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### PERCEPTIONS OF POST GRADUATE STUDENTS ABOUT TEACHER'S COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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#### ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to explore the perceptions of students about teacher's communication practices in the classroom at Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore. The research was qualitative in nature and phenomenological research design was used in the study. The population of the study consisted of M.Phil. scholars of Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of the Punjab, Lahore. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. Using purposive sampling 10 M. Phil (Education) scholars participated in the study. Semi-Structured interview were conducted in the study for data collection from the participants. The data was analyzed and transcribed using thematic analysis. After the analysis it was concluded that competitive environment set by the teacher in the classroom is beneficial for students as it motivates them to excel, negative behavior on the end of teachers decreases cognitive gains of students and it also decreases their motivational level for studies. Encouragement and praise by the teacher enhances the motivational of students for studies because it increases their interest in the content. Moreover, encouragement and praise by the teacher promotes affective learning on the end of students. In nutshell, students had a positive perception about teacher communication in the classroom.

## INTRODUCTION

Effective learning takes place when teacher and students both communicate effectively the classroom. The way in which teacher interacts with students affects directly on the quality of education. For instance, teachers play an important role in providing guidance and direction to the students. Their guidance help students make adjustments appropriate to the requirements of their environment. With this communication pattern, teachers develop a relationship with students. This relationship plays an instrumental role in the social and emotional development of students. In terms of the inter and intra personal strategies that students use in their lives (Silver et al., 2005). The affective dimension of instruction has strong influence on students' academic growth and general school experience (Cushman & Cowan, 2010).

When teachers and students, similarly or differently understand the importance of classroom interactions, they can create an environment that is helpful for the development and improvement of their self-worth (Nuthall, 2007). A positive relationship between teacher and students enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Communication in the classroom is often the mirror of particular culture, social and historical background. The economic progress of China in the past two decades is remarkable. At the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational reforms were launched (Department of Education, PRC, 2001) to prepare students according to the requirements of the ever changing and interconnected world. The primary goal of the educational reform is to address the issues of overemphasis on students' development of basic skills to prepare them for testing purposes, insufficient application level, training of problem solving, the assessment process used for selecting and classifying purposes, the assessment processes used for selecting and classifying students in order to identify students' needs and improve instruction and excessive assignment work load for students (Liu & Qi, 2005).

The research has shown that it is necessary to provide feedback to teachers on their communication style as they are often not aware of the aspects of their behavior and feedback they provide to their students (She & Fisher, 2002). There is not complete homogeneity in western and eastern teaching behaviors. Distinctions among communication styles have been made on the basis of culture. Researchers have made these distinctions on the basis of Eastern (Confucian Heritage Culture) and Western (Socratic Style) environments (Watkins & Biggs, 2001)

It is essential when communicating for the recipient of a particular message, to be able to extract relevant information from particular piece of input. It is usually assumed that behaviors of participants in a social setting also influences others in that setting (Mullen et al., 1997). It is also argued in the educational setting that the communication style in which the content is communicated to the students is also of vital importance.

There has been a great deal of investigation into western student interaction while a little research has been conducted in Chinese schools. According to Biggs and Watkins (2001) good teaching in the western culture is characterized by a teacher dominated room. Although less is known about eastern culture

(Confucian Heritage Culture). However, on the basis of the literature it is said that good deal of knowledge is based on the ideal principles of Confucius along with individual studies as opposed to any meta-analytic ones.

### *Dimensions of Communication Style*

#### *Communication and Final Grades*

Students perceive and develop the impressions of the teacher behavior through the styles of their communication. Varying communication patterns have vital influence on students' grades. The manner through which teachers communicate with their students is one of the numerous factors that help shape productive teaching and how the student's perception of the teacher's communication also affect their learning and their feelings all-round the process of learning. Verbal and non-verbal communication on the account of the teacher build up strengthen positive and effective instructional interaction which has an immediate effect on students frame of mind towards their academic grades (Richmond & McCrosky, 2005). A study conducted by (Riahipour et al., 2014) on students' perception of the teachers' knowledge base and clarity on their specific subjects releases interesting findings. The teaching expertise, the specific of knowledge at hand and the communication style of teachers were all documented as perceived by students. The result of the study showed that each of these elements had a significant relationship with the academic grades of the students. A study in Taiwan indicated that positive behavior of teachers results in higher student achievement (She & Fisher 2002).

