was found to be .90 by using the formula "Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) * 100" (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

Data analysis indicates that there are 1604 teacher verbal immediacy indicators (143 affective, 333 interactive, and 1128 cohesive) in 613 postings or an average of almost 3 indicators per posting in two courses. Figure 1 shows the raw number of responses and indicators in two courses.

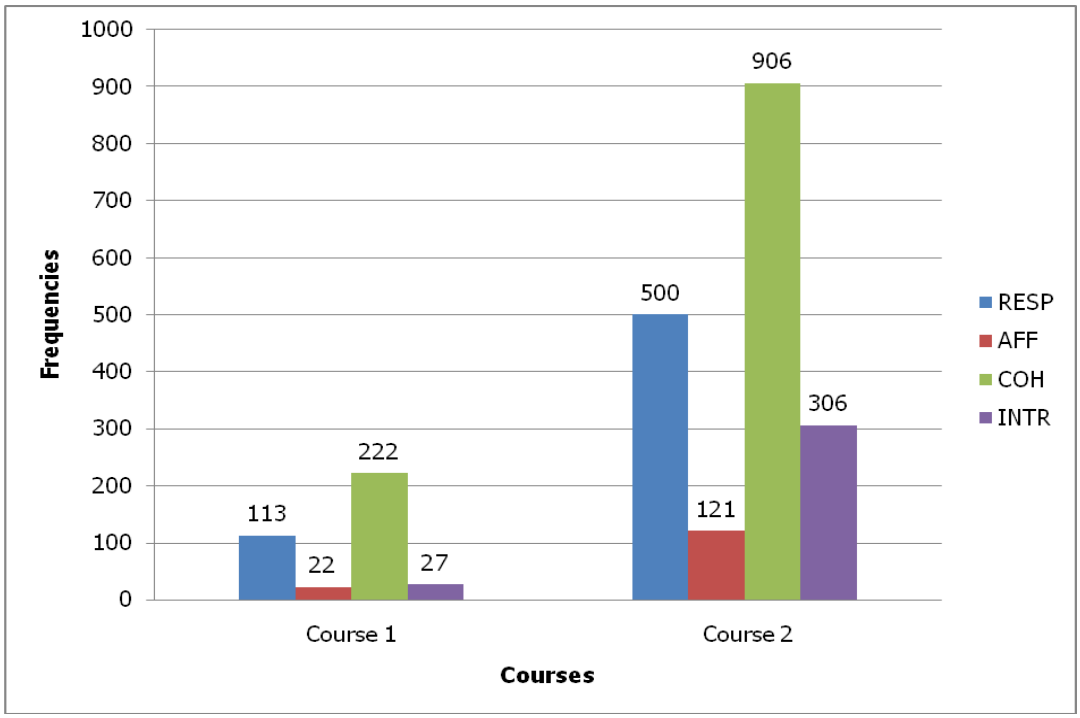

Figure: 1
Types of Indicators in Two Courses

Response messages in two courses show that cohesive indicators were used mostly, and respectively interactive and affective indicators follow it. For both courses, researcher found an average of almost 2 cohesive indicators per response. When we look at the other indicators, we can see that the average of affective (M=0,2) and interactive (M=0,5) indicators drop precipitously.Affective verbal immediacy behaviors might be considered as ways of projecting personal presence into online discourse to compensate for the lack of gestures, facial expressions, and/or intonation that are already available in face-to-face communication (Swan, 2002). Figure 2 shows the raw numbers of affective verbal immediacy indicators (paralanguage-PL, emotion-EM, value-VL, humor-HM, self-disclosure-SD) found across all the units coded. Although the most frequently used affective indicator was paralanguage in this category, paralanguage indicator was seen one in every five messages in two courses. These data show that affective indicators were rarely used by tutors. Cohesive verbal immediacy behaviors build and sustain a sense of group commitment to support the development of a discourse community (Swan, 2002). Figure 2 shows the raw number of cohesive immediacy indicators (greetings & salutations-GS, vocatives-VO, group reference-GR, social sharing-SS, and course reflection-CR) in two courses. As seen in Figure 2 the most frequently used cohesive indicator was greetings and salutations in two courses. The second most frequently used cohesive indicator was vocatives. In all messages which tutors sent an average of almost greeting and salutation or vocative

