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## Communication Immediacy: Behaviors and Perception in a Thai Instructional Context

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### Abstract

Teachers' communication immediacy arguably fosters and maintains positive relationships between teachers and students. Recognizing that not all communicative behaviors are universally consistent or understood, this study aimed to investigate instructors' immediacy behaviors and students' perceptions of the effectiveness of those behaviors in inducing their perceived immediacy in a Thai university. The participants were 234 undergraduate students and two instructors. The collection of research data employed direct observation, questionnaires, and focus group interviews. The findings showed the engagement in various immediacy behaviors of the teachers at different levels of frequency. Students perceived the effectiveness of their teachers' immediacy behaviors in inducing their perceived immediacy which resulted in reducing interpersonal distance between teachers and students. Cultural influences, in addition to the implication of the findings, were discussed.

**Keywords:** immediacy; instructional communication; perceived immediacy

### Introduction

In instructional communication, regardless of the subject matter, communication serves as a tool to facilitate teaching and learning. Studies in this field focus on the interaction between teachers and students to improve both student learning and teacher effectiveness. Immediacy behaviors by instructors, as highlighted by researchers in instructional communication over the past decades (Furlich, 2014; McCroskey, 1994; Millette & Gorham, 2002), play a crucial role in fostering positive teacher-student relationships and enhancing student engagement in learning activities, potentially leading to improved learning outcomes.

Regarding the relationship between the communicative behaviors and the relational impact on the communication partners, Gurrero et al. (2013) stated that the communicative behaviors would affect the development of relational closeness only when the perception toward a behavior is acknowledged by the message receivers. Likewise, Kelly (2012) asserted that the decrease of psychological distance caused by

the perception of immediacy was a two-fold process. Message receivers should perceive the immediacy being conveyed through a particular immediacy behavior from the message sender in the first place in order to decrease the sense of distance and enhance the perception of closeness. If the receiver fails recognize the immediacy conveyed through the communicative message, the effect on reducing relational distance and strengthening interpersonal relationship would not be achieved. The mediator of the two constructs, immediacy behaviors and the impact on psychological distance, is called perceived immediacy.

Although previous literature on communication immediacy has confirmed the relationship between the immediacy behaviors of the teachers and the relational and affective outcome in students, the measurement seemed to have been done on a direct association between a set of immediacy behaviors and relational or affective effects such as motivation, teacher credibility, and self-disclosure on the communication partners (Barahona Guerrero, 2017; Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Ellis, 2004; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Furlich, 2014; Hsu, 2010; Pribyl et al., 2004; Velez & Cano, 2008; Witt et al., 2004). This, to some extent, might lead to conceptual confusion as a particular communication behavior might not receive similar responses among individuals in different circumstances. An examination into the immediacy behaviors and the perceived immediacy, the mediating effects, in the message receivers would contribute to a better understanding of this matter within given contexts. Therefore, this study aimed at identifying instructors' immediacy behaviors in classroom instruction and exploring the effectiveness of immediacy behaviors of the instructors in inducing students' perceived immediacy.

### **Immediacy in Context**

Originally introduced to the field of communication study by Albert Mehrabian (1966), immediacy has been a subject of interest for communication scholars for decades. Mehrabian's Immediacy Principle was related to the typical behaviors people engaged in during their communication interactions. The principle stated that "people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (Mehrabian, 1971, p. 1). This underscores Mehrabian's perspective of immediacy as a manifestation of liking, demonstrated through various communication behaviors.

According to Richmond and McCroskey (1992) and Richmond et al. (2003), Mehrabian's concept of immediacy served as the foundation for investigating the field of instructional communication. However, the focus has since shifted to the use of immediacy behaviors to induce positive relational effects (e.g., liking) rather than emphasizing the psychological constructs that could prompt these behaviors.

In instructional communication contexts, immediacy, as defined by Richmond et al. (2018), pertains to the perception of psychological or physical closeness between teachers and students, leading to a reduction in distance between them. This perception is influenced by both verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, which signal the teachers' willingness to approach and be approached by their students.

Immediacy behaviors which were found in classroom communication included both verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors. Gorham (1988) mentioned a set

of verbal messages utilized by teachers in instructional contexts. These verbal cues can convey a sense of immediacy. These behaviors were available in Gorham's verbal immediacy measure, namely the Verbal Immediacy Behavior Scale which incorporated 17 items of verbally immediate behaviors such as using personal examples, inclusive pronouns (i.e., *we* and *our*), humor, and address forms (i.e., calling students by their names). These verbal messages were considered immediacy communicative cues as they carried the connotation of immediacy and thus fostered rapport between the communication partners: teachers and students.

In addition, nonverbal cues also play a crucial role in communication. Richmond et al. (2003) identified five categories of nonverbal behaviors that can convey a sense of immediacy in instructional communication. These categories include eye behavior (e.g., eye contact), body movement (e.g., moving around the classroom while teaching), proximity (e.g., moving closer to students when talking to them), tactile behavior (e.g., touching students on the shoulder or arm while talking to them), and vocalization (e.g., the use of a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class). These nonverbal behaviors could signify the degree of psychological distance between people and cultivate the perception of immediacy.