#### *Challenging*

Teachers questioning and reactions to student answers are key deterrents in the interaction between teacher and students. The learning environment is changing for the young student population. Because of the dynamic trends of globalization students like more challenging environment. Students who perceive their education setting emphasizing competition and norm referenced criteria for assessment reported adopted a social comparison as a means to assess their academic success. In contrast, students who perceived their classes focused on learning used criteria referenced criteria (task mastery) as the measure of their success (Ferrer & Weiss, 2002). The findings of the same study also reported that teachers who are perceived by students as flexible in terms of allowing students to set their targets and categorize their activities were regarded as strengthening students determination. The learning environment is changing for the young student population. Because of the dynamic trends of globalization students like more challenging environment. The environment that provides them with the opportunity to interact using a question and answer dialogue with teachers.

#### *Controlling*

Research has shown that controlling behavior on the part of teachers does increase cognitive gains among students (Fisher & Rickards, 1997). However, inspite of the achievement students' attitudes were not high in this type of

environment. A study looking at Dutch students finds that female students perceive their teachers as more dominant (controlling) as compared to males (Levy et al., 1992). Teacher interpersonal behavior is strongly related with student motivation and academic achievement (Brok, 2001). Specifically, for the eastern students believed that teacher student relationship can be compared to the father-son, or authority figure subordinate one (Prat et al., 1998). The role of teacher demands a level of respect for hierarchy and authority on the part of students. The teacher is expected to exercise a degree of authority over the material he/she is teaching. The researchers also stated that Western teachers may compromise their authority role in a desire to be liked by students.

Student well-being is important outcome of education next to cognitive gains (Damm & Landhegam, 2002). The student well-being is defined as "a positive emotional state that is the result of a harmony between the sum of specific context factors on the one hand and the personal needs and expectations towards the school on the other hand" (Engels et al., 2004, p. 128). The effect of classroom characteristics on non-academic or non-cognitive aspects such as well-being is limited in comparison to cognitive aspects. Nonetheless it is interesting to explore teacher and education institution related characteristics in order to enhance student well-being. When students were asked what enhances their well-being at their educational institution, they mentioned educational setting linked variables and to lesser extent their social and family conditions. Factors such as teacher communication, course content were listed (Engels et al., 2004).

### ***Encouragement/Praise***

Encouragement and praise of a student by the teacher may lead to a virtuous cycle of more student motivation which may in turn lead to greater desire to learn, yet again increasing motivation (Cristophel, 1990). Among the researched backed methods that are highly advocated for teachers, contingent praise and encouragement is particularly necessary as it is important for developing positive student-teacher relationship. The findings of research studies showed that praise affects students' behaviors and change them positively (Sutherland et al., 2000). Teachers must be trained in giving contingent particular praise to student actions. Praising students for encouraging non - scholastic behavior for example, raising of hand, and picking up litter in the lunch time encourage students to follow rules and maintain discipline in educational institutions (Willmott, 2011). A study conducted in Taiwan stated that students' achievement is increased, when they feel that students exhibits behaviors' such as encouragement and praise. (She & Fisher, 2002)

### ***Non-Verbal***

Verbal messages are believed to impact cognitive aspects of communication. Non-Verbal messages are believed to be responsible for affective type of communication (McCroskey et al., 1996). Chaudhry and Arif (2012) stated that "verbal communication itself does not create that impact upon students' mind and hearts as doe's non-verbal communication that complements the verbal message. Same verbal message may create opposite meaning and interpretation

by students, the way the message is communicated through the medium of nonverbal communication” (p. 57)

