Journal of Silence Studies in Education
Vol. 4, No. 2, June 2025, pp. 107-127

ISSN 2808-1005

Analyzing non-verbal interaction within the IRF framework in remote Chinese EFL grammar classrooms

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received 22 April 2025
Revised 15 May 2025
Accepted 6 June 2025
Available online 14 June, 2025

Keywords
IRF
Non-verbal Interaction
EFL
Remote area
Grammar class

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the manifestations and underlying motivations of non-verbal interaction (including silence) within the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pedagogical model in high-school EFL grammar classrooms in remote regions of China. Drawing on classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted at a public senior high school in Lianzhou, Guangdong Province, involving 40 students, the research first quantifies the frequency of non-verbal cues—such as silence, eye contact, facial expressions, and body posture—across the three IRF phases (Initiation, Response, Feedback), revealing that such interaction peaks during the Feedback phase. Thematic analysis of the interview data subsequently demonstrates that these behaviours do not signify disengagement; instead, they reflect processes of deep cognitive engagement, emotional regulation, or expressions of anxiety and uncertainty, often driven by factors such as limited self-confidence and reduced opportunities for verbal participation. Pedagogically, this study enriches existing theories of classroom interaction by systematically integrating non-verbal behaviour—including silence—into the IRF framework, thereby offering new insights for educators in interpreting student silence. It further advocates for the incorporation of open-ended questioning, extended wait time, and structured peer-discussion opportunities to optimise grammar instruction. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of professional development programs focused on recognising and interpreting non-verbal cues, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and responsive EFL learning environment in under-resourced contexts.

How to Cite: Peng, Y. (2025). Analyzing non-verbal interaction within the IRF framework in remote Chinese EFL grammar classrooms. *Journal of Silence Studies in Education, 4*(2), 107-127. https://doi.org/10.31763/jsse.v4i2.118

1. Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) grammar classroom, student silence is often interpreted as a sign of disengagement or lack of understanding. However, as Remedios, Clark, and Hawthorne (2008) argue, silence may reflect cognitive engagement rather than disengagement. While verbal interaction has long dominated classroom discourse research, the role of non-verbal communication remains under-recognised, despite its importance in shaping relational dynamics in teaching (Gillespie, 1988). Silence, as a form of non-verbal communication that conveys multiple meanings (Bonvillain, 1993), is often accompanied by mental activity and should be recognized as a meaningful aspect of students' language learning processes (Bao, 2023).

Classroom interaction in such contexts is typically structured by the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model, which continues to dominate teacher-led grammar instruction. Although some studies have examined which phase of the IRF sequence predominates in classroom talk, limited

attention has been paid to the role of non-verbal interaction within this framework—particularly in grammar-focused lessons, where the co-occurrence of non-verbal cues and silence may signal cognitive processing, emotional tension, or alternative forms of participation. This challenge is especially salient in remote and under-resourced regions, where educational development is often overlooked and students tend to remain silent in class.

Understanding the motivations behind such silence is therefore critical to supporting students' academic engagement and progress. Rather than examining silence as an isolated phenomenon, this study focuses on the non-verbal interactions that co-occur with silence—such as gestures, gaze, and posture—to explore their underlying causes and potential pedagogical implications.

Drawing on classroom observations conducted at a public high school in Lianzhou City, a remote area in southern China, the study investigates interactional patterns in EFL grammar teaching.

It addresses the following research questions:

1. During which phase of the IRF sequence does silence most frequently co-occur with non-verbal interaction in grammar lessons?
2. How are these co-occurrences manifested, and what motivations underlie their use in the classroom context?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Current Situation of EFL Classrooms in Remote Areas

The current state of English education in remote areas reveals considerable challenges for students. Influenced by China's diverse socio-cultural contexts, the imbalance in socio-economic development across regions has widened disparities in educational opportunities. The gap between developed provincial capitals and underdeveloped western inland areas not only persists but is further exacerbated by these contextual differences, which in turn constrain the cultivation of local talent and social mobility (Song et al., 2020; Fu & Liu, 2024). Consequently, students' access to digital resources and learning facilities varies significantly, with those in rural schools often facing distinct disadvantages. As Yu (2019) and Hu (2003) note, some rural middle schools are even deprived of basic equipment essential for demonstrating standard oral English, such as multimedia devices and English-language broadcasting systems.

Furthermore, the quality of English language education in rural schools is often undermined by the limited professional competence of teachers. Li et al. (2020) highlight that some teachers are employed without holding official teaching qualification certificates, and many suffer from inadequate pedagogical training and limited practical teaching experience. Fundamentally, teachers are not merely practitioners but lifelong learners, whose professional growth evolves through continuous reflection and engagement with their teaching practice (Freeman, 2002; Guerriero, 2017; Shulman, 1998). Therefore, providing a structured and accessible training program is essential to ensure sustained professional growth, particularly for teachers in remote areas.

However, the uneven distribution of teacher resources has created a significant lack of external support for schools, especially in rural regions. Owing to geographical distance and time constraints, the delivery of such training programmes remains challenging. Gao et al. (2022) emphasize that the implementation of professional development should be supported by established technological tools, which can provide rural teachers with timely expertise and professional guidance, thereby overcoming the limitations imposed by distance and time.

In the context of teaching and learning methods in rural China, it is evident from previous research that students' perceptions of learning and their approaches are profoundly shaped by their social and cultural environments (Tsai, 2004). This tendency is particularly prevalent in settings where teachers, under pressure to raise test scores, often encourage mechanical memorization of words, sentences, and passages, neglecting pronunciation and communicative competence in the process (Yu, 2019). Additionally, Aharony (2006) notes that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have fewer opportunities to develop and apply diverse learning strategies.