As the current study is conducted in an instructional context, communication between instructors and students is a primary emphasis. Communication immediacy in this study refers to the relational communication construct which can be expressed through both verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors. Immediacy behaviors are those behaviors that communicate warmth and positive affect, express willingness to engage in interaction, and decrease psychological distance between the interlocutors (teachers and students in this circumstance). The perception of these immediacy messages would foster a sense of positive relational closeness and contribute to an enhanced learning experience for the students.

### **Perceived Immediacy as a Mediator**

The concept of perceived immediacy was originally proposed by Kelly (2012), referring to the mediating perceptions of the degree of psychological closeness by a message receiver toward the message sender. This perception can be prompted by immediacy behaviors such as sharing personal examples, using inclusive pronouns (e.g., *we* and *our*), making eye contact, keeping close proximity, and addressing people by their names. Given that not all immediacy behaviors inevitably result in identical perceptions across different individuals, Kelly (2012) asserted that investigating the mediation between these behaviors and their associated outcomes is valuable. This investigation helps to understand how these behaviors are perceived and how they can be suitably applied in different contexts.

As previously mentioned, evidence from communication literature has confirmed the relationship between communication immediacy and the affective outcome between the relational partners. Despite the considerable number of immediacy studies conducted for over decades, Kelly (2012) and Kelly et al. (2015) have raised concerns about the depth of understanding of the theory. This lack of understanding could potentially cause confusion regarding the concepts of immediacy behaviors and perceived immediacy. The concern arises from the fact that not all

individuals perceive a particular immediacy behavior in the same way. Instead, they react based on their perception of the immediacy message conveyed through a specific behavior, rather than responding directly to the behavior itself. Previous studies investigated the relationship between the immediacy behavior inputs and the relational and affective outcomes (e.g., liking, self-disclosure, and motivation). However, these studies often overlooked the psychological mediator, or perceived immediacy, as they directly examined the association between a set of behaviors conveying immediacy and affective outcomes (Barahona Guerrero, 2017; Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Furlich, 2014; Hsu, 2010; Pribyl et al., 2004; Velez & Cano, 2008; Witt et al., 2004). The frequency of occurrence might indicate the presence of immediacy behaviors, but it provides little insight into the psychological impact on message receivers. Therefore, to thoroughly investigate communication immediacy, both immediacy behaviors and perceived immediacy must be considered. This comprehensive approach is especially important in specific contexts, such as Thailand, where empirical reports on both behaviors and perceptions of these behaviors remain limited.

### **Communication Immediacy through Cultural Perspectives**

Perceived immediacy of message receivers determines their response to particular immediacy behaviors from the message sender. According to Chen and Starosta (2005), the underlying rule governing both verbal and nonverbal human communication is culture. Therefore, understanding cultures is crucial for comprehending communication characteristics within specific societies.

Andersen (2012) explained the relationship between the degree of immediacy and cultures using the notion of contact culture developed by Hall (1966). Since immediacy relates to the expression of closeness, intimacy, and willingness in communicative interactions, cultures that embrace considerable expression of immediacy are regarded as contact cultures. Anderson (2012) asserted that people from contact cultures tend to stand closer and engage in more frequent physical contact compared to those from low-contact cultures. In contrast, individuals from low-contact cultures maintain a wider interpersonal space and engage in less frequent physical contact.

In addition, Andersen (2012) also elaborated on the influence of context culture, as described by Hall (1976), influences the communicative behaviors among people from different backgrounds. Context variations addressed differences in communication styles, particularly the directness of the communicative messages. People from high context cultures, especially those from Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand, tend to be implicit and rely more on non-verbal communication. As a result, individuals from high-context cultures are adept at detecting and understanding non-verbal cues and subtle messages that are not explicitly expressed, such as true feelings or opinions. In contrast, low-context cultures are more expressive and explicit. Individuals from low-context cultures use more verbal cues and tend to be more direct in their communication.

Further to Hall's (1966) classification of contact cultures and Hall's (1976) concept of context orientation, immediacy communicative behaviors can also be

understood through different cultural dimensions as proposed by Hofstede (2001), including individualism versus collectivism and power distance.

Collectivism and individualism are cultural orientations that explain how communication is influenced by one's relationship with others. According to Andersen (2012), individualists tend to be independent, verbally and emotionally expressive, and maintain more interpersonal distance. In contrast, collectivism emphasizes group cohesion, proximity, and conformity to collective norms, often suppressing extreme emotional expression. Cutrone (2005) found that collectivists demonstrate supportive communicative behaviors, such as nodding to show attentiveness during conversations, reflecting their orientation toward group harmony. In essence, collectivists prioritize group unity, whereas individualists prioritize independence and self-expression.

