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Students' Perceptions of Teacher Proxemics and Haptics in University Classrooms

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Abstract:

This study examines university students' perceptions of teachers' proxemic and haptic behaviours in English classrooms. An online quantitative survey was completed by 79 students from three academic levels at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Students responded positively to teacher movement but expressed less consistent attitudes toward physical proximity. Their overall evaluation of haptic behaviours was neutral, whereas their general perception of nonverbal classroom communication was positive. No significant gender differences were identified. First-Year Master students reported greater acceptance of haptic behaviours than Third-Year Licence students, although this difference was not consistently supported across the statistical tests. A weak positive correlation was found between haptic acceptance and general perceptions of nonverbal communication. The findings suggest that students do not perceive all forms of nonverbal immediacy in the same way and that teacher accessibility should be balanced with students' personal boundaries and contextual expectations.

Keywords: proxemics, haptics, teacher immediacy, nonverbal communication, student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Classroom communication extends beyond the verbal messages exchanged between teachers and students. Teachers also communicate through movement, posture, facial expressions, physical distance, and touch. These nonverbal behaviours may influence how students perceive a teacher's accessibility, attentiveness, authority, and willingness to interact.

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In this sense, classroom interaction involves not only the transmission of academic content but also a relational dimension through which teachers and students establish interpersonal connections (Knapp et al., 2014).

One concept that helps explain this relational dimension is teacher immediacy. The concept refers to communication behaviours that reduce the physical and psychological distance between teachers and students (Andersen, 1979). Teacher immediacy may be expressed through a range of verbal and nonverbal behaviours, including eye contact, smiling, body orientation, movement, vocal variation, and physical proximity (Gorham, 1988; Richmond et al., 2018). These behaviours can contribute to students' perceptions of the teacher as accessible and approachable. Importantly, however, immediacy does not necessarily mean that greater physical closeness is always desirable. The meaning of a particular behaviour depends on the context in which it occurs and on how students interpret it.

Research on teacher immediacy has generally reported positive associations with students' affective and educational experiences. Andersen (1979), for example, found that nonverbal immediacy was related to students' affect toward the teacher and course content, although its relationship with measured cognitive performance was limited. Similarly, Witt et al. (2004), in a meta-analysis of 81 studies involving 24,474 participants, reported stronger relationships between teacher immediacy and perceived learning and affective learning than between immediacy and measured cognitive learning. More recent research has continued to report positive associations between teacher immediacy and student motivation, although the evidence is largely correlational and remains uneven across educational contexts (Liu, 2021). These findings suggest that teacher immediacy is particularly relevant to students' perceptions and affective experiences rather than being treated as a direct predictor of academic achievement.

Within the broad area of nonverbal immediacy, proxemics and haptics deserve particular attention because both involve physical aspects of teacher-student interaction. Proxemics concerns the use and perception of interpersonal space. Hall (1966) showed that physical distance carries social meaning and that expectations concerning personal space are shaped by cultural and interpersonal factors. In the classroom, proxemic behaviour may include where the teacher stands, how the teacher moves around the room, and the distance maintained when interacting with individual students. Previous research has associated teacher movement and the use of classroom space with perceptions of immediacy and interaction (Richmond et al., 1987; Chin et al., 2017). At the same time, physical proximity does not automatically produce a positive response. A teacher who moves around the classroom may be perceived as accessible, whereas prolonged closeness may be experienced as uncomfortable or intrusive.

Haptics refers to communication through physical touch. Touch can

communicate support, reassurance, care, or interpersonal closeness, but its meaning is highly dependent on the relationship between the participants and the context in which it occurs (Knapp et al., 2014). Touch has appeared in earlier measures of nonverbal teacher immediacy, including the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale developed by Richmond et al. (2003). Nevertheless, the inclusion of touch as an immediacy behaviour does not imply that students will necessarily perceive teacher touch positively. In educational contexts, teacher-student interaction involves differences in status and authority, which may make students particularly sensitive to physical contact. Personal preferences, institutional expectations, gender, and cultural norms may also influence how touch is interpreted.

This distinction between different forms of physical immediacy is important because proxemic and haptic behaviours should not be treated as a single and uniformly positive category. Teacher movement, temporary proximity, prolonged closeness, and physical touch involve different degrees of interpersonal access. Students may appreciate teachers' movement and accessibility while still wishing to maintain personal-space boundaries or avoid physical contact. Treating all of these behaviours as equivalent may therefore conceal meaningful differences in students' perceptions.

Although teacher immediacy and nonverbal communication have received considerable attention, fewer studies have examined how students themselves evaluate specific forms of physical teacher communication, particularly proxemic and haptic behaviours, within university EFL classrooms. This issue is especially relevant in the Algerian context, where evidence concerning students' perceptions of teacher movement, physical proximity, prolonged closeness, and touch remains limited. Findings from other educational and cultural settings cannot simply be assumed to apply to Algerian university classrooms because perceptions of interpersonal distance and physical contact may vary across contexts (Hall, 1966; Knapp et al., 2014). The present study therefore addresses a context-specific gap by examining students' perceptions of teachers' proxemic and haptic behaviours in an Algerian higher-education EFL setting.