In response, the government has strongly advocated for student-centred teaching methods in the revised (2020) national curriculum—a further development of the 2017 framework—for all high

school students, as these methods have demonstrated clear educational benefits across both urban and rural settings in China. For example, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach—which integrates subject content and foreign language learning in a dual-focused educational context (Marsh, 1994)—has been shown to significantly increase students' motivation to study academic subjects, especially when combined with the use of technology and online resources. This approach provides an immersive language experience, enabling learners to deepen their understanding of the nuances and complexities of a foreign language (Kuzmenko & Kashyrina, 2020). Likewise, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has yielded positive outcomes. As Ma and Cheung (2018) report, students perceived noticeable improvements in their English skills, particularly in oral communication, listening, and comprehension.

Nevertheless, despite the recognized advantages of student-centred teaching methods, their implementation in rural China faces significant obstacles. Wang (2011) observes that rural teachers are often reluctant to adopt such methods due to their time-consuming and unpredictable nature, which contrasts sharply with traditional lecture-based instruction. Consequently, they persist with whole-class lectures and rote memorization, not out of disagreement with educational reform principles, but as a pragmatic form of self-protection. It is far easier for teachers to be held accountable for failing to cover textbook content than for students' poor academic outcomes. This situation highlights the need for effective pedagogical frameworks to support English education in remote areas.

As a consequence of the aforementioned factors, urban students consistently outperform their rural counterparts across most dimensions related to conceptions of and approaches to learning English. Fu and Liu (2024) reveal considerable gaps between urban and rural students in both academic performance and cognitive approaches to language learning. While both groups exhibit relatively high-level conceptions of learning English, rural students demonstrate significantly lower scores in areas such as test performance, intrinsic motivation, learning approaches, and confidence. Yu (2019) further notes that rural middle school students underperform in oral English, as they seldom have opportunities to practise outside the classroom due to limited time, resources, and the absence of an immersive language environment.

In sum, many rural schools struggle with incomplete curricula, outdated pedagogical approaches, a severe lack of administrative and external support, and teaching content that is often detached from the lived realities of rural students, favouring urban-centric knowledge (Han, 2020).

2.2. IRF teaching model (Initiation-Response-Feedback)

Introduced by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) framework, often referred to as "triadic dialogue," has become a widely recognized tool for examining patterns of interaction within classroom discourse. The IRF sequence is commonly understood as a teacher-centered interaction model, where the teacher assumes a dominant role in directing the discourse and regulating student participation (Mehan, 1979; Lemke, 1985; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). This structure is often viewed as a mechanism through which teachers exert control over classroom communication and consolidate their institutional authority (Cazden, 2001).

Historically, the structure of the IRF cycle has been regarded as a restricted and uninterrupted sequence, where the teacher's evaluative feedback serves to close the interaction. This approach often leaves students with limited opportunities to further engage in the learning process (Hall, 2010). As research progressed, scholars began to explore the influence of the IRF cycle on language learning opportunities. Given the complexities of classroom discourse, some researchers examined the IRF cycle in terms of its sequences and chains (Li, 2019). It was found that the structure of the IRF cycle is more flexible than initially assumed, encompassing not only the fundamental initiation, response, and feedback moves but also how these moves are organized into larger sequences (Walsh, 2011).

In this dynamic view, the IRF cycle enables participants to collaboratively construct knowledge collaboratively, thereby creating valuable learning opportunities (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Waring, 2009; Wells, 1993). Molinari et al. (2012) investigated the broader sequences in which the IRF cycle occurs, identifying four types of IRF cycle sequences: monologic, scaffolding, dialogic, and co-constructive sequences. They found that scaffolding, dialogic, and co-constructive sequences encourage a more open environment, fostering greater student engagement. From this perspective, the IRF cycle is not a static pattern but functions dynamically within sequences, with both teacher and student orientations influencing it. In other words, the IRF cycle encompasses not only individual

moves but also a series of related utterances that are responsive to previous exchanges, thus influencing subsequent turn allocations and contributions (Sert, 2015; Waring, 2009).

Many scholars continue to recognize the IRF cycle as a positive influence on students' language learning, classroom interaction, and communication, contributing to the creation of a positive language environment (Jassim & Khalaf, 2022). For example, Hidayatullah (2024) and Dawood & Sultan (2024) also emphasise the importance of the IRF model in fostering classroom discourse and promoting language acquisition. Lefstein et al. (2015) further argued that classroom discourse should be analyzed in terms of sequences rather than isolated moves. They critiqued the practice of analyzing individual discourse moves independently, stressing that "discourse moves are positioned within sequences that critically shape their meaning and effect". Their study demonstrated the importance of considering the larger sequential context of IRF cycles. Initially, by examining the frequencies and rates of individual moves, they later applied a sequential analysis to re-analyze the data, focusing on the chains. The results revealed that the focus on individual moves did not fully explain how moves were structured or how each move functioned.

These variations highlighted that the same IRF cycle could lead to different orientations depending on specific teaching purposes. Within each sequence, the teacher plays a crucial role in either directing the discourse toward an open-ended discussion or closing it to restart a new one.

However, when considering the IRF model from a "sequence perspective," it is essential to focus on specific functions and variations, taking into account the specific educational contexts in different regions. For example, Park (2014) explored the sequences of the IRF cycle, focusing on the teacher's questioning practices in elementary English classes in Korea. The teacher's questions should be interpreted within the IRF sequences where meanings are negotiated and jointly constructed to reach mutual understanding. However, Park's study primarily focused on the teacher's use of questions and did not give significant attention to other functions of teacher talk, such as comments, prompts, or exposition.

Additionally, Rustandi (2017) aimed to analyze the reflection of the IRF model in speaking lessons and explore which of the three components (initiation, response, feedback) is dominant. The results showed that student responses were the most dominant in speaking class interactions, accounting for 45% of the total interaction. Teacher initiation ranked second at 35.1%, while teacher feedback accounted for the smallest proportion at 19.9%.