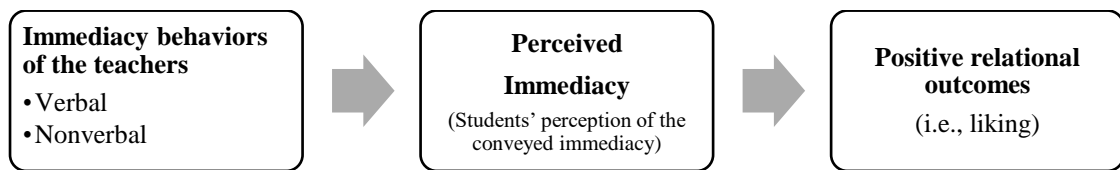
Cultural differences in power distance, the degree of willingness of people to accept the inequality of power distribution within society, significantly influence communicative behaviors, as discussed by Samovar et al. (2014). Societies with low power distance emphasize equality among individuals, whereas high power distance cultures place importance on acknowledging status differences and unequal power distribution. Andersen (2012) observed variations in tactile behaviors between these cultural systems, noting that physical contact, such as touch, is often avoided in high-power distance societies due to its perceived inappropriateness. Furthermore, Andersen (2008) also observed that subordinates in high-power distance cultures display visible bodily tension when interacting with superiors, often smiling as a gesture of politeness and deference. This hierarchical relationship was also evident in the classroom context of the cultures with large power discrepancies, as reported by Gudykunst and Kim (1992). For example, in Asian cultures students are expected to exhibit modest and deferential behavior toward their teachers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Effective communication can foster a better relationship between individuals and consequently lead to favorable outcomes in various circumstances. In an instructional context, immediacy behaviors are communicative behaviors that convey immediacy (e.g., warmth and willingness) in interactions. These behaviors have the potential to promote engagement between teachers and students (Richmond et al., 2018). Immediacy behaviors are broadly classified into verbal forms (Gorham, 1988) and nonverbal immediacy behaviors (Richmond et al., 2003). Perceived immediacy, as proposed by Kelly (2012), acts as a mediator between immediacy behaviors and relational outcomes. This perception is prompted by immediacy behaviors, causing message receivers to respond based on how they perceive these behaviors, rather than responding directly to the behaviors themselves. Thus, when a message receiver perceives the conveyed immediacy (indicating the willingness to approach and be approached by the communication partner) through the communicative behaviors of the sender, this perception can potentially reduce the relational distance between them. Subsequently, this can influence how the message is received and responded to, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**  
*Theoritical Framework*



Since behaviors are perceived differently by individuals, investigating both immediacy behaviors and perceived immediacy, which mediate how message receivers respond, enhances understanding within specific contexts. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate instructors' immediacy behaviors in a Thai university and their effectiveness in inducing students' perceived immediacy. The two research objectives were: (1) to identify instructors' immediacy behaviors in a Thai university context, and (2) to explore the effectiveness of immediacy behaviors of the instructors in inducing students' perceived immediacy.

### **Methodology**

The research design utilized a mixed methods approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative studies to address the two research questions: (1) *What are the immediacy behaviors that instructors use in their classroom instructions?* and (2) *What are the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the instructors' immediacy behaviors in inducing their perceived immediacy?* The data collection techniques used included direct observation, survey questionnaires, and focus-group interviews.

### **Participants**

The study included two Thai instructors and 234 Thai students from a university in Thailand. The instructors were selected using non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, for direct observation. Both instructors were Thai, with one female and one male informant instructor.

Student participants were selected using a non-probabilistic purposive sampling approach, with 234 students invited to participate in the questionnaire administration. This included 36 male students and 198 female students. Participants were from different academic years: 50 sophomores, 114 juniors, 68 seniors, and 2 fifth-year students. All participants were enrolled students who had experienced on-site classroom learning and were studying in a public university in northern Thailand during the data collection period (first semester of the academic year 2021).

### **Direct Observation**

Two instructors were observed for their communication behaviors during their classroom instruction using the direct observation checklist for instructors' immediacy behaviors. The checklist consisted of 29 items of immediacy behaviors adapted from Gorham's (1988) verbal immediacy scale and Richmond et al.'s (2003) revised-nonverbal immediacy measure. The 29 items of immediacy behaviors were classified

into 15 verbal behaviors and 14 nonverbal behaviors. The list of immediacy behaviors is similar to the Immediacy Behavior Questionnaire and Perceived Immediacy Questionnaire as shown in Table 1. However, one item, “*address me by name or nickname*”, was excluded from the direct observation checklist as the observed data was collected by the researcher, and there was item number 5 “*address students by name or nickname*” captured the data regarding how the teachers addressed their students in the classes.

The immediacy behaviors were recorded using partial interval recording approach (PIR). According to Pustejovsky and Swan (2015), PIR involves dividing the observation period into intervals, during which observed behaviors are rated dichotomously (yes/no) based on whether they occurred in each interval. In this study, each interval lasted for 30 minutes.