Accordingly, the present study investigates how students at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret perceive teachers' use of classroom space, physical proximity, prolonged closeness, and appropriate touch. It also examines whether perceptions of haptic behaviour and general nonverbal classroom communication differ according to gender and academic level, and whether students' acceptance of teacher touch is related to their general perception of nonverbal classroom communication. The study does not measure teachers' actual classroom behaviour or students' academic achievement. Rather, it focuses on students' reported perceptions of these forms of nonverbal classroom communication.

The study contributes context-specific evidence on students' evaluations of different forms of teacher physical communication. In particular, it distinguishes

between teacher accessibility through movement and proximity and the potentially more sensitive issue of physical touch. This distinction provides a more cautious understanding of nonverbal teacher immediacy by recognising that behaviours intended to reduce interpersonal distance may not be perceived in the same way by all students. Teacher immediacy provides the main conceptual framework for the study, while Hall's (1966) theory of proxemics supports the interpretation of physical distance and personal-space boundaries.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do university students perceive teachers' movement and use of physical proximity in the classroom?
2. How do university students perceive appropriate teacher touch?
3. Do students' perceptions of haptic behaviour and general nonverbal classroom communication differ according to gender or academic level?
4. Is students' acceptance of teacher touch related to their general perception of nonverbal classroom communication?

Given the exploratory nature of the study, no formal hypotheses were proposed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Teacher Immediacy in Educational Communication

Teacher immediacy developed from Mehrabian's approach–avoidance principle, according to which people approach individuals and situations they evaluate positively and avoid those they evaluate negatively. In instructional communication, the concept was applied to behaviours that reduce the perceived distance between teachers and students. Andersen (1979) defined teacher immediacy as nonverbal behaviour that reduces "physical and/or psychological distance" (p. 543). It does not remove the professional relationship between teachers and students. Rather, it concerns the degree of accessibility and closeness communicated by the teacher.

Immediacy may be verbal or nonverbal. Verbal forms include addressing students by name, asking for their opinions, providing feedback and using inclusive pronouns such as we and our (Gorham, 1988). Nonverbal immediacy includes eye contact, smiling, vocal variation, relaxed posture, body orientation, movement and reduced physical barriers. Richmond et al. (2018) describe it as the teacher's willingness "to approach and be approached by students" (p. 98). Thus, teacher immediacy is communicated through a combination of actions rather than through one isolated behaviour.

Early research connected immediacy mainly with students' affective responses. Andersen (1979) reported that nonverbal immediacy predicted 46% of the variance in students' affect toward the teacher and approximately 20% of their affect toward the course content. It also predicted behavioural commitment, but it did not significantly predict cognitive test performance. These results suggest that an immediate teacher may influence students' attitudes and willingness to

continue learning more directly than their examination results.

Gorham (1988) later extended this research by examining verbal immediacy. The study found that verbal and nonverbal behaviours worked together in shaping instructional interaction. It also indicated that movement around the classroom became more important as class size increased. Students in larger classes may experience greater psychological distance from the teacher, making visible immediacy behaviours more noticeable (Gorham, 1988).

The relationship between immediacy and learning has not always been straightforward. Richmond et al. (1987) reported an association between selected immediacy behaviours and cognitive learning, but they also found that some behaviours contributed more than others. Vocal expressiveness, smiling, relaxed posture, looking at students and moving around the classroom were among the more meaningful behaviours. Touch made a smaller contribution and occurred rarely among the university teachers examined in their study.

A broader evaluation was offered by Witt et al. (2004). Their meta-analysis found substantial relationships between nonverbal immediacy and perceived learning ($r = .51$) and affective learning ($r = .49$), while its relationship with measured cognitive learning was only slight ($r = .17$). The authors concluded that teacher immediacy has a stronger association with students' "attitudes and perceptions" than with cognitive performance (Witt et al., 2004, p. 184). This distinction matters for the present study because its questionnaire measures perceptions, not academic achievement.

Teacher immediacy has also been connected with motivation. Liu (2021) reviewed 30 studies and found that most reported positive relationships between teacher immediacy and student motivation. However, only five studies were conducted in EFL or ESL settings, while 74% employed correlational designs. The findings provide support for studying immediacy in language classrooms, but they also require cautious interpretation. Associations between immediacy and motivation do not prove a direct causal relationship (Liu, 2021).

2.2 Classroom Proxemics

Proxemics concerns how people organise and interpret physical space. Hall (1966) used the term to refer to the "interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space" (p. 1). He distinguished four general distance zones: intimate, personal, social and public. These zones describe different degrees of interpersonal access, but Hall did not present them as universal boundaries independent of culture.