Nonverbal behaviors are very important in academic setting because they can express true feelings and emotions while conveying information in a verbal only way. Non-verbal behavior can also regulate verbal communication (Philippot, Feldman & McGee, 1992). Students' perceptions of teacher non-verbal is related to student reports of teachers' interpersonal behavior in general. The more positive non-verbal behavior teacher exhibits, the more positively students feels about the teacher. Non-verbal behaviors associated positively with cognitive learning are things such as eye-contact and smiling. Factors such as these can influence how a message is perceived. Babbad (1992) stated that both verbal and non-verbal communication channels are used, the non-verbal ones should be thought of as more truthful and revealing of actual beliefs. Non-verbal behaviors contribute more dramatically than verbal behaviors towards teacher effectiveness. It should be clear then that non-verbal aspects of communication in a classroom cannot be dismissed (Philippot et al., 1992).

### *Effects of Communication*

Both intentional and unintentional communication behaviors of teachers influence students' outcome in classroom (Babbad, 1992). However it is not clear at present if differential treatments towards students only help some of them in attaining higher levels, or actually lowers the achievement level of those students who receive a less stimulating environment. This depends on how explicitly the teacher is conveying or hiding the differential treatment.

Those teachers who focus on conveying their “rightness” with little regard for interaction with the students become ineffective as teachers (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). Nonetheless, knowing about students' perceptions of teacher communication styles is beneficial for teachers. It could aid teachers in thinking about how to positively enhance their classroom environment. It is anticipated that this would be the case in both Eastern and Western classrooms. However, the behavior may manifest itself differently according to cultural norms. On the basis of above arguments objectives are given in the next section.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study are

1. To investigate the role communication style of teacher on the students final grades.
2. To investigate the role of competitive environment set by the teacher on the motivational level of students for studies.
3. To investigate whether the authoritative behavior of teachers influence the motivation of students for studies.
4. To investigate the effect of encouragement and praise by the teacher in promoting students interest in the classroom.
5. To investigate the effect of positive non-verbal behavior of teachers on the cognitive gains of students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was qualitative in nature. Phenomenological research design was used in the study. Phenomenological research design focus on the commonalities of lived experiences within a specific group. The target of this approach was the description of the nature of specific phenomenon. Usually interviews are conducted to gather firsthand knowledge of an event, situation or experience. Interviews includes questions from participants about experiences, in terms of the phenomenon under investigation. Phenomenological research approach provides in depth understanding of the phenomenon in its purest sense.

In the context of the current study, perceptions of M. Phil students of IER, about teacher communication in the classroom were investigated through semi-structured interviews.

### ***Population***

In qualitative studies generalizability of the data is generally not an issue because these studies do not seek ultimate truths. However, the population of the study is 150 students of M.Phil. (Master of Philosophy) program of Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Purposive sampling method was used to define the sample of the study. As the purposive sampling is the process of selecting small number of individuals who will contribute to the researchers understanding of the phenomenon undertaken. Ten M.Phil. scholars were selected to gather data about their perceptions of teacher communication styles in the classroom.

### ***Instrument of the Study***

A semi-structured interview, was used to collect data from M.Phil. scholars. Initial research questions were based upon the themes of relevant literature reviewed. Themes of the relevant literature are “communication and final grades, challenging, controlling. Encouragement/praise and nonverbal communication”. Follow up provoking questions, were also asked on the basis of responses of students. The researchers herself, asked the questions and noted the key points of their responses while conducting interviews.

### ***Validation of the Instrument***

The self-developed semi- structured interview questionnaire was checked by three professors engaged in teaching at University of the Punjab, Lahore.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data was analyzed through thematic analysis method of qualitative research. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) this method provides core skills required to conduct any type of analysis. Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the data. This is the core method of identifying themes within qualitative data. The data was coded through open coding method. Open coding method in the study, entailed following steps: Developing familiarity with the data, generation

of initial codes, searching for the themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes.