In grammar classrooms, teacher feedback plays a pivotal role, especially when the IRF model is applied. The feedback phase requires particular attention, as it directly impacts students' understanding and learning process (Uswatun et al., 2024). Teacher feedback, which includes both reinforcement and corrections, is essential in guiding students' language development. However, some scholars have suggested that feedback itself may sometimes hinder students' learning. For example, researchers argue that the third turn in IRF interactions can be mechanical and constraining when it is used solely for assessment purposes (e.g., Walsh, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Lei, 2009; Herazo, 2010). In this context, the teacher's feedback is essential for reinforcing learning and addressing any misunderstandings (Uswatun et al., 2024).

2.3. Silence within Non-verbal interaction

Language lessons can be understood not merely as academic instruction but as social events embedded in interpersonal relationships and continuous interaction (Erickson, 1986; Allwright, 1989). This perspective highlights that language learning is fundamentally a social process. Within this framework, interaction serves as a vital mechanism for language acquisition. As Rivers (1987) argues, interaction lies at the heart of communicative language teaching, enabling learners to expand their linguistic repertoire through engagement with authentic materials and the contributions of their peers. In doing so, they draw upon both formally acquired and incidentally absorbed language knowledge to participate in meaningful exchanges. According to Rustandi (2013), classroom interaction is not a one-way transmission from teacher to student but rather a reciprocal and dynamic process involving teacher-student, student-teacher, and peer-to-peer engagement, as illustrated in Figure 1.

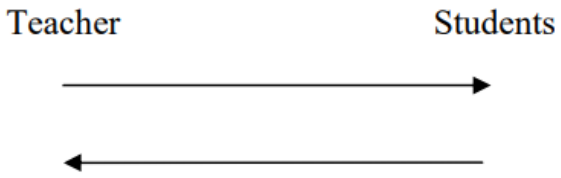

Fig. 1. The Way of Classroom Interaction (Rustandi, 2013)

Crucially, interaction in the classroom is not limited to verbal modes. While verbal communication involves spoken or written language, Rustandi (2017) stresses that nonverbal communication—often overlooked—plays an equally significant role in the teaching and learning process. Gillespie (1988) extends the definition of interaction to include nonverbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, touch, physical proximity, and environmental or temporal elements. Moreover, silence itself is a form of nonverbal interaction; as Bock et al. (1985) summarize, "as a form of nonverbal communication, silence—like other nonverbal cues—is inherently more deeply embedded in its context than spoken language." These nonverbal signals are particularly effective in conveying emotional and attitudinal information that may not be easily articulated through words (Argyle, 1988). In instances where verbal and nonverbal messages are inconsistent, students tend to trust the nonverbal cues more readily (Ross & Ross, 1989), underscoring the psychological significance that body language holds.

The importance of nonverbal communication is further underscored when considering the emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning. Freire (1970) asserts that knowledge is not transmitted but instead constructed through active inquiry and reinvention—a process that engages learners intellectually and emotionally. In this context, nonverbal interaction often serves as a conduit for emotional undercurrents in the classroom. Robinson (2005), for example, demonstrates how specific gestures and facial expressions can reflect a broad spectrum of emotional or psychological states, offering teachers insight into learners' engagement, confusion, or resistance (Figure 2).

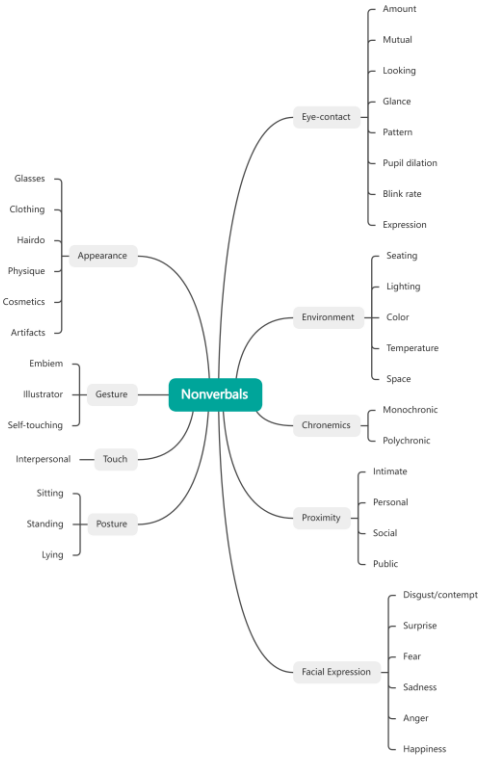

Fig. 2. Types of Nonverbal communication in the classroom (Robinson, 2005)

Moreover, positive silence, as a form of nonverbal communication, is often accompanied by at least one visual element—such as a gesture, facial expression, or posture—from other nonverbal modalities (Sifianou, 1997; Agyekum, 2002). As illustrated in Figure 3, such multimodal combinations serve multiple functions in the EFL classroom and significantly shape the overall classroom climate, thereby influencing both the nature and quality of interaction.

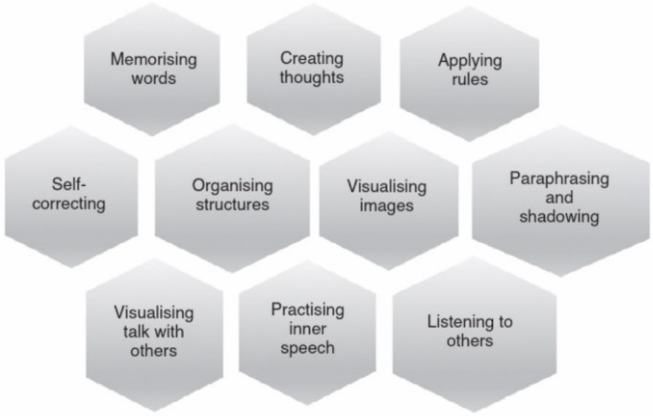

Fig. 3. The multiple functions of productive silence (Bao, 2023)

However, research underscores the importance of non-verbal communication: only around 35% of classroom communication is verbal (Ross & Ross, 1989), while an estimated 35% to 90% is non-verbal (Bonnett & Doddington, 1990). Despite its prevalence, non-verbal interaction remains under-theorized and underutilized in pedagogical practice (Woolfolk & Galloway, 1985).