Hall's model stresses that perceptions of distance develop within cultural systems. People learn what counts as an acceptable distance through social experience, often without being consciously aware of these rules. As Hall (1966) explains, culture gives "structure and meaning" to the human sensory base (p. 95). Consequently, the same physical distance may communicate friendliness in

one setting and intrusion in another.

Later research maintained this cultural view while showing that distance is also affected by status, gender, roles and the relationship between interactants. Knapp et al. (2014) define proxemics as the study of the use and perception of social and personal space. They note that conversational distance may vary according to cultural orientation and the participants' social positions. Broad cultural categories cannot predict every interaction because personal preferences and immediate circumstances also influence spatial behaviour (Knapp et al., 2014).

In education, instructional proxemics refers to teachers' use of classroom space, movement and positioning. The front of the classroom, the area behind the teacher's desk and the spaces between students' seats carry different communicative meanings. A fixed position behind a desk can maintain formality and authority, whereas movement among students may communicate availability and involvement (Chin et al., 2017).

Classroom space is also related to the teaching activity. Whole-class explanation generally places the teacher at a greater distance, while group work and individual assistance require closer positioning. Chin et al. (2017) found that teachers' movement was shaped by classroom layout, seating arrangements and the instructional task. Their interviews further showed that students appreciated closer interaction when teachers approached them to provide assistance.

Teacher movement may increase visual stimulation and help maintain students' attention. Richmond et al. (1987) observed that physically active teachers provide both visual and auditory stimulation. They also reported that teachers who moved away from the desk and among students tended to be perceived as warmer and more effective. Movement, therefore, may function as an immediacy behaviour without requiring continuous physical closeness.

However, reduced distance is not always beneficial. Richmond et al. (1987) recognised that the point at which proximity becomes uncomfortable differs among individuals. Briefly approaching a student to explain a task is different from remaining inside that student's personal space. This distinction supports analysing movement, helpful proximity and prolonged closeness as separate behaviours rather than combining them automatically into one measure.

2.3 Haptics and Teacher–Student Interaction

Haptics refers to communication through touch. Touch may express affection, encouragement, reassurance, authority or control. According to Knapp et al. (2014), it is "a highly ambiguous form of behavior" (p. 13) because its meaning depends on context, relationship and manner of execution. The physical act alone cannot determine how it will be interpreted.

Touch was included in early research on nonverbal immediacy. Andersen's (1979) measure considered touching students among the behaviours that might communicate closeness. Richmond et al. (1987) also included teacher touch,

although they found that it was uncommon in university classrooms. This indicates that touch has a theoretical place within immediacy but may occur less frequently than movement, eye contact or vocal expressiveness.

The Nonverbal Immediacy Scale developed by Richmond et al. (2003) also included items concerning touch on the shoulder or arm and avoidance of touch. The scale was designed to measure self-perceived and other-perceived immediacy in different communication settings. Still, it measures general nonverbal immediacy rather than providing a specific standard for acceptable teacher–student touch.

Touch may be received positively when it is brief, socially acceptable and suitable for the relationship. It may communicate support or interpersonal responsiveness. At the same time, touch can cause discomfort when it is unwanted, prolonged or inappropriate. Knapp et al. (2014) explain that touch may comfort, hurt, influence or regulate interaction. Its meaning is therefore less predictable than many other nonverbal behaviours.

The teacher–student relationship also involves an unequal distribution of authority. Students may find it difficult to express discomfort directly when the person touching them controls classroom evaluation and discipline. For this reason, teacher intention cannot serve as the only criterion for judging appropriate touch. Students' perceptions, personal boundaries and institutional norms must also be considered (Richmond et al., 1987; Richmond et al., 2003).

Cultural expectations add another layer to the interpretation of touch. Hall (1966) demonstrated that spatial and sensory practices are shaped by culture, while Knapp et al. (2014) found differences in proximity and touch between cultural groups. However, they also warn that broad labels such as contact and noncontact cultures do not explain every individual interaction. Gender, familiarity, status and immediate context may override general cultural tendencies.

2.4 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The present study uses teacher immediacy as its main conceptual framework. This framework explains how teachers' nonverbal behaviours may reduce perceived distance and influence students' attitudes toward classroom communication. It is suitable for the study because movement, proximity and touch have all appeared in previous immediacy research (Andersen, 1979; Richmond et al., 1987; Richmond et al., 2003).

Hall's proxemic theory serves as a supporting framework. It explains why the physical distance between teachers and students carries social and cultural meaning. It also helps distinguish classroom movement from invasion of personal space. A teacher may be mobile and accessible without standing excessively close to individual students (Hall, 1966; Chin et al., 2017).

The two frameworks are complementary. Teacher immediacy explains the relational purpose of reducing distance, while proxemic theory shows that closeness has limits shaped by culture and context. Together, they permit a balanced interpretation: movement and proximity may communicate support, but greater closeness does not automatically produce greater immediacy.