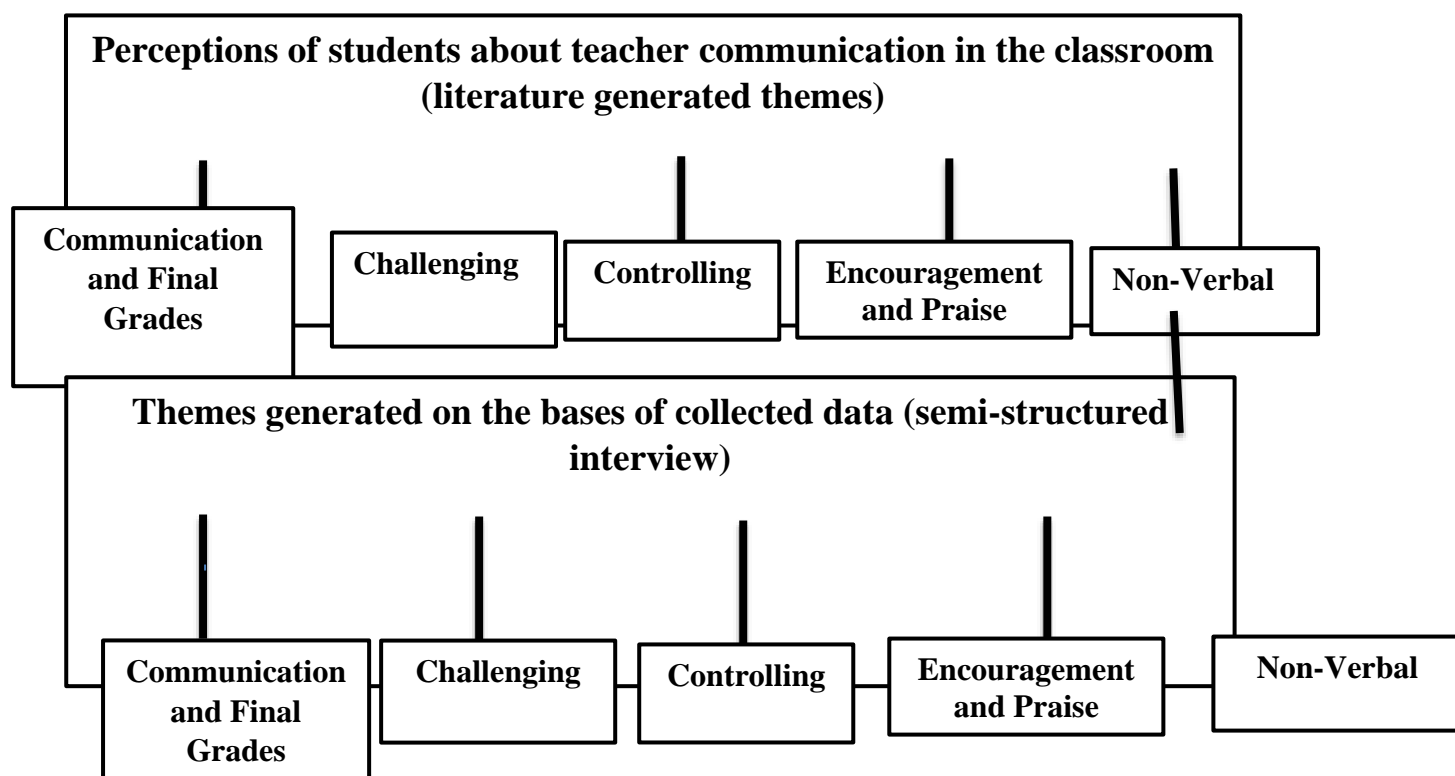
**Ethical Considerations**

Prior permission was sought from Incharge of M. Phil programs the students before taking their interviews. The researcher assured each student about the confidentiality of the information which they provided to the researcher. Care was taken while coding and analyzing the data. The study did not take into account the racial or ethnic background of students.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The section of research report comprises of analysis and interpretation of data, collected for the study. Data was collected from M.Phil. Scholars of Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of the Punjab, Lahore. The instrument of data collection was semi-structured interview. Follow up questions were also asked from the participants, to avoid any ambiguity in their responses. Key points were written on the bases of the analysis of the interview data. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this method provides basic framework required to conduct any type of analysis.