As data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, only laboratory classes were conducted on-site, following the university’s policy. The observations were carried out in laboratory classes taught by two instructors: two classes were taught by male instructor with 12 and 20 students (lasting two hours and five hours respectively), and two classes were taught by the female instructor, each with 8 students (lasting two hours per class meeting). Thus, a total of 22 intervals were observed: 14 intervals from the classes taught by the male instructor and 8 taught by the female instructor. All class meetings were conducted in Thai.

The direct observation was conducted with the researcher acting as a complete observer. Data collection was overt, as the instructor informants were aware of the observation’s purpose and the researcher’s presence in their classes. However, they were not asked to modify their behaviors. Therefore, the obtained data reflects the actual immediacy behaviors the instructors engaged within their classroom environments.

The data from the direct observation checklist were analyzed manually, counting the frequency of the intervals at which the behaviors occurred and reporting the percentage of their occurrence to capture the data regarding the actual immediacy behaviors exhibited by the instructors.

## Questionnaires

The Immediacy Behavior Questionnaire and Perceived Immediacy Questionnaire were administered to 234 student participants from different classes. The two questionnaires consisted of 30 items of immediacy behaviors (16 verbal and 14 nonverbal behaviors) in a five-point Likert scale adapted from Gorham’s (1988) verbal immediacy scale and Richmond et al.’s (2003) revised-nonverbal immediacy measure, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

### *Immediacy Behaviors*

	<b>Immediacy Behaviors</b>	<b>Type of Behavior</b>
1.	Use personal examples or talks about experiences she/he has had outside of class.	Verbal
2.	Ask questions or encourages students to talk.	Verbal

	<b>Immediacy Behaviors</b>	<b>Type of Behavior</b>
3.	Get into discussions based on something a student brings up even when this doesn't seem to be part of his/her lecture plan.	Verbal
4.	Use humor in class.	Verbal
5.	Address students by name or nickname.	Verbal
6.	Address me by name or nickname.	Verbal
7.	Get into conversations with individual students before or after class.	Verbal
8.	Initiate conversations with students before, after or outside of class.	Verbal
9.	Refer to class as "our" class or what "we" are doing.	Verbal
10.	Provide feedback on individual work through comments on papers, oral discussions, etc.	Verbal
11.	Ask how students feel about an assignment, due date or discussion topic.	Verbal
12.	Invite students to telephone, send a Facebook or Line message, email, or meet with him/her outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something.	Verbal
13.	Ask questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions.	Verbal
14.	Praise students' work, actions or comments.	Verbal
15.	Discuss about things unrelated to class with individual students or with the class as a whole.	Verbal
16.	Be addressed by his/her nickname by the students.	Verbal
17.	Gesture while talking to the class.	Nonverbal
18.	Lean toward students when talking to them.	Nonverbal
19.	Move closer to students when talking to them.	Nonverbal
20.	Look at the class while talking.	Nonverbal
21.	Smile at the class while talking.	Nonverbal
22.	Move around the classroom while teaching.	Nonverbal
23.	Be animated when talking to students.	Nonverbal
24.	Sit or stand close to students while talking to them.	Nonverbal
25.	Has a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.	Nonverbal
26.	Maintain eye contact with students when talking to them.	Nonverbal
27.	Use his/her hands and arms to gesture while talking to students.	Nonverbal
28.	Smile at individual students in the class.	Nonverbal
29.	Look directly at students while talking to them.	Nonverbal
30.	Use a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class.	Nonverbal

Regarding the Immediacy Behavior Questionnaire, the participants were asked to recall an on-site class they attended and rate the frequency of each immediacy behavior exhibited by the instructor in that class ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

The Perceived Immediacy Questionnaire was designed to assess the extent to which specific immediacy behaviors of instructors conveyed their willingness to approach and be approached by students. Participants were asked to indicate their perception of the effectiveness of each immediacy behavior of the instructors in expressing the instructors' willingness to approach and be approached by students on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (very ineffective) to 5 (very effective).

The quantitative data from the Immediacy Behavior and Perceived Immediacy Questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate the mean and standard deviation. Each item of the questionnaires was analyzed separately to examine



the average frequency of occurrence for each immediacy behavior and to report students' perceptions of the behavior's effectiveness in expressing the instructor's willingness to approach or be approached by students.

### Focus Group Interviews

Nineteen participants were recruited to the focus group interviews based on the results of the Perceived Immediacy Questionnaire to further explore insights regarding the data gained from the questionnaires. Ten student interviewees were those who scored the highest, and the other nine students scored the lowest in the Perceived Immediacy Questionnaire in order to obtain the most complete data from different groups of students. There were four focus group interviews with 4-5 students participating in each. The primary language for the interview was Thai in order to prevent difficulties that might occur because of a language barrier.