One possible explanation for this neglect lies in traditional classroom norms, where teachers may misread or disregard students' nonverbal signals. Rather than interpreting these as indicators of emotion or engagement, educators may resort to increased disciplinary control in an attempt to maintain order. Students are often expected to remain silent and physically still, reinforcing the misguided assumption that only verbal participation is valid in educational settings (Woolfolk & Galloway, 1985). This tendency may result from the inherent difficulty of becoming consciously aware of one's nonverbal behaviour while teaching, compounded by the influence of physical settings and cultural differences. As Argyle (1988) notes, gestures vary widely across cultures, with some serving as fixed emblems, others as illustrative movements, or self-directed actions. Such complexities may prompt teachers to dismiss nonverbal communication as negligible, when in reality, it holds transformative potential for fostering student engagement and promoting more responsive teaching.

In sourcing relevant literature, it becomes evident that while the importance of nonverbal interaction in education is well acknowledged, empirical research in this area remains limited—particularly within the context of grammar instruction in secondary schools located in remote regions. Existing studies have primarily focused on urban or general classroom settings, leaving a notable gap in understanding how nonverbal communication operates in under-resourced rural environments, where both teachers and students may face distinct linguistic, cultural, and infrastructural challenges. This study aims to address the gaps in the existing literature, with a particular focus on the role and pedagogical implications of nonverbal interaction in English grammar classrooms in remote high schools.

By examining how teachers and students in these contexts utilize, interpret, and respond to nonverbal cues, the study aims to uncover patterns of interaction that may otherwise be overlooked in conventional classroom discourse analysis. It also seeks to highlight the potential of nonverbal communication as a tool for scaffolding learning, managing affective factors, and enhancing student engagement. In doing so, the research contributes not only to the growing field of classroom interaction studies but also to the improvement of English language education in marginalized or underserved areas. Ultimately, the findings are expected to provide practical insights for teacher training, curriculum development, and policy formulation, ensuring more equitable and responsive pedagogical practices that support the long-term language development of students in remote regions.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the research design, research participants, data collection methods, and data analysis employed in this study.

3.1. Research Design and Participants

The participants in this study included one experienced English teacher (with over 15 years of teaching experience) and 40 Year 12 students (aged 17–18) from a grammar-focused EFL classroom in Lianzhou City, a remote area in southern China. The students' English proficiency levels ranged from B1 to B2 according to the CEFR scale. This site was purposefully selected to explore classroom interaction in under-researched rural contexts, particularly those that adopt the IRF sequence in grammar instruction.

This study employs a qualitative, mixed-methods approach, combining classroom observations with post-lesson interviews. This design allows for data triangulation by cross-verifying patterns observed during the instructional process with the perspectives of both the teacher and students, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. The data obtained from classroom observations were subsequently analyzed through processes of transcription, coding, and thematic interpretation.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

1) Classroom Observation

Classroom observations were conducted to explore how non-verbal interaction is distributed across different stages of the IRF sequence in EFL grammar instruction, and to identify moments of student silence that may reflect non-verbal participation. To ensure the validity and contextual richness of the data, two 45-minute lessons were observed at different times of the day (one in the morning and one in the afternoon). A video camera was positioned to capture the entire classroom setting, enabling a comprehensive view of both verbal and non-verbal behaviours.

2) Post-lesson interviews

The qualitative phase also included semi-structured post-lesson interviews with the teacher and selected students who exhibited silence, accompanied by noticeable body language, during the observed grammar lessons. To enhance recall accuracy and link responses to specific observed behaviours, short video clips from the classroom observations were used during the interviews. These clips featured instances of noticeable silence or nonverbal behaviours, and participants were invited to reflect on their thoughts and feelings during those moments. These interviews were conducted after the classroom sessions to facilitate reflective responses based on a comprehensive learning experience.

Student interviews focused on:

1) What were you thinking or feeling when you remained silent with body language at that moment?
2) What do you wish your teacher had done at that moment?

The teacher interview explored:

1) Have you noticed students' silence or non-verbal cues during your lessons?
2) What is your interpretation of these behaviours at the moment they occur? Have these observations prompted you to consider any adjustments or improvements to your teaching practices?

These interviews were designed to provide context-rich insights that complement the observational data, offering a more nuanced understanding of how non-verbal interaction and silence function within the IRF sequence in a rural EFL grammar classroom.

2.3Data Analysis

The recorded lessons were transcribed for detailed analysis. Relevant excerpts—especially those involving student silence with noticeable body language—were selected based on their alignment with the research questions. The transcription process followed Creswell's (2008) approach, converting audiovisual data into written format. Coding was then employed to categorize segments according to the IRF model (Initiation, Response, Feedback) and to identify instances of verbal and non-verbal interaction, as suggested by Nunan and Bailey (2009). Finally, the researcher analyzed the data

thematically, focusing on how non-verbal behaviours and silence emerged during different IRF phases.