The study employed following framework for the analysis of qualitative data



**Figure 1:** Thematic map for qualitative data analysis of the study (source: Author)

## Communication and Final Grades

Students reported during the interview that the cooperative behaviour of teachers encourage students to excel in their academics. The polite attitude of teachers increases their motivation level. The favoritism of teachers towards specific students affected their morale to work harder for academic achievement negatively. Students also reported that teachers should provide them more guidance for conceptual learning. It will increase their interest in academics. The clear instructions of teacher aids student to work for academic success without any stress. The friendly behaviour of teachers aids students to discuss their academic problems with teachers and thus results in higher academic grades. They further reported that communication style of teachers should be according to the mental level of students so that they can understand the lecture and general classroom conversation of teachers. It will help them to communicate with teachers with confidence. Few students communicated during the interview:

P1 “My teachers are very friendly and cooperative .I can communicate them without any fear and can easily discuss difficulties I face in academics. Because of this I attain 3.5 CGPA”

P2 “I cannot understand the lecture of my teacher as his lecture is beyond my mental level. He also gives very difficult examples”

P3 “My teacher promotes conceptual learning through his lecture delivery. He always ask us to avoid cramming. Conceptual learning promotes my interest in the subject and thus increases my CGPA”

P4 “My teacher always gives importance to specific students in the class. He also communicates with them more. Because of this my motivation to work harder decreases and which results in low academic grades”

- Cooperative behavior of teachers increases final grades.
- Favoritism of teachers towards specific students affects cognitive gains negatively.
- Teachers should focus on conceptual learning.
- Explicit communication style of teachers increases final grades.
- Friendly behavior of teachers increases final grades.
- Communication gap between teachers and students decreases final grades
- Communication style of teachers should be according to the level of students

## *Challenging*

Students reported during the interview that competitive environment of classroom set by the teachers increases urge to excel in academics. The feedback provided by teachers help them to overcome their shortcomings and improve their grades. Some students reported that because of the competitive



environment in the classroom their stress level increases and academic performance suffers. Students further reported that teachers' cooperative behaviour in the competitive environment increases academic grades. It increases their motivational level to achieve high grades as compared to their classmates. Some students quoted during the interviews:

P5 "I am always motivated to excel in academics because of the competition with my classmates"

P6 "Because of the comparative environment set by teacher in the classroom, I am motivated to improve my academic performance to achieve higher grades than my friends"

P6 "Competitive environment of the classroom increases my stress level and I am unable to perform in exams according to my full potential"

P6 "Teachers feedback on my performance increases my motivational level and thus results 3.4 CGPA!"

- Challenging environment set by the teachers in the classroom, creates an urge to excel in studies among students.
- Challenging environment set by the teachers in the classroom increases motivational level of students if it is compiled with formative feedback.
- Challenging environment in the classroom is important but it increases stress level among students also.
- Challenging environment in the classroom increases desire to excel if it is compiled with cooperation on the end of teachers.

### ***Controlling***

Students reported during the interview that authoritative behaviour of teachers in the classroom creates an environment of fear. Students' motivation to excel is also hampered because of this. They further stated that student-centered attitude of teachers help them to discuss their academic problems with teachers. The stress level of students increases because of the controlling behaviour of teachers and they are unable to perform up to mark. However, authoritative behaviour of teacher is appropriate sometimes as it is requirement of some specific academic tasks. Students quoted during the interview:

P7 "I am always terrified in the classroom as my teacher is very strict. Because of this I am unable to discuss my problems with my teacher as a result my academics suffer"

P8 "I think teacher should maintain friendly behaviour with students so that they can communicate with them easily. Only in this way students can discuss their confusions with teachers"

P9 “Teachers should be authoritative in certain academic tasks which requires special instructions because of complexity”

Controlling behavior of teachers decreases motivation among students.