This position is particularly relevant to haptics. Touch may function as an immediacy behaviour, but its meaning depends on students' acceptance of it. The present study therefore does not assume that proximity and touch are inherently positive. It examines how students themselves evaluate these behaviours in an Algerian EFL university context.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory, descriptive and cross-sectional survey design. It aimed to examine students' perceptions of teachers' proxemic and haptic behaviours rather than observe teachers' actual classroom practices. Data were collected once from the participants; therefore, the findings describe reported attitudes and associations but do not establish causal relationships.

A quantitative approach was selected because the questionnaire produced numerical data that allowed the researcher to describe response patterns and compare groups. The study also included inferential tests, but these tests were used in an exploratory manner. No hypotheses had been formulated before data collection.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at the Department of English, Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, Algeria. The target population consisted of approximately 420 students taught by the researcher. They belonged to three levels: Third-Year Licence, First-Year Master and Second-Year Master.

The questionnaire was made available to the whole target population, but participation remained voluntary. Seventy-nine students completed it, which represents an approximate response rate of 18.8%. The sample included 62 female students (78.5%) and 17 male students (21.5%). Regarding academic level, 52 students were enrolled in Third-Year Licence (65.8%), 18 in First-Year Master (22.8%) and nine in Second-Year Master (11.4%).

The study relied on convenience and voluntary sampling because the participants were students accessible to the researcher. The three academic levels were included to examine possible differences at different stages of university education. Nevertheless, the sample was not random, and its gender and academic-level groups were unequal. These characteristics limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised to all Algerian university students.

3.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected through a researcher-developed online questionnaire designed to examine students' perceptions of teachers' proxemic and haptic

behaviours in the university classroom. The questionnaire was constructed with reference to the conceptual framework adopted in the study, particularly the literature on teacher immediacy, proxemics, and haptics (Andersen, 1979; Hall, 1966; Knapp et al., 2014; Richmond et al., 2003). The items were intended to represent specific classroom behaviours rather than to establish a fully validated measurement scale.

The questionnaire was administered in English because the participants were students in the Department of English. It consisted of 15 items. The first two items collected demographic information concerning gender and academic level. The remaining 13 statements addressed three areas relevant to the research questions. Five items concerned teachers' movement, use of classroom space, and physical proximity; five items addressed teacher touch and students' comfort with physical contact; and three items examined students' general perceptions of nonverbal communication in relation to classroom interaction, professionalism, and motivation.

Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Three statements were negatively worded and were reverse-coded during data preparation so that higher scores consistently represented greater acceptance of the behaviour being measured.

The questionnaire was developed specifically for the present exploratory study and was not adapted from a single established measurement instrument. In addition, it was not subjected to formal expert review or pilot testing before administration. Consequently, the questionnaire should not be regarded as a fully validated measure of teacher immediacy, proxemics, or haptics. The reliability results reported below are therefore used to assess the internal consistency of the intended item groups rather than to establish the overall validity of the instrument. The measurement limitations associated with the researcher-developed questionnaire are considered in the discussion of the findings and in the limitations section.

3.4 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The Google Forms questionnaire was shared through Google Classroom between 25 and 26 April 2025. Approximately 420 students were eligible to participate, of whom 79 completed the questionnaire. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and that choosing not to participate would have no influence on their marks or academic situation.

The questionnaire was anonymous and did not request students' names, registration numbers, email addresses or other directly identifying information. Since the participants were taught by the researcher, anonymity and voluntary participation were particularly important for reducing possible pressure. Nevertheless, these measures could not completely remove the power difference

between the teacher-researcher and the students. No formal ethical approval was obtained; this is acknowledged as a procedural limitation of the study.

3.5 Data Preparation

The responses were exported from Google Forms as a CSV file and imported into IBM SPSS Statistics. The original responses appeared as text and contained minor differences in capitalisation, such as **Strongly Agree** and **Strongly agree**. Separate numeric variables were therefore created while the original responses were retained.

The answers were coded as follows:

RESPONSE	CODE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	1
DISAGREE	2
NEUTRAL	3
AGREE	4
STRONGLY AGREE	5

The negatively worded items concerning prolonged closeness, discomfort with touch and avoidance of physical contact were reverse-coded. Thus, higher values consistently represented greater acceptance of proximity or touch. After coding, all 13 items contained 79 valid responses, and no missing values were found.

3.6 Reliability and Score Construction

Internal consistency was examined separately for the three intended groups of questionnaire items using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha provides an estimate of the internal consistency of items within a scale, but a satisfactory alpha coefficient does not by itself establish construct validity or demonstrate that the items represent a single underlying construct (Taber, 2018). Given the exploratory nature of the present instrument, the reliability results were used to guide the construction of composite scores rather than to claim psychometric validation.

The five proxemics items produced poor internal consistency ($\alpha = .450$). Corrected item-total correlations ranged from .165 to .280, and removal of individual items did not improve the coefficient to an acceptable level. The items were therefore not combined into a proxemics composite score. Instead, they were retained and analysed separately because they addressed different aspects of classroom spatial behaviour, including teacher movement, helpful proximity, and prolonged closeness.