3. Findings

3.1. Observation

Considering the covert nature and difficulty in perceiving nonverbal behaviour, this research primarily collected conspicuous moments of silence and clear nonverbal interactions. During the observation process, the total number of non-verbal interactions was 286, comprising 66 initiations, 27 student responses, and 193 teacher feedback. These non-verbal interactions occurred during the teaching and learning process in various forms, such as eye contact, facial expressions, body movements, and silences. See Table 1:

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of IRF Phases in EFL Grammar Lessons

Types	First Time		Second Time		Total	%
	Frequency	*%*	*Frequency*	*%*		
Teacher Initiation	35	24.00%	31	22.10%	66	23.10%
Students Response	13	8.90%	14	10.00%	**27**	**9.40%**
Teacher Feedback	98	67.10%	79	67.90%	**177**	**61.90%**
TOTAL	146	100%	124	100%	286	100%

However, the entirety of the non-verbal interactions cannot be fully described due to their repetitive patterns. The following three exchanges demonstrate authentic IRF exchanges sampled from the 286 interactions observed:

Excerpt 1

T: "OK, guys! At the beginning of this class, I would like to review the content we covered in the last lesson. Do you still remember?" [Initiation]

S: "Yes, the past perfect tense." [Response]

T: "Correct." [Feedback]

Excerpt 2

T: "So now we know the difference between the past perfect tense and the present perfect tense. Can anybody summarize their usage in exercises?" [Initiation]

S: "Pay attention to the beginning and ending times of the actions in the exercises." [Response]

T: "Yes, but that is not enough. We will summarize more when we do the exercises together." [Feedback]

Excerpt 3

T: "Guys, this is what we learned in this lesson. Do you have any questions?" [Initiation]

S: "No..." [Response]

T: "Fine, see you next class." [Feedback]

1) Initiation Phase (See Table 2)

Following the IRF model, the teacher typically initiates verbal interactions by posing questions to students. During this phase, most students remain silent, which is often accompanied by noticeable non-verbal behaviours. As shown in Table 2, the most frequent types of non-verbal interactions include silence alone (33.3%), silence accompanied by a gesture (18.2%), silence accompanied by facial expressions (18.2%), silence accompanied by body movement (16.7%), and silence accompanied by eye contact (13.6%).

Table 2. Frequency of Non-verbal Interaction during the Initiation Phase

Types	First Time		Second Time		Total	%
	Frequency	*%*	*Frequency*	*%*		
Solely Silence	12	33.30%	10	27.00%	**22**	**33.30%**
Gesture	7	19.40%	5	13.50%	12	18.20%
Eye Contact	5	13.90%	4	10.80%	9	13.60%
Body Movement	6	16.70%	5	13.50%	11	16.70%
Facial Expression	6	16.70%	6	16.20%	12	18.20%
TOTAL	36	100%	30	100%	66	100%

2) Common patterns of student behaviour

One of the most common phenomena observed was solely silence, especially in the first few seconds after the teacher's question. Many students lowered their heads, avoided eye contact, or appeared to be thinking, suggesting either hesitation or cognitive processing. Some also exhibited small gestures, such as fiddling with pens or resting their chins on their hands.

Example 1:

T: "Can anyone explain the difference between past simple and present perfect?"

S1: (Looks down; avoids eye contact; stays silent for 4–5 seconds; fidgets with pen)

Occasionally, a few students responded promptly with visible readiness:

S2: (Raises hand quickly; leans forward slightly; maintains direct eye contact with teacher)

T: Yes, please, go ahead.

Example 2:

T: "Who can give me an example sentence using the past perfect?"

S: (Immediately raises hand; sits up straight; makes eye contact with the teacher)

→ This matches the 13.6% of eye contact and 18.2% of gestures observed.

Less common but interesting behaviours

Though less frequent, some students displayed more unusual or subtle non-verbal cues during initiation. These subtle reactions offer insight into varying emotional and cognitive states.

Example 3:

T: "So, what happens when the verb comes before the subject?"

S: (Tilts head slightly; squints eyes; taps notebook rhythmically; remains silent)

Example 4:

T: [Walking across the room] Do you think this sentence is grammatically correct?

S: (Shifts body away slightly; leans back in chair; scratches head; does not respond)

Example 5:

T: [writes a sentence on the board] "Anyone notice a mistake here?"

S: (Presses lips together; raises eyebrows; glances briefly at peers; then looks down)

In summary, the initiation phase encompasses rich non-verbal dynamics, ranging from predictable pauses and hesitations to more individualized, expressive actions. While many students demonstrated overt engagement—such as raising their hands, leaning forward, or maintaining eye contact—others remained silent or avoided interaction. These less typical behaviours may suggest differing levels of comfort, confidence, or cognitive processing, but further insights will be explored through follow-up interviews. What is evident, however, is that

non-verbal interaction is not homogeneous, and it varies according to individual learners and the instructional context.

3) Response Phase (See Table 3)

The response phase is primarily characterised by verbal student contributions, leading to a noticeable decrease in non-verbal interactions compared to the initiation and feedback phases. However, non-verbal cues still play a subtle yet important role, especially in reflecting students' levels of confidence, eagerness, or hesitation.

As shown in Table 3, the most frequent types of non-verbal behaviours in this phase include solely silence (29.6%), body movement (22.2%), and gesture (18.5%). Students' responses ranged from enthusiastic participation to quiet uncertainty.

Common patterns of active engagement

Many students demonstrated eager participation, often raising their hands before being called upon, leaning forward, and maintaining steady eye contact with the teacher. Some even nodded or smiled in response to their peers' answers, showing attentiveness and interest.

Example 1:

T: "What is the function of the present perfect continuous in this sentence?"

S1: (Raises hand high; leans forward slightly; maintains eye contact with the teacher; smiles)

→ Indicates active engagement through body movement and sustained gaze.

S2: (Raises hand halfway; glances around the room; shifts posture repeatedly)

→ Suggests hesitation or internal debate about whether to participate.

Example 2:

T: "Can anyone give another example with the past perfect?"