- Teachers should be authoritative in certain matters only and their teaching style should be student centered.
- Students get scared because of controlling behavior of teachers and it affects their final grades.
- Controlling behavior of teachers decreases motivation and increases stress level among students.

### *Encouragement and Final grades*

Students reported during the interview that encouragement and praise by the teacher increases their interest in their courses. The praising statements provides them energy to study harder. Praise by the teacher makes learning easy and enjoyable for them. It also motivates them to overcome their weak areas in academics. Students further stated that because of teacher encouragement they indulge in conceptual learning and avoid cramming. It is the most significant aspect of teacher encouragement and praise. In nutshell, the teacher encouragement and praise for the students result in higher academic achievement of students which is the primary goal of teaching learning process. Some students quoted during the interview:

P10 “Because of teacher encouraging comments. I devote myself wholeheartedly to my studies and got excellent marks”

P11 “Because of teachers appreciation my motivational level for studying hard increases”

P12 “Because of my teacher praising comments, my self-confidence increases and I work hard in my studies to gain good marks”

P13 “My teacher praising remarks increases my energy level and I take interest in understanding academic concepts. Learning is pleasure for me now”

P14 “My teacher often praise my work. She accepts me to maintain my high academic grades”

Encouragement and praise by the teacher increases interest of students in the classroom.

- Encouragement and praise by the teacher makes learning easy for students.
- Encouragement and praise by the teacher increases motivation among students to learn.
- Encouragement and praise by the teacher increases conceptual learning among students.

- Encouragement and praise by the teacher increases cognitive gains but also increases expectations of teachers for more good academic scores among students

### *Nonverbal*

Students reported during the interview that positive non-verbal gestures of teachers are a source of encouragement for the students. Teachers' facilitative attitude during class presentations motivate students to work harder. Students notice body language, facial expressions, gestures and eye-contact are noted by students. If teacher maintains positive non-verbal behaviour it will be easy for the students to communicate with him. Some students quoted during the interview

P14 "When my teacher nods his head during my presentation in class it motivates me to deliver with more confidence"

P15 "When our teacher sits on student seats during discussions, I am more comfortable to communicate with her about my confusions"

- Positive non-verbal behavior of teachers promotes affective learning.
- Facilitative attitude of teachers increases cognitive gains
- Positive non-verbal behavior of teachers even compiled strictness increases cognitive gains

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS 1**

How the communication style of teacher affects your final grades?

The thematic analysis of semi structured interview data, through open coding method provided with the following answer to the research question. Students told that the communication style of teachers affects their CGPA up to 70 percent. They further told that teachers should focus on conceptual learning. Teaching method should be according to the level of students. Favoritism of teachers towards specific students affects the overall morale of students. The sole responsibility of result on students decreases final grades. Cooperative and friendly attitude of teachers increases final grades. Explicit style of communication increases final grades. Moreover, they also told that communication gap between teachers and students affects final grades negatively. A student quoted during the interview:

P16 "Teachers are ideal for the students, if even the skill is not present among students, teachers can motivate them to excel in studies"

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 2**

How the competitive environment set by the teacher in the classroom, affects your motivational level for studies?

The thematic analysis of semi structured interview data, through open coding method provided with the following answer to the research question. Students told that the competitive environment set by the teacher in the classroom,

motivates them to urge in academics in them. They further told that teacher teachers should provide more formative feedback as it is an important element in enhancing students' motivational level. Overall students told that competitive classroom environment is effective for them. A student quoted during the interview:

P17 "Because of the motivation given by the teacher, I used to study late in the nights"

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 3**

How the authoritative behavior of teacher, affects your motivational level for studies?