The interview protocol used as a guideline for the focus group interview consisted of two sections of questions: (A) the immediacy behaviors of the instructors (e.g., *Instructors' immediacy behaviors refer to instructors' behaviors that increase psychological closeness between instructors and students. What specific behaviors come to mind when you think of instructors' immediacy behaviors?*) and (B) the significance of the perceived immediacy as a mediator between immediacy behaviors and the development of positive relationships between students and their instructors (e.g., *How are teachers' immediacy behaviors significant to your relationship with your teachers?*)

Regarding the qualitative data from the focus group interviews, thematic analysis was conducted in order to obtain the findings related to teachers' immediacy behaviors and how they played roles in inducing students' perceived immediacy. According to Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic analytical process is divided into six consecutive stages of: familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. The data from the interviews were analyzed through this systematic six-stage process of thematic analysis.

## Results

### Immediacy Behaviors of the Instructors

The findings from the questionnaire revealed that all immediacy behaviors of the teachers were found although with different frequencies. Five behaviors occurred at a very high frequency: inviting students to contact the teacher via different channels or to meet with the teachers outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something ( $M = 4.38, SD = 0.74$ ); referring to class as *our class* or *what we are doing* ( $M = 4.28, SD = 0.84$ ); maintaining eye contact with students when talking to them ( $M = 4.22, SD = 0.85$ ); looking directly at students while talking to them ( $M = 4.22, SD = 0.81$ ), and looking at the class while talking ( $M = 4.21, SD = 0.87$ ). The behaviors with a very high level of frequency are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Instructors' Immediacy Behaviors at the Very High Level of Frequency from the Immediacy Behavior Questionnaire*

Immediacy behaviors	Mean	S.D.	Type of behavior
12. Invite students to telephone, send a Facebook or Line message, email, or meet with him/her outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something.	4.38	0.74	Verbal
9. Refer to class as "our" class or what "we" are doing.	4.28	0.84	Verbal
26. Maintain eye contact with students when talking to them.	4.22	0.85	Non-verbal
29. Look directly at students while talking to them.	4.22	0.81	Non-verbal
20. Look at the class while talking.	4.21	0.87	Non-verbal

However, the least frequently occurring behaviors found at the moderate level included being addressed by his/her nickname by the students ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ), moving around the classroom while teaching ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), leaning toward students when talking to them ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), getting into conversations with individual students before or after class ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ), and moving closer to students when talking to them ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Instructors' Immediacy Behaviors at the Moderate Level of Frequency from the Immediacy Behavior Questionnaire*

Immediacy behaviors	Mean	S.D.	Type of behavior
16. Be addressed by his/her nickname by the students.	3.26	1.33	Verbal
22. Move around the classroom while teaching.	3.26	1.21	Non-verbal
18. Lean toward students when talking to them.	3.25	1.15	Non-verbal
7. Get into conversations with individual students before or after class.	3.23	1.20	Verbal
19. Move closer to students when talking to them.	3.18	1.21	Non-verbal

Regarding data obtained from the direct observation, all 29 behaviors on the checklist were observed, albeit with varying frequencies. As depicted in Table 4, from the total 22 observed intervals, the highest frequency (22 intervals, 100%) of the observed immediacy behaviors were seven nonverbal behaviors, which included: (1) gesturing while talking to the class, (2) moving around the classroom while teaching, (3) sitting or standing close to students while talking to them, (4) having a very relaxed body position while talking to the class, (5) maintaining eye contact with students when talking to them, (6) using his/her hands and arms to gesture while talking to students, and (7) looking directly at students while talking to them.

**Table 4**

*Instructors' Immediacy Behaviors with the Highest Frequency from the Direct Observation*

<b>Immediacy Behaviors</b>	<b>Intervals</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Type of Behavior</b>
17. Gesture while talking to the class.	22	100	Nonverbal
22. Move around the classroom while teaching.	22	100	Nonverbal
24. Sit or stand close to students while talking to them.	22	100	Nonverbal
25. Have a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.	22	100	Nonverbal
26. Maintain eye contact with students when talking to them.	22	100	Nonverbal
27. Use his/her hands and arms to gesture while talking to students.	22	100	Nonverbal
29. Look directly at students while talking to them.	22	100	Nonverbal

On the other hand, as listed in Table 5, the findings revealed five behaviors that occurred least frequently, totaling four intervals or 18.18% out of the total 22 intervals. These behaviors were all verbal behaviors including (1) initiating conversations with students before, after or outside of class; (2) asking how students feel about an assignment, due date, or discussion topic; (3) inviting students to telephone, send a Facebook or Line message, email or meet with him/her outside of class if students have questions or want to discuss or clarify any points; (4) asking questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions; and (5) being addressed by his/her nickname by the students.