S: (Lifts hand halfway; glances sideways at classmates; slowly lowers hand again)

Example 3:

T: "Why do we use 'had already left' instead of 'left'?"

S: (Shifts forward in seat and opens mouth slightly but says nothing; eyes flicking from teacher to book)

Students also responded non-verbally to their classmates' answers, through facial expressions of agreement, curiosity, or excitement.

Example 4:

Student 1(speaking): "The past perfect shows an action before another action in the past."

Student 2: (Nods in agreement; smiles; briefly makes eye contact with the teacher)

→ Indicates cognitive alignment and social affirmation through subtle non-verbal cues.

Less common disengaged behaviours

While most students showed signs of attention, a smaller group exhibited more passive or disengaged behaviours. These included solely silence, avoiding eye contact, or distracted actions such as flipping through books or staring into space.

Example 5:

T: "Can you finish this sentence using present perfect continuous?"

S: (Looks down at desk; does not respond for several seconds)

Example 6:

T: "Any other examples?"

S: (Flips through textbook slowly; not looking up; gaze unfocused)

In conclusion, the response phase features a broad spectrum of student behaviours. While most students showed interest and active or tentative participation, a minority displayed passive or withdrawn reactions, emphasizing the importance of reading non-verbal cues alongside verbal responses to understand classroom dynamics.

Table 3. Frequency of Non-verbal Interaction during the Response Phase

Types	First Time		Second Time		Total	%
	Frequency	*%*	*Frequency*	*%*		
Solely Silence	4	22.20%	4	22.20%	**8**	**29.60%**
Gesture	3	16.70%	2	11.10%	5	18.50%
Eye Contact	2	11.10%	2	11.10%	4	14.80%
Body Movement	3	16.70%	3	16.70%	6	22.20%
Facial Expression	2	11.10%	2	11.10%	4	14.80%
TOTAL	14	100%	13	100%	27	100%

4) Feedback Phase (See Table 4)

The feedback phase yielded the richest range and highest overall frequency of non-verbal interactions, accounting for 177 instances, or over 60% of all observed non-verbal behaviours across the three phases. As shown in Table 4, the most common types include gestures (19.2%), body movements (18.6%), and facial expressions (18.1%), followed closely by eye contact (16.4%). However, a closer analysis of the video data reveals a more complex picture. Although these figures suggest heightened engagement, many of the non-verbal cues during the feedback phase reflect a passive or ambiguous state. While some students appeared attentive, others displayed signs of withdrawal, distraction, or hesitation, even as they continued to move or gesture.

Table 4. Frequency of Non-verbal Interaction during the Feedback Phase

Types	First Time		Second Time		Total	%
	Frequency	*%*	*Frequency*	*%*		
Solely Silence	12	13.80%	14	15.60%	26	14.70%
Gesture	18	20.70%	16	17.80%	**34**	**19.20%**
Eye Contact	14	16.10%	15	16.70%	29	16.40%
Body Movement	16	18.40%	17	18.90%	**33**	**18.60%**
Facial Expression	15	17.20%	17	18.90%	**32**	**18.10%**
TOTAL	75	100%	79	100%	177	100%

Commonly disengaged or ambiguous behaviours

During teacher feedback, it was not uncommon to observe students remaining silent (14.7%), with glazed or vacant gazes, often staring at the floor, out the window, or at passersby in the corridor. These behaviours suggest cognitive disengagement, despite their inclusion in the broader category of non-verbal interaction.

Example 1:

T: "Now, let us see why this tense was appropriate here."

S: (Stares blankly at the wall; arms crossed; eyes unfocused)

→ Reflects solely silence and detachment, despite the teacher's active presence.

Some students initially showed signs of wanting to respond, such as raising their hand or leaning forward, but withdrew mid-action when the teacher continued speaking or moved on to another topic.

Example 2:

T: "Does anyone else have a different explanation?"

S: (Begin to raise hand but drop it as the teacher turns away and continues explaining)

→ A precise instance of suppressed engagement, where gesture signals intention but is not realised.

Others exhibited subtle yet emotionally charged facial expressions, such as biting their lips, furrowing their brows, or pressing their lips together, suggesting confusion, uncertainty, or unspoken disagreement.

Example 3:

T: "Remember, it's always 'had' plus past participle."

S: (Frowns slightly; tilts head; lowers eyes without asking a question)

→ Facial expression here signals quiet doubt.

More neutral or ambiguous gestures were also familiar—students would rub their palms, tap their fingers, or adjust their posture repeatedly. Although these may reflect mild anticipation or nervousness, they may also indicate restlessness or a lack of focus.

Example 4:

T: "So, who can help me complete this table?"

S: (Pulls at sleeves; crosses and uncrosses legs; glances sideways at peer)

→ Body movement and gesture are present, but their purpose is unclear.

Meanwhile, more active disengagement included students packing bags, sipping water, or glancing repeatedly at the clock or out the window.

Example 5:

T: "Let's now try the exercise on page 14."

S: (Zips up pencil case; takes out water bottle; looks out of window)

→ Reflects minimal academic engagement while physically active.

Despite the above, there were still notable instances of active engagement through non-verbal channels. When praised or encouraged, some students smiled, clapped quietly, or nodded in recognition. These responses typically followed moments of explicit teacher approval.

Example 6:

T: "That's correct, well done!"

S1: (Smiles broadly; claps softly twice)

S2: (Nods; eye contact)

→ Facial expression, gesture, and eye contact combine to express positive reception.

Example 7:

T: "Let's move on to the next exercise."

Ss: (Eye contact with the teacher; nod silently; sit up straighter)

→ Suggests readiness and respect for the teacher's lead.