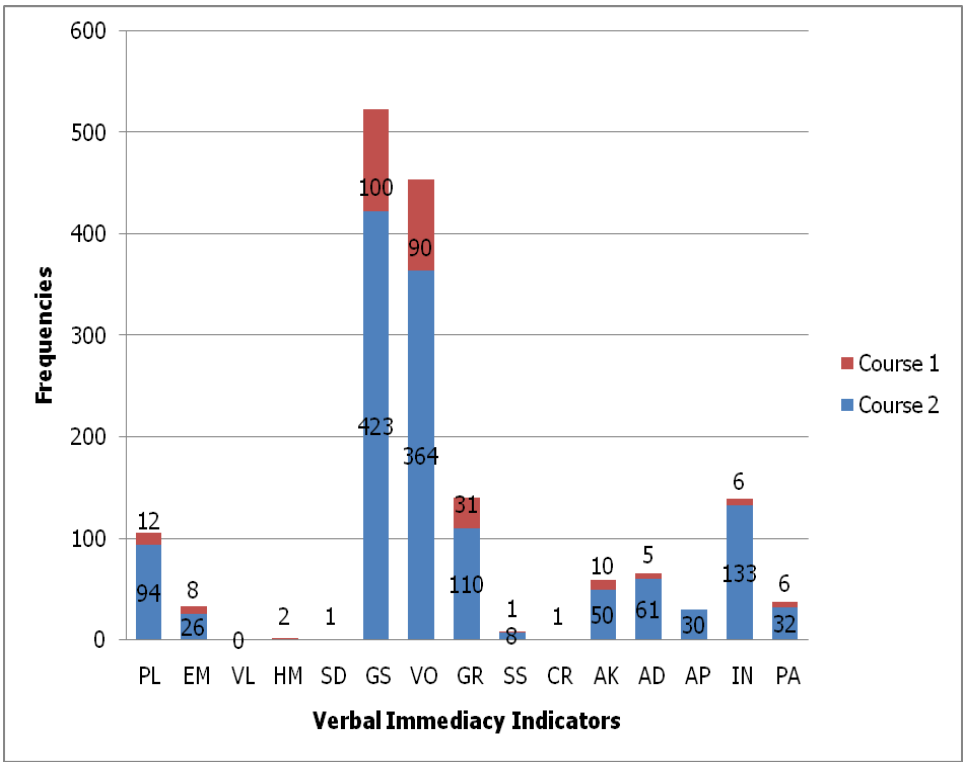

Figure: 2
Verbal Immediacy Indicators in Two Courses

verbal immediacy indicator was found. Both this category and also within all indicators the third most frequently used indicators was group reference, the use of words such as "we", "our" refer to the class as a group. At the other extreme in this category, social sharing and course reflection were the least used immediacy behaviors.

Interactive verbal immediacy behaviors support interactions among communicators by providing evidence that others are also attending the discourse (Swan, 2002). Figure 2 shows the raw number of interactive immediacy indicators (acknowledgement-AK, agreement and disagreement-AD, approval-AP, invitation-IN, personal advice-PA) in both courses. The data show that the most frequently used interactive indicator was invitation, which refers to asking questions or otherwise to inviting response and it is sequentially followed by agreement-disagreement, acknowledgement, personal advice and approval. Also, as it seen in Figure 2, interactive indicators were used in almost equal range in both courses by tutors, differently from the other indicators, especially in "Course 2". According to data, interactive indicators were seen one in every two messages in both courses.