The five haptics items demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .820$), with corrected item-total correlations ranging from .550 to .718. Since removing

any item reduced the coefficient, all five items were retained and averaged to produce the Haptics Score.

The three general-perception items produced a lower but usable exploratory coefficient (α = .646), with corrected item-total correlations ranging from .418 to .499. The items were therefore averaged to produce the General_Perception_Score, but this score was interpreted cautiously because the coefficient provides only limited evidence of internal consistency.

3.7 Statistical Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were used to describe participants' gender and academic level. Since the proxemics items did not form a reliable composite scale, each item was analysed separately using frequencies, percentages, means, medians and standard deviations.

One-sample t-tests compared the haptics and general-perception means with the neutral midpoint of 3. Cohen's d and its confidence interval were reported to indicate the magnitude of each difference.

Independent-samples t-tests examined gender differences. Welch's results were reported because this procedure does not require equal population variances and is more robust when group sizes are substantially unequal. Confidence intervals and Hedges' g were also considered.

Academic-level differences were examined using conventional ANOVA, Welch's ANOVA and the Kruskal–Wallis test. The three procedures were considered because the groups were unequal and the Second-Year Master group contained only nine students. Games–Howell comparisons were examined when Welch's test indicated statistical significance.

Finally, Spearman's rank correlation examined the relationship between the haptics and general-perception scores. It was selected because the scores originated from ordinal Likert responses and the general-perception scale had limited reliability. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, but isolated results close to this threshold were interpreted cautiously.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Participant Profile

The study included 79 students. Female students represented most of the sample (78.5%), while male students represented 21.5%. Third-Year Licence students formed the largest academic group (65.8%).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	62	78.5
	Male	17	21.5
Academic level	Third-Year Licence	52	65.8
	First-Year Master	18	22.8

	Second-Year Master	9	11.4

The unequal group sizes should be considered when interpreting comparisons based on gender and academic level.

4.2 Students' Perceptions of Classroom Proxemics

The proxemics items were examined separately because they did not produce a reliable composite scale. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Proxemic Behaviours

Item	M	SD	Median	Agreement %
Teacher movementincreases engagement	3.37	1.17	3	49.4
Reduced distance supports understanding	3.35	1.04	4	51.9
Teacher proximity encourages participation	3.25	1.22	4	50.6
Prolongedcloseness causes discomfort	3.52	1.35	4	59.5
Teacher movement makes the classroom dynamic	3.92	1.04	4	82.3

Note. Agreement combines Agree and Strongly Agree. The item concerning prolonged closeness is presented here in its original wording. It was reverse-coded only when reliability was calculated.

The strongest response concerned teacher movement. A total of 82.3% agreed that teachers' physical movement makes the classroom environment more dynamic. Nearly half (49.4%) also associated movement with greater engagement.

Students were moderately positive about reduced distance. Approximately 51.9% reported that it supported understanding, while 50.6% believed that teacher proximity encouraged participation. However, 59.5% felt uncomfortable when a teacher remained too close for a long period.

These results show a distinction between mobility and closeness. Students generally appreciated teachers moving around the classroom, but this did not mean that they accepted continuous or excessive proximity.

4.3 Reliability and Composite Scores

The internal consistency of the three intended questionnaire dimensions was examined before calculating composite scores.

Table 3: Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of the Intended Dimensions

Dimension	Items	Cronbach's α	M	SD	Decision
Proxemics	5	.450	—	—	Analysed item by item
Haptics	5	.820	2.92	0.91	Retained
General perception	3	.646	3.57	0.70	Retainedcautiously

The haptics dimension showed good internal consistency (α = .820). The five items were therefore averaged into one score. The general-perception

dimension had marginal reliability (α = .646) and was used only as an exploratory score. The poor reliability of the proxemics items (α = .450) did not support averaging them.

4.4 Comparison with the Neutral Midpoint

One-sample t-tests compared both composite means with the neutral midpoint of 3. The haptics mean (M = 2.92, SD = 0.91) did not differ significantly from the midpoint, t(78) = −0.75, p = .458, Cohen's d = −0.08, 95% CI [−0.30, 0.14]. Thus, the participants did not express a clearly favourable or unfavourable collective position toward appropriate teacher touch.

The general-perception mean (M = 3.57, SD = 0.70) was significantly higher than the neutral midpoint, t(78) = 7.27, p < .001, Cohen's d = 0.82, 95% CI [0.56, 1.07]. This indicates that the students generally held positive perceptions of the importance of nonverbal communication in classroom interaction.

4.5 Gender Differences

Male students reported a slightly higher haptics mean (M = 3.06, SD = 0.86) than female students (M = 2.89, SD = 0.92). However, the difference was not statistically significant, Welch's t(26.97) = 0.72, p = .479, Hedges' g = 0.19.

General-perception scores were also similar for male (M = 3.63, SD = 0.63) and female students (M = 3.56, SD = 0.72). The difference was not statistically significant, Welch's t(28.55) = 0.38, p = .706, Hedges' g = 0.10.