In sum, although the feedback phase is quantitatively the most expressive in terms of non-verbal behaviours, it also contains the most complex mixture of engagement and disengagement. The co-existence of passive and active signals within the same phase highlights the importance of contextual interpretation: not all gestures or expressions indicate understanding or attentiveness. Instead, they should be interpreted in relation to both verbal discourse and broader classroom dynamics.

3.2. Interview

In this section, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected students who exhibited distinct non-verbal behaviours during classroom observations. The aim was to uncover the underlying motivations behind these behaviours, thereby offering insights into how to support their learning more effectively. Interviews were also held with their teacher to gain a broader understanding of the interactional context.

1) Student Interviews

The student interviews were structured according to the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) framework. For each phase, students who demonstrated noticeable or unusual behaviours were invited to share their perspectives.

Initiation Phase

As observed, many students displayed active engagement during this phase, including behaviours such as raising their hands immediately, leaning forward, and maintaining attentive eye contact. However, silent and more passive behaviours were also common. Through interviews, it became evident that silence had different meanings for different students. Some reported being in a state of cognitive processing:

I: Why did you remain silent at that moment?

S: I was thinking about the question... trying to remember what we learned before.

In contrast, others admitted their silence stemmed from disengagement or confusion:

S: I didn't know what the teacher was asking. I missed the last class.

S: I wasn't really listening... The teacher kept talking, and I couldn't keep up.

More overtly disengaged behaviours—such as tapping pens, scratching heads, leaning back in chairs, or shifting restlessly—were also explored. Several students associated these actions with uncertainty or memory lapse:

I: What was going through your mind when you were moving around?

S: I was confused. I couldn't remember the grammar point... If the teacher could do a quick recap before asking, that would really help. There's just too much to remember—our last English lesson was days ago.

A few students were observed to lower their heads quickly, avoid eye contact, or glance at peers. When asked about these behaviours, they revealed a sense of hesitation and reliance on peer cues:

S: I wasn't sure of the answer... I wanted to see if anyone else knew first.

These interviews suggest that non-verbal behaviour in the Initiation Phase, although externally similar, may stem from diverse internal states, including active processing, confusion, or anxiety. Further themes will be discussed in the next sections.

Response Phase

During the Response Phase, the majority of students were actively engaged, with many attempting verbal responses. Interestingly, several students who had previously exhibited more passive or avoidant behaviours during the Initiation Phase—such as avoiding eye contact or lowering their heads—were observed to become more responsive. These students opened their mouths as if preparing to speak, and directed their gaze towards the teacher or peers, although they did not ultimately verbalize a complete answer.

Interviews with these students revealed a nuanced rationale for such behaviours:

S: I didn't know the answer, but I still wanted to look like I was participating… so the teacher wouldn't call on me.

This type of strategic non-verbal engagement—marked by partial participation—was often driven by a desire to remain inconspicuous. For some students, eye contact and facial expressions became tools of silent interaction:

S: Sometimes I just look at the person answering… if it makes sense, I'll nod. We kind of understand each other through eye contact.

These subtle non-verbal cues suggest internal engagement without vocalization. In particular, facial expressions and sustained eye contact appeared to convey attentive listening and shared understanding among peers.

Conversely, students who displayed signs of disengagement during this phase—such as silent staring, fidgeting, or shifting posture—were also interviewed. Their explanations largely echoed the underlying reasons identified in the Initiation Phase: a lack of confidence, hesitation, and self-doubt.

S: I didn't want to say the wrong thing… I was listening but didn't feel ready to speak.

These less frequent but revealing responses highlight the importance of recognizing non-verbal participation. Even in the absence of spoken answers, students' non-verbal cues may indicate emotional or cognitive states—such as confusion, embarrassment, or uncertainty—that verbal exchanges alone may not capture.

Feedback Phase

As mentioned in the observation section, this phase featured the most complex and varied non-verbal expressions, including sighs, brief applause, raised and lowered hands, gazes out of the window, and packing up. Interviews with students exhibiting such behaviours revealed several key reasons.

The first, as some students admitted, was a simple distraction:

S: "It was near the end of the lesson, and the teacher was just summarizing—I didn't think it was that important anymore."

The second, and perhaps more significant, reason related to missed opportunities for clarification. Students who raised their hands but then withdrew, or who showed signs of hesitation or disengagement, often explained that they had questions but lacked the confidence or chance to ask:

S: "I didn't quite understand and wanted to ask, but the teacher kept talking, so I didn't want to interrupt."

I: "Would you ask after class?"

S: "Sometimes, if I remember. If not, I just let it go."

I: "What if you still don't understand?"

S: "There's not much I can do. The teacher won't go back to explain again."

Some students noted a broader issue with classroom discourse, expressing that they often felt passive in English lessons:

S: "When we talk with classmates, we all say English is a bit boring—it's just listening to the teacher speak."

S: "If we had more activities or thinking space, it would be better."

A few students offered specific suggestions:

S: "Like having time to think or small group discussion—that would help."

S: "Don't always ask if we understand. We don't even know if we do. Maybe ask a different question to check."

These responses align with a notable non-verbal trend observed during the phase: students who raised their hands and then quickly withdrew, or who looked toward the teacher with an expectant gaze but never got the chance to speak. Such behaviours were not necessarily due to a lack of interest or knowledge but reflected hesitation, self-doubt, and the fast pace of classroom talk.

Another group of students demonstrated behaviours such as packing up early, drinking water, or glancing repeatedly out the window. Interviews revealed that some of these behaviours reflected a perceived closure of the lesson:

S: "Once other people start packing up, I feel like it's finished—even if the teacher is still talking."

This illustrates how specific body movements may signal a student's internal perception of classroom structure and importance, even if not explicitly stated. Similarly, physical gestures—such as shifting in chairs or dragging bags—may function as informal cues of cognitive withdrawal, especially when paired with minimal verbal input.

