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Body Language: Interpersonal Communication through Dance Movement

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Abstract:
Body language is the oldest language in the world. Long before verbal language emerged, humans communicated through bodily movements. Over time, body language developed into a means of conveying ideas, thoughts, feelings, and cultural values. Today, communication needs continue to evolve, and people no longer have to rely on verbal language alone to understand one another. Various approaches can strengthen interpersonal relationships, promote mutual understanding, minimize misunderstandings, and create harmony through cooperation and a shared sense of belonging and understanding. This study is a social practice employing a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Triangulation of data, data sources, instruments, and data analysis techniques was applied to examine the trustworthiness of the research findings. The research subjects were students enrolled in the Drama, Dance, and Music course, aged 19–20 years, who were in the early-adulthood stage and displayed various characteristics, including difficulty trusting others, egocentrism, and the initial transition into adulthood. The body literacy practice was also grounded in a concept of literacy that involves values, attitudes, and social relationships to achieve particular goals. The implementation of this method is expected to help students improve their interpersonal intelligence and develop effective collaboration with others.

Keywords: Body Language; Communication; Interpersonal; Dance.

Introduction

Body language is the first language that humans are able to use and understand, long before verbal language emerges. This phenomenon can be understood as part of the history of the development of performance culture in the form of dance, which serves as a means of communication between dancers and audiences. Body language consists of gestures that carry meaning and express a dancer's expressions (Rustiyanti et al. 2020). A dancer's body literacy is an empirical experience reflected in the ability to read choreography and perform it continuously. Through this process, the choreography becomes a form of body-language literacy, trained through corporal acrobatics, corporal impulses, corporal instinct, and virtuosity as an aesthetic experience (Rustiyanti et al. 2020).

Cultures around the world acknowledge that music and dance foster a sense of togetherness and strengthen cooperation. Through these activities, performers in music and dance need to be in sync when creating music or performing group movements.

Behavioural synchrony has been linked with greater social bonding and cooperation suggesting that such synchrony could be one of the key mechanism behind collective music and dance's prosocial effect (Reddish, Fischer, and Bulbulia 2013).

Based on the explanation above, the importance of arts education in schools, including dance education, becomes clear. Through dance, students are guided to become familiar with their bodies and experience the harmony of music and movement with a group. This process can foster sensitivity toward others and develop the ability to communicate the messages embedded in a dance work to its audience. Thus, communication through movement is a key element of this activity.

Howard Gardner, as cited in Wijayanti and Rukiyati (2021), explains that humans possess nine types of intelligence, including musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligence. This explanation demonstrates that bodily-kinesthetic intelligence can be developed through body language and gestures combined with melody and rhythm. Such activities engage the body and enable individuals to express themselves in ways that others can interpret. Interpersonal intelligence nurtured through musical and kinesthetic activities provides individuals with opportunities to understand other people's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors through relationships between performers and audiences.

This forms one of the foundations of the present study, which involved students in the Elementary School Teacher Education (PGMI) program who were enrolled in the Drama, Dance, and Music course and were aged 19–20 years. The study sought to explore how communication is understood through dance movement by means of body literacy practices that use body language as a communication medium.

Dance is a significant form of nonverbal communication in which bodily movements can express emotions, thoughts, and attitudes without words. Through dance, communication barriers can be overcome, as movements and gestures can "communicate" emotions and feelings, providing access to the dancer's inner world. In dance performances, bodily dynamics have a strong emotional dimension: emotions are shaped by bodily movements, and the two complement each other in expressing meaning. Body language in dance is a powerful and essential communication tool for conveying emotions and stories to audiences. Across various forms of dance, from dance films to national and contemporary dance, body language plays an important role in enhancing the audience's emotional and aesthetic experience. Dance is therefore not merely an art form, but also a medium of communication that transcends verbal and cultural boundaries.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. This approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of PGMI students at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri who were enrolled in the Drama, Dance, and Music course and were aged 19–20 years, particularly their experiences of the role of the body in enabling interpersonal communication. Data were collected naturally through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis followed the stages developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), namely data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data were gathered by triangulating several sources and techniques, including observation, questionnaire instruments, interviews, and documentation. Data condensation involved selecting and abstracting the results of questionnaires, observations, and interviews, which were then related to relevant theories. The next stage was data display, in which the collected data were presented in charts, descriptions, and other forms. Finally, conclusions were drawn from the findings obtained throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