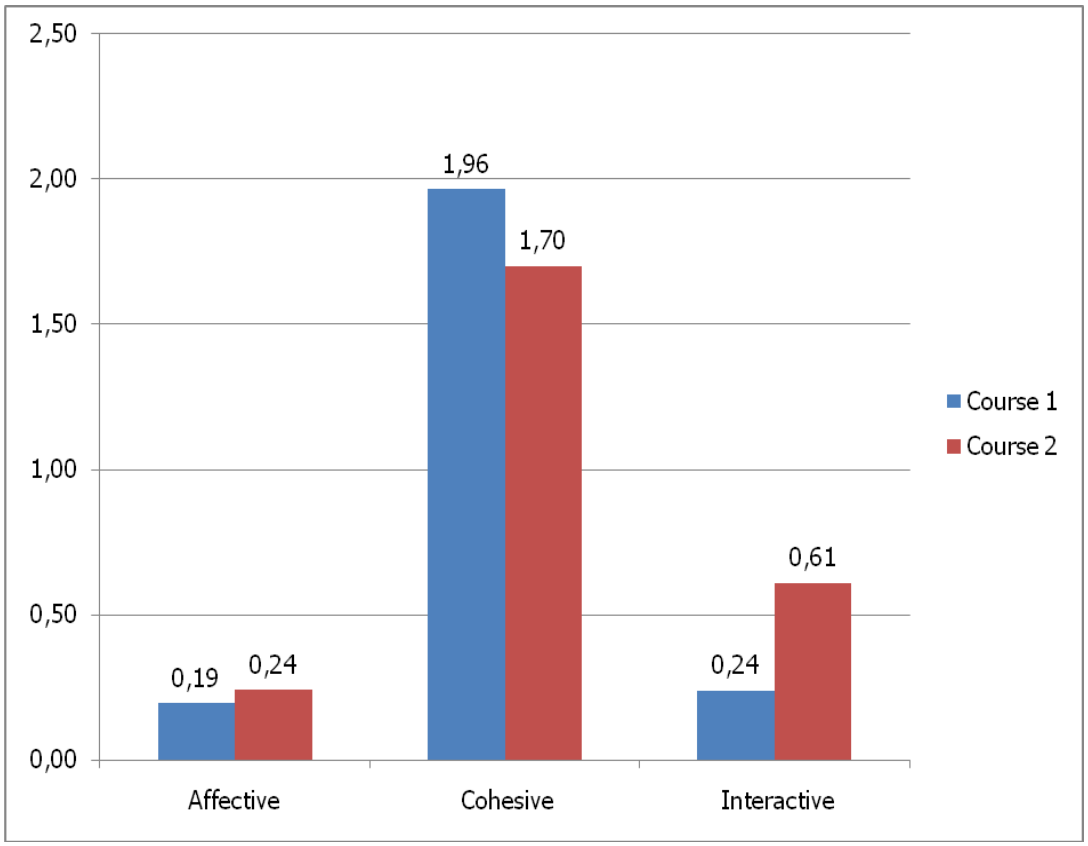

Figure: 3
The Means of Verbal Immediacy Indicators in Two Courses

Looking at the immediacy indicators' means in both most (course 2) and least (course 1) messages received courses (Figure 3) it can be said that the affective and cohesive indicators' means are close to each other (M= 0,24 - 0,19; M= 1,70 - 1,96). On the other hand, there is an observable difference in the interactive indicator means in the course where attendance is high (M= 0, 61 - 0, 24). At that point, considering the averages of interactive immediacy indicators by each tutors in two courses, researcher found an average of 5 interactive indicators per tutor in the course where the least communication observed. This mean increased to 90 in the course where the most communication observed. These results may be interpreted in the way that teachers' interactive immediacy indicators influence students' participation more than affective and cohesive immediacy indicators in asynchronous computer-mediated communication environment.

An analysis of teachers' immediate feedback to students questions in two courses (Figure 4) shows that as for the course 2, where the most communication observed, tutors respond forty one percent of the students' questions in one day which ranges between 4 minutes and 17 hours while these responses are observed as twelve percent in the course 1, where the least communication observed. At the other extreme, in course 1, thirty eight percent of students' questions were responded in the fourth day while this