Finally, student comments also revealed a critical view of the teacher's feedback approach. Several students noted that teacher responses often lacked elaboration:

S: "She always says 'Correct' or 'Good', but I don't know why it is right."

S: "She usually calls on the same people. I just stop raising my hand."

Such perceptions correspond with observed patterns of reduced engagement in some students, who appeared less motivated to participate once they anticipated that feedback would be cursory or unevenly distributed.

In summary, the feedback phase reveals not only diverse and layered non-verbal behaviours, but also deeper issues of classroom interaction. Students' actions—whether hesitant, disengaged, or subtly expressive—provide insight into their internal states and their evolving relationship with teacher feedback. These interviews highlight the need for more inclusive and responsive feedback practices, ensuring students feel both seen and heard.

2) Teacher Perspective

Following the exploration of students' behaviours and underlying motivations, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher to gain insight into her interpretation of classroom silence and non-verbal responses.

The teacher confirmed that she had indeed noticed students' non-verbal cues and silence during lessons:

T: "I definitely notice them—especially during the feedback phase. At that point, it's quite obvious that many students are no longer fully engaged."

She expressed a sense of urgency and, at times, frustration, when witnessing this shift in attention:

T: "I do get a bit anxious or even frustrated. I hope students can always stay focused on me, but I can clearly feel their energy drop once we enter the feedback stage. During the initiation and response phases, their attention is usually better."

Despite these challenges, the teacher demonstrated a reflective stance and a willingness to make changes. She noted that while adjusting mid-lesson is not always feasible due to time constraints and syllabus requirements, she has begun to explore possible improvements:

T: "I've tried to speak with some students individually, and they've told me they'd prefer more flexible questioning styles, and more time to think. I'm trying to incorporate that."

She also acknowledged that the current teacher-centred model might not fully cater to students' needs:

T: "Sometimes I feel like I'm talking too much. I ask, 'Do you understand?' and they say 'Yes'—but I'm not sure they really do. I know some of them are silent because they're unsure or nervous. I would like to give them more space to express that."

Furthermore, the teacher recognized that students' silence does not necessarily equate to disengagement, and that more subtle cues—such as hesitation to speak, brief gestures, or momentary eye contact—could be signs of internal processing or silent participation:

T: "I'm learning to read between the lines. Some students may not speak, but their faces, eyes, and posture—they all convey something. I just wish I had more time to explore that during class."

In addition, she expressed a desire for greater institutional support and professional development in this area:

T: "If there were more training on how to handle silence or encourage participation beyond direct questioning, that would be very helpful. We're trained to focus on outcomes and correct answers, but not always on how to create space for thinking or for less confident students."

In summary, while the teacher is aware of and concerned by the silence and non-verbal behaviours in her classroom, she also shows a developing awareness of their complexity. Her comments reflect a shift from viewing these behaviours purely as signs of disengagement towards understanding them as multifaceted responses that may require pedagogical adjustment and greater responsiveness.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the characteristics and underlying motivations of students' non-verbal behaviors within the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) structure in an EFL classroom situated in a remote area of China. Drawing on classroom video observations and semi-structured interviews with both students and their teacher, the research revealed that non-verbal interaction was most frequent during the Feedback phase, and that such behaviours—ranging from eye contact and facial expressions to silence and body posture—varied significantly across different phases and individuals. Notably, silence emerged not as a passive or dismissive act, but rather as a complex form of non-verbal communication that could reflect deep cognitive engagement, emotional struggle, or uncertainty. Students' responses further indicated that their non-verbal behaviours often stemmed from factors such as a lack of confidence, hesitation, and limited opportunities to express themselves, especially during the Feedback phase when attention tends to wane.

These findings carry significant implications for English language teaching in similar EFL contexts. Teachers are encouraged to reframe their perceptions of silence and disengagement, recognizing that what appears as passivity may be an indicator of cognitive effort or social inhibition. Adjustments to the IRF pattern—such as incorporating more open-ended questions, allowing for delayed responses, and providing opportunities for peer discussion—may promote more inclusive and meaningful participation. Additionally, as Hall (2011) noted, if one considers non-verbal communication to be essential in second language acquisition, it becomes necessary to examine non-verbal systems and cues as part of the learning process. Therefore, teachers' ability to identify and interpret such non-verbal cues should be enhanced through targeted professional development, enabling them to respond to students' needs in more nuanced and empathetic ways.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. The findings are based on data from a single classroom context, and the interpretation of non-verbal behaviours, while supported by student interviews, remains partially subjective. Furthermore, students' accounts may have been constrained by their verbal expression skills or influenced by social expectations. Future research could address these limitations by extending the sample size across schools and regions, and by adopting methods such as stimulated recall interviews to help students articulate their in-the-moment cognitive and emotional states more clearly.

In conclusion, this study highlights the pedagogical value of non-verbal behaviours and silence within the IRF framework, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of classroom interaction that encompasses both verbal and non-verbal forms of participation. By acknowledging and responding to these often-overlooked cues, educators can foster a more responsive and student-centred learning environment, particularly in under-resourced EFL settings where traditional notions of participation may not fully capture the richness of student engagement.

Acknowledgments

We thank all the participants who have shared their voices so that this study could be accomplished. Our gratitude also goes to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and substantial feedback so that this manuscript could be published and reach wider readers.

Declarations

Author contribution	:	We are responsible for the entire research project, from initiating the ideas to revising the manuscript.
Funding statement	:	No funding sources were required or obtained in writing this paper.
Conflict of interest	:	The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Declaration of ethics	:	We as authors acknowledge that this work has been written based on ethical research that conforms with the regulations of our university and that we have obtained the permission from the relevant institute when collecting data. We support *The Journal of Silence Studies in Education* (*JSSE*) in maintaining high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.
Additional information	:	No additional information is available for this article.

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