**Table 5**

*Instructors' Immediacy Behaviors with the lowest Frequency from the Direct Observation*

<b>Immediacy Behaviors</b>	<b>Intervals</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Type of Behavior</b>
8. Initiate conversations with students before, after, or outside of class.	4	18.18	Verbal
11. Ask how students feel about an assignment, due date, or discussion topic.	4	18.18	Verbal
12. Invite students to telephone, send a Facebook or Line message, email, or meet with him/her outside of class if students have questions or want to discuss or clarify any points.	4	18.18	Verbal
13. Ask questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions.	4	18.18	Verbal
16. Be addressed by his/her nickname by the students.	4	18.18	Verbal

According to the data from the interviews, students revealed that the sense of immediacy could be expressed through the following verbal behaviors of the teachers: making small talks with students, addressing individual students with their names, using inclusive pronoun *we* or *our* when referring to the entire class, checking if students can

follow the lesson, repeating or recapping the answers of the students, and encouraging students to speak out in the class as illustrated by the following statements from the interviewees:

*I like it when teachers engage in small talk with the class before starting the lesson. This could be about current news or campus events, providing a refreshing start to the class. (S2)*

*When teachers refer to us (the whole class) as 'we' or 'our class,' it gives the impression that the teachers consider themselves part of our group, and it makes me feel less distant. (S6)*

*Instead of 'you', the teacher calls us by our names when it is specific to an individual student. (S14)*

*I think of Ajarn \_\_[the name of the teacher]\_\_. He often repeated students' answers. I knew that he was truly listening to us (the students). I liked it when he encouraged students to speak up and repeatedly reassured the class not to worry about whether their answers were correct or not. He simply wanted to hear from the students. (S12)*

Students also mentioned different nonverbal cues that could express immediacy of the teachers, including eye behavior, smiling, kinesthetic movement, proximity, and tactile behavior. On the other hand, cautions and recommendations have also been mentioned regarding the engagement of some communicative behaviors that could potentially yield undesirable consequences. For example, while eye contact is generally viewed as an immediacy behavior, it might also be perceived as intimidating when accompanied by non-immediacy cues such as frowning or head shaking. To avoid this negative impact on the teacher-student relationship, eye contact should take place with some other immediacy behaviors such as head nodding or smiling. Physical touch was another issue raised during the focus group discussions. Many students reported that a slight tap on their shoulders by the teachers could communicate a supportive or an encouraging message. However, the issue of gender differences between teachers and students has also been discussed, as tactile contact can be sensitive in interactions between teachers and students of different gender.

### **Students' Perceptions toward the Effectiveness of the Teacher's Immediacy Behaviors in Inducing Perceived Immediacy**

From the questionnaire, four immediacy behaviors were reported as very effective in expressing the instructor's willingness to approach and be approached by students. All of these four behaviors were nonverbal, including looking directly at students while talking to them ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ), being animated when talking to students ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ), maintaining eye contact with students when talking to them ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), and using a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ), as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*The Very Effective Immediacy Behaviors to Express the Instructors' Willingness to Approach and Be Approached by the Students*

Immediacy behaviors	Mean	S.D.	Type of behavior
29. Look directly at students while talking to them.	4.26	0.79	Non-Verbal
23. Be animated when talking to students.	4.21	0.86	Non-Verbal
26. Maintain eye contact with students when talking to them.	4.21	0.80	Non-Verbal
30. Use a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class.	4.21	0.91	Non-Verbal

Considering the five categories of nonverbal immediacy behaviors identified by Richmond et al. (2003), these four behaviors can be classified as follows: (1) eye behaviors (e.g., *looking directly at students while talking to them* and *maintaining eye contact with students when talking to them*), (2) body movement (e.g., *being animated when talking to students*), and (3) vocalization (e.g., *using a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class*). Notably, tactile behaviors and proximity cues were not found to have the same level of impact.

Out of the 30 items of immediacy behaviors, 25 behaviors were rated effective in conveying the instructors' willingness to approach or be approached by the students. Only one behavior, *being addressed by his/her nickname by the students*, was reported as neither effective nor ineffective to express the willingness of the instructors to approach and be approached by the students ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ).

However, none of the immediacy behaviors was found ineffective in expressing the willingness of the teachers to approach or be approached by the students. From the interviews, students' perceptions of the teachers' immediacy behaviors had an impact on both their perceptions of desirable teacher qualities such as empathy, openness, and approachability and the formation of positive relationships between teachers and students, as illustrated by the following statements from the interviewees:

*To me, when the teachers are open to students' opinions, it shows they genuinely care about the diversity of students' needs and backgrounds and take them into consideration when teaching. Since students come from various backgrounds, their progress may not be the same at the same pace. (S11)*

*These [immediacy] behaviors of the teachers showed that they were trying to approach and be friendly with the students. They bridged the gap between themselves and the students and also created an open environment for students to approach them. It was a mutual effort, where not only the teachers were friendly to students but also approachable, allowing students to reach out to them as well. (S2)*



This positive impression, in turn, contributed to academic benefits, including increased engagement in learning activities, reduced learning anxiety, and enhanced motivation for learning, as an interviewee noted:

*With this positive perception, I felt that attending the class was enjoyable and relaxed even though the learning content might not be easy at all. It appeared that I was motivated to work hard and strive for excellent achievement in the course. (S4)*

## Discussion

### Instructors' Immediacy Behaviors

The findings revealed students experienced different immediacy behaviors, including both verbal and nonverbal cues, from their teachers at varying frequencies. Teachers had numerous opportunities to engage in these behaviors across a range of communication situations, from small talk before lessons to interactions during lectures and conversations after class. This may account for the higher frequency of some behaviors compared to others. Communicative cues such as the use of inclusive pronouns and eye contact were clear and explicit, making them easier for students to recognize.