These results provide no evidence of gender differences in haptic acceptance or general perceptions of nonverbal classroom communication. However, this conclusion should remain cautious because the sample included only 17 male students.

4.6 Academic-Level Differences

The three academic levels differed slightly in their haptics scores.

Table 4: Composite Scores According to Academic Level

Academic level	n	Haptics M (SD)	General perception M (SD)
Third-Year Licence	52	2.79 (0.98)	3.53 (0.75)
First-Year Master	18	3.33 (0.66)	3.72 (0.62)
Second-Year Master	9	2.89 (0.71)	3.52 (0.56)

Descriptive results showed some variation in students' haptics scores across the three academic levels. First-Year Master students reported the highest mean score (M = 3.33, SD = 0.66), followed by Second-Year Master students (M = 2.89, SD = 0.71) and Third-Year Licence students (M = 2.79, SD = 0.98).

The conventional one-way ANOVA did not indicate a statistically significant difference among the three groups, F(2, 76) = 2.52, p = .087. Welch's ANOVA produced a statistically significant result, Welch's F(2, 22.53) = 3.51, p = .047, and the Games–Howell post-hoc comparison showed a difference between First-Year

Master and Third-Year Licence students (mean difference = 0.54, p = .030, 95% CI [0.04, 1.05]). However, the Kruskal–Wallis test did not reach statistical significance, H(2) = 5.73, p = .057.

Because the statistical procedures did not produce fully consistent results, the apparent difference across academic levels should be interpreted cautiously. The findings provide an indication of a possible difference in students' acceptance of teacher touch, particularly between First-Year Master and Third-Year Licencestudents, but they do not provide sufficiently consistent evidence to establish academic level as a reliable predictor of haptic perceptions.

4.7 Relationship Between Haptics and General Perception

A Spearman rank-order correlation was used to examine the relationship between students' acceptance of teacher touch and their general perceptions of nonverbal classroom communication. The analysis showed a weak positive association between the two variables, ρ = .224, p = .047, N = 79.

This result indicates that students who reported greater acceptance of teacher touch tended to report slightly more positive general perceptions of nonverbal classroom communication. However, the strength of the association was weak, and the result was close to the conventional significance threshold. It should therefore be interpreted as a limited exploratory association rather than as strong evidence of a meaningful relationship. The finding also does not establish a causal relationship between the two variables.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined students' perceptions of teachers' proxemic and haptic behaviours through teacher immediacy and Hall's proxemic theory. The findings show that students did not evaluate all forms of physical closeness in the same manner. They generally valued teachers' movement and recognised the importance of nonverbal communication, but their attitudes toward proximity and touch were less positive and less consistent. This supports the view that immediacy consists of several behaviours whose meanings depend on the classroom context (Richmond et al., 2018).

5.1 Perceptions of Classroom Proxemics

The most positive finding concerned teacher movement. Most participants believed that movement made the classroom more dynamic, while about half associated it with engagement, understanding and participation. This is consistent with Gorham's (1988) finding that movement around the classroom functions as a visible immediacy behaviour. Richmond et al. (1987) also found that moving among students, instead of remaining behind a desk or podium, contributed to perceptions of teacher immediacy.

Movement may help teachers communicate attention to different parts of the classroom. It can also reduce the symbolic distance created when the teacher remains permanently at the front. Chin et al. (2017) found that teachers' use of classroom space was related to instructional activity, seating arrangements and

opportunities for individual assistance. Thus, movement may support interaction because it allows teachers to monitor students and approach them when assistance is needed.

However, movement should not be confused with continuous closeness. Although about half of the students valued reduced distance, 59.5% reported discomfort when the teacher stood too close for a long period. Hall (1966) argued that distance carries social meaning and that expectations concerning personal space are culturally formed. The present results suggest that students may accept temporary proximity when it serves a clear pedagogical purpose, but they may reject closeness that lasts longer than necessary.

This distinction helps explain the poor reliability of the proxemics items. Teacher movement, reduced distance and prolonged closeness may not represent one simple attitude. Students can favour an active teacher while still wanting their personal space respected. Nevertheless, the low alpha may also result from the limited number and wording of the items. It should not be interpreted as definite proof that classroom proxemics has no common structure.

5.2 Perceptions of Haptic Communication

The haptics score was close to the neutral midpoint and did not differ significantly from it. This indicates that the students did not share a clearly positive or negative attitude toward teacher touch. Some perceived appropriate touch as supportive and caring, whereas others preferred teachers to avoid physical contact. The relatively large standard deviation also reflects this variation.

This finding questions the assumption that all nonverbal immediacy behaviours automatically produce closeness. Touch has been included in previous measures of immediacy (Andersen, 1979; Richmond et al., 2003), but its presence in a scale does not make it acceptable in every educational setting. Knapp et al. (2014) describe touch as "a highly ambiguous form of behavior" (p. 13), since its meaning depends on the relationship, context and manner in which it occurs.

