Yarmouk University

Faculty of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

A Psycholinguistic Study of Jordanian Children's Comprehension of Body Language

By:
Majd Saleem Abushunnar

Supervisor:
Prof. Lutfi Abulhaija
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Examinining Committee:

Dr. Lutfi Abul Haija ................................................... Chairman

Dr. Hesham Obidat ...................................................... Member

Dr. Fawwaz Al-Abed Al-Haq ................................. Member
Dedication

My work and my life is dedicated

To those who inspire and motivate me

To those who pave the way for me

To those whose favor I can never deny

To my family, my light, my joy, and my sky
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Abstract

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The present study aims at investigating children’s comprehension of body language in relation to six variables: the type of the kinesic behavior, age, gender, school type, academic achievement, and hearing-impairment. Also, aims at generalizing some conclusions concerning the universality of nonverbal communication, the association between verbal and nonverbal capacities, and emotion development. Participants of the present study are 72 children ranging in age between 3.5 and 9.5 years old. They are gathered from one kindergarten, one public school, one private school, and one school for hearing-impaired children in two Jordanian cities: Amman and Zarqa. Concerning the procedure followed in this study, a comprehension test is
designed to investigate children’s perception of 60 body signs. The task is presented in a picture form and validated by 10 Jordanian adults. Then, participants are visited at their schools and individually interviewed in videotaped sessions. The interviews consist of 60 questions each in which participants are shown a group of pictures presenting different body acts and asked to choose one picture for a targeted meaning. Finally, children’s responses are analyzed and statistically treated.

The results of children’s responses reveal a number of findings. Children’s comprehension of nonverbal messages vary with the behavior in question. For example, children are better decoders of emblems than postures. Children’s decoding abilities of nonverbal signals develop with age. However, the developmental stages of children’s decoding skills may differ according to culture and kinesic behavior. Children’s decoding ability does not seem to be influenced by gender differences. This might suggest that gender differences in adults’ decoding ability are attributed to environmental factors rather to genetic ones. Also, no strong correlation is suggested between children’s decoding abilities and the type of school they attend. However, children’s comprehension of nonverbal cues appears to be associated with their academic achievement. High-achieving children are more sensitive to nonverbal signals than low-achieving children. Concerning hearing-impairment, no differences are observed in the decoding skills of hearing-impaired children and these of hearing ones, except in decoding affect displays. The present study supports
the presence of both innate and learned components that control children’s nonverbal communication. However, it does not support the correlation between children’s verbal and nonverbal capacities which has been suggested by Michael and Willis (1968), and Nicoladis et al. (1999). In regard to emotion development, the present study states a number of observations: children tend to detect emotions via facial expressions rather than postures, and they confuse negative emotions of anger, disgust, sadness, fear, and surprise.