Findings

An in-depth exploration of interpersonal communication embedded in social interaction activities through body literacy demonstrated that participants were able to understand messages conveyed through body language. Soekanto, as cited in Moh. Fahri and Qusyairi (2017), states that social interaction cannot occur unless two conditions are met: social contact and communication. Contact refers to an action by an individual or group that has meaning for the person performing it and is then perceived by another individual or group. The meaning received is interpreted and responded to through a reaction. Contact may occur directly or indirectly. Direct contact takes place through physical actions, such as speech, movement, and gestures. In this study, body language was interpreted through dance movements. Body literacy integrates values, attitudes, social relationships, and effective collaboration.

The movements were performed by two people, each with a specific role: Leader and Reader. The Leader is the person who has a message to convey to their movement partner, who is called the Reader. The Reader receives the message and is expected to communicate what the Leader intends to convey through movement.

The following are the stages of body literacy, in which body language is used throughout the activity:

1. Value Integration
   The researcher explained the concepts of Reader and Leader in body literacy. The discussion focused on literacy practices that use the body as a medium for conveying messages: the Leader acts as the sender, while the Reader acts as the receiver. The aim is to understand one another through each participant's movement gestures.
2. Attitude
   The body literacy process is a practical activity involving two people: the Leader (the person who leads or conveys the message) and the Reader (the person who reads or receives the message). The Leader is responsible for guiding the Reader so that the message conveyed through movement can be interpreted.
3. Social Relationships
   At this stage, the Leader must already have a message to communicate to the Reader through movement. The participants hold each other's hands with their eyes closed. The Leader guides the Reader through movements that carry a

particular message, accompanied by contemplative instrumental music to strengthen their sense of connection and concentration.

The participants must maintain their hand contact throughout the activity. After the body literacy activity, each participant writes their interpretation on a piece of paper. The Reader's response is then compared with the message intended by the Leader.



Figure 1. Transfer of Values

4. Collaboration

   Each Reader–Leader pair writes down the message that was conveyed and the message that was received. They then jointly confirm whether the message communicated and received through bodily movement has been understood in the same way. This process is repeated until the summative assessment in the Drama, Dance, and Music course. Since the summative assessments, including both the midterm and final examinations, are conducted through practical activities involving large groups, good cooperation and mutual consideration are required.

   Each pair performs movements accompanied by music. The principle is that each pair must remain in physical contact and hold hands throughout the activity without letting go. No spoken language is used; communication takes place only through movement, bodily expressions, and movement symbols conveyed and responded to by the Leader and the Reader.

According to Soerjono Soekanto, as cited in Hazani (2020), social interaction cannot occur unless two conditions are met: (1) Social contact, namely the process in which both parties receive stimuli and provide responses, or the reaction of the receiving party to an action performed by another person; and (2) Communication, namely the process through which a person interprets another person's information, attitudes, and behavior, expressed through knowledge, speech, gestures, attitudes, actions, and feelings, and subsequently produces a response.

The responses observed following the implementation of body literacy using body language as a medium indicate that individuals develop greater sensitivity toward others. This sensitivity fosters sympathy, empathy, a sense of belonging, cooperation, and better ego control.

Analysis

1. Body Literacy as a Medium of Interpersonal Communication

The implementation of body literacy through the Reader–Leader approach demonstrates that the body has the potential to function as an instrument of interpersonal communication capable of conveying messages without verbal language. In this activity, bodily movement becomes a communication symbol used by the Leader to convey ideas, feelings, or particular messages to the Reader. The Reader then interprets these messages through sensory experience and the movement responses they receive.

When viewed in relation to Soerjono Soekanto's social interaction theory, this process fulfills the two prerequisites for social interaction: social contact and communication. Social contact is manifested through physical interaction between two individuals who hold hands and provide movement stimuli. Communication takes place when the Reader perceives, interprets, and responds to the movement stimuli provided by the Leader.