The neutral result may reflect personal, cultural and institutional boundaries. A light touch on the shoulder may communicate encouragement to one student but discomfort to another. The teacher–student relationship also involves differences in status and authority, which may make students more sensitive to physical contact. Hall's (1966) account of culturally organised space supports the idea that physical closeness cannot be separated from the social setting in which it takes place.

For teaching practice, the result does not justify recommending touch as a general strategy. Teachers can communicate immediacy through movement, eye contact, facial expression, vocal variation and availability without making physical contact. Richmond et al. (1987) found that touch was uncommon among university teachers and that other immediacy behaviours made more meaningful

contributions. Haptic communication should remain limited, context-sensitive and respectful of students' boundaries.

5.3 General Perceptions of Nonverbal Communication

The general-perception score was significantly higher than the neutral midpoint, with a large effect size. Students generally believed that teachers' use of space and touch influenced their perceptions of professionalism and motivation. They also recognised nonverbal communication as an important part of learning. This agrees with the teacher-immediacy framework, which treats teachers' nonverbal behaviour as part of the relational dimension of instruction (Richmond et al., 2018).

The finding also corresponds with previous evidence connecting teacher immediacy with affective responses and motivation. Witt et al. (2004) found stronger relationships between immediacy and perceived or affective learning than between immediacy and measured cognitive performance. Liu's (2021) review similarly reported positive associations between immediacy and motivation in most of the studies examined.

However, the present study did not measure motivation, interaction or learning directly. It measured students' beliefs that nonverbal communication *could* influence these outcomes. The result should therefore be described as a positive general perception, not evidence that proxemics or haptics improved motivation. This distinction is necessary because students' perceptions and objective learning outcomes are not equivalent (Witt et al., 2004).

The general-perception score also had marginal reliability ($\alpha = .646$). Although the three items were related, they addressed professionalism, motivation and the general importance of nonverbal communication. These ideas are connected but not identical. The score is useful for exploratory interpretation, but it should not be presented as a validated measure.

5.4 Gender and Academic-Level Differences

No significant gender differences were found in haptics or general perception. Male and female participants produced similar means, and the effect sizes were small. This may indicate that attitudes toward teacher touch were shaped more by individual preferences and classroom expectations than by gender alone.

However, the gender groups were highly unequal, with only 17 male participants. The study may therefore have lacked enough statistical power to detect smaller differences. The absence of statistical significance should not be interpreted as proof that gender has no role in perceptions of touch. Knapp et al. (2014) note that touch and interpersonal distance may vary according to gender, status, culture and the relationship between participants.

First-Year Master students reported higher haptics scores than Third-Year Licence students. One possible explanation is that Master students have more experience with university teachers and may feel more comfortable with less

formal interaction. They may also study in smaller classes, where teacher–student relationships can become more familiar. Gorham (1988) found that class size affected the role of immediacy behaviours, although the present study did not collect information about class size or students' familiarity with individual teachers.

This academic-level result remains uncertain. Welch's ANOVA and the Games–Howell comparison reached significance, but the Kruskal–Wallis test produced p = .057. The Second-Year Master group also contained only nine students. The finding should therefore be treated as a possible pattern requiring further investigation rather than a stable difference between academic levels.

5.5 Relationship Between Haptics and General Perception

The weak positive correlation suggests that students who were more accepting of teacher touch also tended to hold more favourable views of nonverbal classroom communication. This relationship is theoretically reasonable because touch is one possible form of nonverbal immediacy (Richmond et al., 2003).

Still, the correlation was small and only slightly below the significance threshold. Haptic acceptance explained only a limited part of the variation in general perception. The result indicates that students can value nonverbal communication without supporting teacher touch. For many students, immediacy may be communicated more acceptably through movement, eye contact, gestures and vocal behaviour.

The correlation also came from self-reported data collected through the same questionnaire. Shared wording and response tendencies may have increased the relationship between the two scores. No causal direction can be inferred. It cannot be claimed that acceptance of touch produces favourable perceptions or that favourable perceptions cause greater acceptance of touch.

5.6 Pedagogical Implications

The findings support a selective approach to teacher immediacy. Teachers may benefit from moving beyond the front of the classroom, varying their position and approaching students when a pedagogical task requires assistance. Instructional proxemics should be purposeful rather than constant. Chin et al. (2017) similarly show that movement and proximity gain meaning through the teaching activity and classroom arrangement.

At the same time, teachers should distinguish accessibility from intrusion. Remaining close to a student for a long period may create discomfort even when the teacher's intention is positive. A brief approach during explanation may be accepted, while unnecessary closeness may cross personal boundaries. Hall's (1966) framework helps explain why distance must be adjusted to cultural and interpersonal expectations.