The thematic analysis of semi structured interview data, through open coding method provided with the following answer to the research question. Students told that authoritative behavior of teacher decreases motivational level of students. They further told that behavior of teacher should be authoritative in some matters as it is important for effective teaching. Cooperative attitude of teacher combined with authoritative behaviors in certain matters increases. Motivational level. Solely authoritative behavior of teacher affects motivational level negatively and decreases academic performance. A student quoted during the interview:

P18 "I am scared throughout the lecture and cannot even ask a question because of the authoritative behavior of teacher"

P19 "Teachers should not be rigorous about formative assessment, they should focus on end grades"

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 4**

How the encouragement and praise by the teacher is promotes your interest in the classroom?

The thematic analysis of semi structured interview data, through open coding method provided with the following answer to the research question. Students told that the encouragement and praise by the teacher promotes interest in the content of subject. They further told that encouragement and praise by the teacher increases expectations of teachers for better academic scores from the. Encouragement and praise by the teacher results in improvement in grades and promotes conceptual learning. Encouragement and praise make student by the teacher makes students work whole heartily improvement in academic grades. A student quoted during the interview:

P20 "Because of encouragement and praise by the teacher, I used to work whole heartedly in my studies"

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 5**

How the positive non-verbal behavior affects your cognitive gains?

The thematic analysis of semi structured interview data, through open coding method provided with the following answer to the research question. Students

told that positive nonverbal cues by the teacher enhances motivation for learning. They told that valuing and caring attitude of teacher increases cognitive gains. They also told that positive non-verbal cues even compiled with strict attitude increases cognitive gains. Moreover, students added that facilitative attitude of teacher increases cognitive gains and promotes affective learning. A student quoted during the interview. A student quoted during the interview:

P 21 “Teachers must address pitfalls of student for example; English language barrier”

P 22 “Teachers should give some cues, if they are about to take surprise tests”

### **CONCLUSION**

Students were clear in their understanding, about what patterns constitutes, effective communication style. They made clear recommendations about how current teaching practices, can be improved. Students requirements from feedback, is rooted in the two challenges mainly for the teachers; dealing with individual differences and more cooperative behavior.

They explicitly stated in the semi-structured interviews that cooperative behavior increases, cognitive gains. They further explained their expectations regarding cooperative behavior. For instance, they told that, teaching strategy should be according to the level of students. Teachers should not indulge in favoritism. As favoritism towards specific students, affects the overall motivational level of the class strength.

Students emphasized that competitive environment, set by the teacher in the classroom is beneficial for them. As it motivates them to excel. However, few students stated that competition should be balanced. Highly, competitive environment of the classroom, increases anxiety level of students. Strict behavior on the end of teachers, decreases cognitive gains of students. As it makes them scared and it also decreases their motivational level for studies

Students stated that encouragement and praise, by the teacher enhances their motivational level for studies. It increases their interest in the content. Encouragement and praise, promotes affective learning on the end of students. It is very effective for increasing their academic scores. They further stated that caring attitude of teacher even compiled with strictness increases, cognitive gains. Facilitative classroom environment increases academic scores. In nutshell, following conclusions are the crux of research findings: Communication gap between teacher and students affects academic grades negatively, facilitative classroom environment increases academic grades, and cooperative attitude of teacher promotes affective learning.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The study was limited to the M.Phil. Scholars of Institute of Education and Research (IER) of University of the Punjab due to financial and time constraints.

## RECOMMENDATIONS/FUTURE GUIDELINES

Following recommendations were suggested on the basis of study findings

1. Teachers should try not to indulge in favoritism.
2. Teachers should address pitfalls of students, for example; language barriers.
3. Teachers should be flexible, in teaching approaches.
4. Teacher should motivate students for conceptual learning.

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