Moreover, cultural background seemed to play a crucial role in the engagement of some particular immediacy behaviors. For example, the use of collective pronouns can be understood within the context of the collectivism cultural dimension (Hofstede, 2001). Collective pronouns such as *we* or *our* can express the teachers' intentions to foster inclusivity among all class members including both the teachers and students. This verbal immediacy behavior helps reduce distance between teachers and students, thereby strengthening the sense of collectiveness. In addition to this collectivist orientation, as noted by Cutrone (2005), backchanneling behaviors such as head nods, smiles, or indications of attentive listening are used in collectivistic cultures to show supportive engagement and interest in communication partners. The frequent engagement in eye behaviors, such as maintaining eye contact while interacting with students, identified in this study, can also be regarded as backchanneling behaviors indicating the attention and support of the listeners (teachers) to the speakers (students). These communicative cues such as using inclusive pronouns and backchannel behaviors, to some extent, reflect Thailand's collectivist cultural background, which emphasizes group cohesion.

One of the five least frequently occurring behaviors was the verbal practice of teachers being addressed by their nicknames. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the influence of Thai culture. In Thailand, teachers are typically addressed by their professional title *Ajarn*, a neutral and respectful term of address. Although *Ajarn* can be followed by the teacher's full name or nickname specifically, addressing teachers simply as *Ajarn* does not diminish the level of respect conveyed. In addition, considering this practice through the lens of Hofstede's (2001) power-distance cultural dimension is relevant. Respecting hierarchy is a fundamental value in interactions between subordinates and individuals of higher status, particularly in high power-distance cultures. Addressing teachers with the professional title *Ajarn*

in the Thai context, which falls under the high power-distance cultural framework, reflects the respect that students hold for their teachers. This notion aligns with the findings of the study by Jenvdhanaken and Rangponsumrit (2020), who investigated cultural differences between Thai and Spanish teachers. Their research reported a greater level of power distance in Thai culture compared to Spanish culture, highlighting the use of *Ajarn* to address teachers as an example of the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in Thailand

Additionally, leaning toward the students while talking to them and moving closer to students when talking to them were also the least frequently observed behaviors in the questionnaire. The proxemic issue was also raised during the interviews, where students expressed discomfort when teachers stood too close or within hand-reach distance. This incidence can be explained in light of low contact culture as described by Hall (1966), who classified cultures into high contact and low contact cultures according to the degree of interpersonal space between communicators. High contact cultures (e.g., South Americans and Arabs) tend to maintain closer interpersonal space and engage in more frequent physical touch, while low contact cultures (e.g., Asians), utilize a larger space in their interpersonal interactions. Given that Thailand falls within the low-contact cultural group, the act of a teacher moving too close to students might be perceived as inappropriate, potentially invading personal space and causing discomfort. In the context of this study, where all participants were Thai, it is reasonable to anticipate the adoption of a low-contact spatial manner in their interactions. Consequently, the frequency of these two proxemic behaviors was lower than others.

Moving around the classroom while teaching was rated as the least frequent occurrence in the questionnaire; however, it was observed most frequently during the direct observations. This contradiction in the data could be attributed to the class size. Moore et al. (1996) mentioned that smaller class sizes allow students to perceive the teacher's immediacy behaviors to a greater degree compared to larger classes with more students. Teaching a smaller class provides teachers with more space and time to interact with each student, which is a limitation in larger classes. In this study, the observations were conducted in laboratory classes with a small number of students and a considerable amount of space. Instructors were able to move around and visit each student's work station to discuss and monitor their assigned experiments. Consequently, the frequency of this immediacy behavior was high during the observations. However, the questionnaire findings may be influenced by larger class sizes, leading to lower observed frequency of this behavior compared to the direct observations.

### **Students' Perceived Immediacy Influenced by the Instructors' Immediacy Behaviors**

Considering the findings of this study, the notable perceptions toward the effectiveness of the four nonverbal behaviors (i.e., *looking directly at students while talking to them, maintaining eye contact with students when talking to them, being animated when talking to students, and using a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class*) might stem from being a high-context cultural society, similar to many other Asian countries (Hall, 1976). In terms of directness and explicitness of the

communicative messages, individuals from high-context cultures tend to employ a greater array of non-verbal cues and are able to understand implicit messages. This stands in contrast to individuals from low-context cultures, who generally exhibit a more direct and explicit communication style. D'souza (2018) studied students' perceptions of teacher immediacy behaviors within the Thai educational context. Thai students, both male and female, were similarly able to recognize the nonverbal immediacy behaviors of teachers. The influence of Thailand's high-context culture was identified in connection with a communication style characterized by indirectness and a reliance on nonverbal cues. Thus, as the context of the current study was Thailand, the influence of the high-context culture on the communication style of the participants could be anticipated. This is supported by the fact that eye behaviors, body movements, and vocal tones were found to be highly effective in eliciting the perceived immediacy among the participants.