Touch should not be promoted as a routine teaching technique. The divided responses indicate that its meaning cannot be predicted with confidence. Teachers can establish immediacy through less intrusive behaviours, including attentive eye contact, open body orientation, movement, vocal expressiveness and individual feedback (Richmond et al., 2018). In the Algerian university setting, respect for students' personal boundaries should remain central to nonverbal classroom communication.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted with 79 students from a single university department. The sample was obtained through voluntary convenience sampling, and the response rate was approximately 18.8%. These characteristics limit the generalisability of the findings to other university students or educational contexts. The low response rate also raises the possibility of non-response bias, since students who chose to participate may have differed in their perceptions from those who did not respond.

Second, the sample was unevenly distributed across gender and academic level. Female students represented 78.5% of the sample, while male students represented 21.5%. Similarly, Third-Year Licence students constituted 65.8% of the sample, compared with 22.8% of First-Year Master students and 11.4% of Second-Year Master students. These unequal group sizes reduce the strength of comparisons between groups, particularly those involving the smaller subgroups.

Third, the questionnaire was developed by the researchers specifically for the present study and was not adapted from a single established instrument. It was not subjected to formal expert review or pilot testing before administration. Although the items were informed by the conceptual framework and previous literature on teacher immediacy, proxemics, and haptics, the instrument should therefore be regarded as exploratory rather than fully validated. The poor internal consistency of the proxemics items ($\alpha = .450$) further limits the extent to which these items can be treated as a single construct. For this reason, the proxemics items were analysed individually rather than combined into a composite score.

Fourth, the study relied on self-reported perceptions collected through an online questionnaire. Such data reflect participants' reported attitudes and evaluations rather than direct observations of teachers' classroom behaviour. In addition, the participants were taught by the researcher, which may have influenced their willingness to respond or the way in which they evaluated teacher behaviour, despite the anonymous and voluntary nature of participation.

Finally, the study was cross-sectional and exploratory. The data were collected at one point in time and therefore cannot establish causal relationships between teacher nonverbal behaviours and students' motivation, engagement, learning, or academic achievement. The findings should consequently be understood as context-specific evidence concerning students' perceptions. Future

research should employ larger and more diverse samples, improved and validated measurement instruments, and, where possible, observational or longitudinal designs to examine teacher proxemics and haptics more systematically.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined students' perceptions of teacher proxemic and haptic behaviours in university classrooms at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. Guided by teacher immediacy and supported by Hall's theory of proxemics, the study focused on students' reported perceptions rather than on teachers' actual classroom behaviours or students' academic achievement.

The findings indicate that students did not perceive all forms of physical immediacy in the same way. Teacher movement received the most favourable responses, with most participants agreeing that it contributed to a more dynamic classroom environment. Students also showed moderate acceptance of reduced physical distance and teacher proximity. However, prolonged closeness was associated with discomfort for a substantial proportion of participants. These findings suggest that students may value teacher accessibility and movement while still expecting their personal space to be respected.

Students' responses to haptic behaviour were less consistent. The overall haptics score did not differ significantly from the neutral midpoint, indicating that the participants did not hold a clearly positive or negative collective attitude toward appropriate teacher touch. Some students viewed touch as supportive, whereas others showed a preference for avoiding physical contact. This finding suggests that physical touch should not be treated as an automatically positive form of teacher immediacy. Its acceptability may depend on personal preferences, interpersonal relationships, and the classroom context.

The study also found no statistically significant gender differences in students' perceptions of haptic behaviour or general nonverbal classroom communication. Differences across academic levels were less conclusive. Although First-Year Master students reported higher acceptance of haptic behaviour than Third-Year Licence students in some analyses, this difference was not consistently supported across all statistical procedures. It should therefore be regarded as a tentative pattern rather than an established group difference. A weak positive relationship was also found between acceptance of teacher touch and general perceptions of nonverbal classroom communication, but the strength of this association was limited.

Taken together, the findings support a context-sensitive understanding of teacher immediacy. Reducing psychological distance does not necessarily require reducing physical distance. Teachers may communicate accessibility and attentiveness through movement, approachability, eye contact, body orientation, vocal variation, and other nonverbal behaviours without relying on physical touch. In this context, teacher immediacy may be most effective when it combines

accessibility with respect for students' personal and interpersonal boundaries.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the exploratory nature of the study. The sample was relatively small and unevenly distributed across gender and academic levels, and the response rate was low. In addition, the questionnaire was developed specifically for the study and was not subjected to formal expert review or pilot testing. The low internal consistency of the proxemics items further limits the extent to which they can be considered a single scale. The study also relied on self-reported perceptions from a single university, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future research should therefore examine these behaviours with larger and more diverse samples and use refined, validated instruments to investigate the structure and contextual meaning of teacher proxemics and haptics in university EFL classrooms.

Overall, the study suggests that students' perceptions of teacher physical communication are selective rather than uniformly positive. Teacher movement and accessibility were generally viewed favourably, whereas prolonged closeness and physical touch received more cautious responses. These findings provide context-specific evidence from an Algerian university setting and support further research into how nonverbal teacher immediacy can be used while maintaining appropriate professional and personal boundaries.

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