Thus, body literacy within the Reader–Leader approach is not merely an activity for exploring movement; it is also a process of exchanging meaning that involves the ability to send, receive, read, and interpret messages through the body.

2. Developing Kinesthetic Sensitivity and the Ability to Interpret Messages

The interaction between the Leader and the Reader illustrates a learning process that relies on kinesthetic sensitivity. When both participants perform the activity with their eyes closed while maintaining contact by holding hands, each individual is required to increase their sensitivity to the stimuli they receive.

In this situation, the Reader cannot rely on visual observation or verbal communication. Therefore, understanding the message depends greatly on the ability to sense the direction of movement, pressure, changes in intensity, rhythm, and bodily responses provided by the Leader.

This process shows that body literacy involves the ability to read the body as well as the ability to interpret messages through movement responses. These abilities are important in developing an awareness that every movement may carry meaning that can be understood through experiences of interacting with others.

An interesting finding is that the message received by the Reader is not always identical to the message intended by the Leader. Such differences in interpretation are an important part of the learning process because they create opportunities to reflect on how a person conveys a message and how another person interprets it.

3. Developing Empathy and Awareness of Others

Body literacy activities through the Reader–Leader approach provide interactive experiences that encourage participants to understand the presence and condition of others. When the Leader provides movement stimuli, they must consider the Reader's abilities and responses. Conversely, the Reader is required to pay attention to every stimulus received.

This condition builds a reciprocal relationship that is oriented not only toward conveying messages, but also toward being willing to sense, understand, and respond to the presence of others.

From a pedagogical perspective, this process can be understood as learning empathy through bodily experience (embodied empathy). Empathy is not merely understood as a concept explained verbally; rather, it is experienced directly through movement activities that require individuals to pay attention to their partners' responses and needs.

This process can foster several social attitudes, including:

- Social sensitivity, namely the ability to recognize and respond to stimuli from others.
- Empathy, namely the ability to understand a partner's experiences and responses through bodily interaction.
- Sympathy, namely the emergence of concern for other people's conditions and experiences.
- Tolerance, namely the willingness to accept differences in interpretation and movement responses.
- Ego control, namely the ability to reduce personal dominance and give partners room to respond.

4. Strengthening Two-Way Communication and Collaboration

Although the activity assigns the roles of Leader and Reader, the communication that takes place is essentially not one-way. The Leader acts as the sender of the message, while the Reader acts as the receiver. However, successful communication is largely determined by the Reader's response and the Leader's ability to adjust their movement stimuli.

This indicates that interpersonal communication through body literacy is a reciprocal process. The two individuals do not merely carry out their respective roles; they also influence one another in building mutual understanding.

The confirmation stage, in which the Leader writes down the intended message and the Reader records the message they have perceived, is an important part of this process. This activity enables both participants to determine the degree of correspondence between the message conveyed and the message received.

If differences in interpretation are identified, the two individuals can reflect on the experience and repeat the activity to improve the communication process. Thus, this activity develops collaborative skills that are demonstrated not only through synchronized movements, but also through the ability to build mutual understanding, adapt to one another, and achieve shared goals.

5. Internalizing Social Values through Movement Experiences

The four stages of body literacy implemented in this study—value integration, attitude, social relationships, and collaboration—demonstrate a process of internalizing values through practical experience.

At the value-integration stage, participants gain a conceptual understanding of the body as a medium of communication. The attitude stage then provides an opportunity to implement this understanding through movement practice. At the social-relationship stage, participants directly experience interaction and the exchange of messages with others. Meanwhile, the collaboration stage strengthens their ability to build mutual understanding and work together.

These four stages demonstrate that body literacy goes beyond the ability to understand and interpret movement. It develops into a social learning experience that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects.

Conclusion

Body language communicated through body literacy activities demonstrates that nonverbal communication is a medium that can enhance dancers' interpersonal communication. Body language conveyed through movement, symbols, and bodily gestures creates tactile interaction that can be interpreted as the meaning of messages transferred from the Leader to the Reader. This activity can be used as an initial step before moving on to group-based dance performance preparation, which requires cooperation and mutual understanding among all individuals involved.

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