However, concerning the exclusion of tactile and proximity communicative cues from the group of highly effective cues for inducing students' perceived immediacy, this outcome could be attributed to the influence of low-contact cultures (Hall, 1966) as previously discussed. Individuals who adhered to norms of the low-contact cultures maintain greater interpersonal distance and minimize physical touch during interpersonal interaction. Becoming too close spatially or engaging in excessive physical contact in such low-contact contexts could be viewed as an intrusion into personal privacy and thus deemed inappropriate. Consequently, in order to align with the appropriate norms within this low-contact cultural context and facilitate the development of smooth interpersonal relationships, teachers are expected to be aware of these limitations and integrate them as part of their code of conduct. The findings of this study are similar to those of Phondee et al. (2022), who investigated teacher immediacy behaviors in Thai secondary schools. The study reported that the practice of lightly touching students' shoulders or arms to express care and concern by the teachers was found at the lowest frequency, despite being categorized as an immediacy behavior.

In addition to the above mentioned low-contact cultural influence, Thailand is also characterized as a high power-distance society based on Hofstede's (2001) PDI. Within high power-distance cultures, there is a tendency to avoid tactile and close proxemic interactions. Moreover, Andersen (2012) reported that communicative behaviors involving physical contact, such as touching, are deemed inappropriate in interactions with superiors. Consequently, it is recommended that such instances should be avoided within high power-distance cultural contexts. Additionally, the researcher also noted that individuals in high power-distance cultures often engage in behaviors that demonstrate respect and appeasement toward those in higher positions. For example, these behaviors might include smiling more frequently (Andersen, 2008) or adopting a modest and deferential attitude toward teachers within a classroom setting (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992).

Students reported their perceptions of the positive qualities encompassed in the immediacy behaviors exhibited by their instructors. When instructors engage in immediacy behaviors, they tend to be perceived as empathetic, open-minded, and approachable. These perceptions can indicate the teachers' degree of approachability, which influences whether students choose to engage or avoid interactions with them. In

other words, students' perceptions of these affective qualities foster the development of a positive rapport between them and their teachers. This positive effect extends to the classroom atmosphere, creating an environment conducive to active student engagement in various activities. This finding aligns with Kelly's (2012) observations, which highlight the role of perceived immediacy as a mediator between immediacy behaviors and their impact on relationship development. Message receivers must first perceive the affective qualities conveyed through immediacy behaviors to determine the degree of relational closeness they are willing to establish with the message senders. Successfully establishing a close relationship between teachers and students consequently benefits the students' learning experience.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, students reported varied experiences with different immediacy behaviors exhibited by their instructors at different levels of frequency. The findings highlighted five immediacy behaviors that instructors engaged in with a very high frequency including *inviting students to contact him/her outside of class for questions or discussions, referring to the class using the inclusive pronouns 'we' or 'our', maintaining eye contact with students when talking to them, looking directly at students while talking to them, and looking at the class while talking*. The engagement in the immediacy behaviors of the teachers could induce perceived immediacy among students leading to a reduction in relational distance between teachers and students. Four communicative cues including eye behaviors (e.g., *looking directly at students while talking to students and maintaining eye contact with students when talking to students*), body movement (e.g., *being animated when talking to students*), and vocalization (e.g., *using a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class*) were reported as highly effective in inducing students' perceived immediacy. In the context of this study, students' perceived immediacy was associated with qualities such as empathy, open-mindedness, and approachability that they perceived in their teachers. Cultural background appeared to play a crucial role in both the engagement and the perception of specific immediacy behaviors. For instance, the influence of the low-contact culture on interpersonal space utilization, collectivism demonstrated through the use of collective pronouns, and power distance reflected in the Thai practice of addressing teachers were all evident factors.

Awareness of this matter in a Thai context would therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding to the development of the communication immediacy theory. In the instructional context, focusing on immediacy behaviors enables teachers to adopt effective and appropriate communicative cues that foster relationships with their students. This positive relationship between teachers and students, in turn, enhances students' engagement in learning activities and supports their overall academic achievement.

Future studies related to instructional communication immediacy should be conducted with different groups of students or a larger sample size. This is in acknowledgement of the limitation of this study, which was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to classes with a large number of students was, therefore, limited due to the preventive policy during the virus outbreak. The differences in class

sizes as well as demographic background of the samples might elicit different immediacy behaviors of the teachers and students' perceived immediacy toward certain behaviors.

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