

UNDERSTANDING NONVERBAL MESSAGES



AGENDA

- Starter
- Silent Movies
- Words or Actions?
- Say What?
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

Objectives

Students will recognize their ability to communicate without using words.

Students will analyze the importance of the nonverbal messages they send.

Students will practice using nonverbal cues to communicate.

Starter (3 minutes)

As a class, discuss how certain animals communicate nonverbally. Give the following examples:

- Did you know that when a deer shows the white on its tail, it's signaling danger?
- Did you know that when a horse flattens its ears against its head, it's telling you that it's angry?

Invite students to give additional examples of how animals—their pets, for example—communicate nonverbally. Point out that people communicate nonverbally as well. Explain that students will explore how and what they communicate with body language.

Part I Silent Movies (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students recognize their ability to communicate without using words.

1. Students consider examples of nonverbal communication.

Ask if anyone knows what a silent movie is. If necessary, explain that when movies were first made, they did not have any sound. The audience never heard the actors speak. Information about the story was shown in writing on the screen between scenes. If there was background music, it was provided by someone who played the piano in the movie theater as the movie was shown.

Ask students to speculate about how actors could tell a story if they could not be heard speaking. List ideas on the board. After a brief discussion, ask, "Do you think it was easy or difficult for the actors to communicate without using words? Let's try it out."

2. Students use body language to send messages.

Select four volunteers to come to the front of the room to help with a demonstration. Explain that each volunteer will attempt to communicate an emotion without using words. The rest of the class must guess what it is. Tell students to observe each demonstration carefully so that they can answer questions about it afterward.

One at a time, whisper one of the following emotions to each volunteer: fear, anger, happiness, and surprise. After students correctly identify an emotion, ask them to describe how the volunteer revealed that emotion. Encourage students to describe specific gestures, facial expressions, and body postures. Explain that when students used these actions, they sent messages through body language.

Follow the same procedure with four new volunteers. Tell students that these new volunteers will try to communicate messages, instead of emotions. Whisper one of the following messages to each volunteer before beginning:

- It's okay.
- What time is it?
- Be quiet.
- I'm sorry.

3. Students reflect on their experience.

Ask students if it was difficult to understand what messages were being conveyed when no words were spoken. Say, "We've looked at some obvious examples of nonverbal communication, but these examples show how effective body language can be. It's important to be aware of the nonverbal messages you send, since you might be sending the wrong messages."

4. Students recognize culture as a factor in interpreting nonverbal messages.

Ask students if they have ever misread someone's nonverbal messages. Ask students if someone has ever misread their nonverbal messages. Tell students that sometimes those misunderstandings are the result of different cultural norms. Explain that nonverbal cues are interpreted with regard to cultural background.

Part II Words or Actions? (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students begin to understand the importance of the nonverbal messages they send.

1. Students discuss the importance of body language.

List some of the ways that nonverbal messages are conveyed by writing the words "facial expressions," "gestures," and "body posture" on the board.

Say, "Sometimes it's not just what you say, but the way you say it that can send messages to others." Ask students to watch carefully as you demonstrate that point as follows:

- Look a student directly in the eye as you firmly say, "I was late because my car wouldn't start."
- Turn away briefly, then address the student again. This time, look above and to the right of the student and then to the ground as you hesitantly say, "I was late because my car wouldn't start."

Ask the student to explain why you did not seem to be telling the truth the second time. (The student should mention your not looking directly at them and your hesitation to speak.)

Add "eye contact" to your list on the board. Explain that eye contact, or the lack of it, sends a strong message. Ask:

- If you talk to someone and look that person directly in the eyes, what message are you sending? (You mean what you say; you're being honest and sincere.)
- What about if you are listening to someone while looking that person directly in the eyes? (You are giving the person and what they are saying your full attention.)

Remind students that nonverbal messages can mean different things in different cultures. For example, it is disrespectful in some cultures for a child to look an adult directly in the eyes.

2. Students identify ways in which their words and body language might conflict.

By asking questions such as the following, begin a discussion about how people can send conflicting messages through their words and body language:

- Have you ever heard someone say that actions speak louder than words? What do you think this means?
- Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Do you think that our body language can send messages that are different from our words? If so, how?

Encourage students to give examples. If necessary, prompt students by demonstrating how words and body language can send conflicting messages by standing with your shoulders slouched and frowning as you say, "I'm really happy to be here today." Invite students to explain how your words and actions send conflicting messages.

3. Students draw conclusions about nonverbal communication.

Emphasize the importance of nonverbal communication by explaining that people send just as many nonverbal messages as verbal ones. Focus attention on the power of body language by saying, "Sometimes, your body may tell a different story than the one coming out of your mouth. When this happens, which one should the listener believe? If you want people to understand you, make sure your words and actions communicate consistent messages."

Part III Say What? (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students create and perform scenarios in order to practice using nonverbal cues to communicate.

1. Students create role plays that involve nonverbal cues.

Have students work with partners or in small groups of three or four to create brief role plays that involve people who are communicating nonverbally. Students should include one of the following examples:

- Sending a nonverbal message only, using no words at all
- Using body language to emphasize or complement a verbal message
- Sending one message verbally and a conflicting message nonverbally

2. Students present their role plays.

Invite students to present their role plays to the class. After each presentation, encourage the class to describe the messages conveyed in the role play. The student performers should explain how well the class understood the messages.

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Close this lesson by bowing slightly from the waist up. Explain that this is how people often greet each other in Japan and Korea. Ask students to explain the importance of sending nonverbal messages that accurately convey the meaning of the verbal message. Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- Communication happens through actions as well as words, so be aware of your body language.
- If you want to be understood correctly, present the same message with your words and with your body.

Student Assessment

1. Why is it important to be aware of your body language?
2. Describe a situation in which body language affects how people interpret what you are saying.
3. Describe a situation in which someone else's body language influenced how you viewed that person.

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Using Quotations

“It’s not what you say that counts. It’s what you don’t say!”

Have several students illustrate this phrase by making a statement while using body language that conveys the opposite meaning.

Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

Have students view news publication photos or books of portrait photography. Have them write down a one-sentence impression of what’s happening in each photo.

Then, have students share their responses in small groups and discuss what gave them their impressions.

Writing in Your Journal

Have students interview parents or other adults about the positive and negative nonverbal messages they get from their children. Have students write about their findings, citing specific examples if possible.

Have students report their findings to the class. Create two top-10 lists reflecting the most common parent complaints and compliments.

Using Technology

Explain to students that American Sign Language is not nonverbal communication, but a true language. Have students use the internet to research American Sign Language.

Have students teach their classmates a few American Sign Language gestures.

Homework

Have students observe three ads and identify nonverbal messages in each. Suggest that students try viewing some of the ads with the sound turned off.

Have students discuss how important nonverbal communication is to ads.

Additional Resources

Have students read books or watch videos on animal behavior. Have them design posters that explain the meaning of various animal postures (e.g., a dog's raised hackles, bared teeth, wagging tail).

Have students report their findings to a partner and display their posters in the classroom.