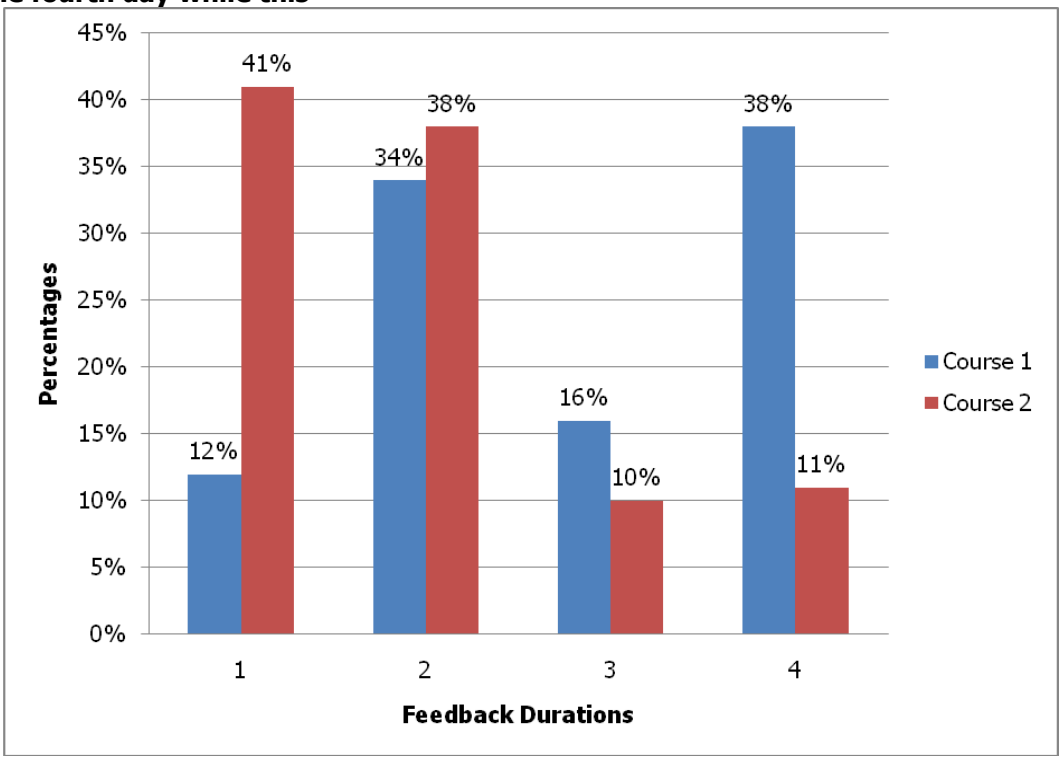

Figure: 4
The Percentages of Feedback Durations

percentage is observed as only eleven percent in course 2. The data indicates that immediate feedback is an important factor to determine student participation.

CONCLUSION

The values and beliefs in teaching and learning process are being reconceived with the development of new technologies. As online education gains wider acceptance in higher education, there is an increasing awareness of instructors' facilitative roles. As for online education, these new roles of instructors may be more complicated and formidable than traditional classroom because online communication relies mainly on written language without non-verbal cues. Therefore; establishing and sustaining a good climate in online environment suitable for the creation of learning community become important issues to consider. Both students' and teachers' positive communication behaviors are crucial in creating a good climate for learning. For this reason, teacher immediacy behaviors in online settings are needed to be investigated and instructors' awareness about immediacy behaviors should be raised.Literature suggests that, it can be seen that teachers' immediacy behaviors can lessen the psychological distance between themselves and their students, therefore, leading to greater learning and motivation. Based upon these results in the literature, this study aimed to determine the amount of teacher immediacy behaviors and its' relation to participation. When we look at the general results of this study, we can say that instructors moderately use verbal immediacy indicators (M= 2,6) in asynchronous discussions. In a similar study which investigated students' verbal immediacy indicators, Swan (2002) found a great many immediacy indicators in online discussions, an average of almost 6 indicators per posting. Findings indicated that teacher verbal immediacy behaviors were not at a desired level. The second and third aims of the study targeted in determining the relation among participation, verbal immediacy indicators and immediate feedback. According to analyses, interactive immediacy indicators determine students' participation level more than affective and cohesive immediacy indicators in asynchronous computer-mediated communication environment. Also analyses show that instructors' immediate feedback increases student participation in online discussions.

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