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The Role of Non-Verbal Communication in the Coach-Athlete Relationship

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Abstract

The starting point in choosing this theme was the belief that in the specific professional sports instructive activity the dominant form of communication is the nonverbal communication in the coach-athlete relationship, with implications for the improvement of the training process. The study consisted in a sociological approach through an inquiry conducted on a group of athletes. The questionnaire comprised items with prefigured and open answers to facilitate the research in the female gymnasts of the "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacau team. A dominant form of expressing in the sports training is represented by body movements as "an expression of energy and information through posture, movement and indices", a psycho-somatic connection (body-soul) through which feelings and emotions are expressed. The gestures of illustration, the artifacts, the facial expressing are other landmarks of the existence of nonverbal communication perceived by the athletes in the sports training process. The body language communication is perceived by most respondents, the messages transmitted this way being continuous, facilitating a dialog between the coach and the female gymnast.

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1. Introduction

The formative side of the sports training process presupposes paying more attention to the promotion of the methodologies ensuring extra effectiveness of the instructive action, by using them in the sports training. Here, communication, as a fundamental type of psycho-social interaction, gives finality to the intentions, desires, aspirations, attitudes and actions of its participants.

Non-verbal communication is concretized in a group of messages that are not expressed in words and that can be decoded, creating meanings that can accompany, contradict, replace, complete, or accentuate the message transmitted through words (Dobrescu, 2006). According to D. V. Năstase, (2005), the important role played by this form of communication is emphasized by the results of the American scientist A. Mehrabian, who discovered that

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during communication people respond 8% to words, 23% to intonation, and 69% to body language. The studies show that promptness is specific to non-verbal communication, highlighting the fact that this way the information is decoded 4.5 times faster than in the case of verbal communication.

Sports mediate, in a specific manner, the individuals' relationship with themselves, with the other members of their group, and with the coordinators of these kinds of activities, especially during the process of learning the motor content (Dobrescu, 2006). Starting with the assertions taken from the professional literature, according to which non-verbal communication is a form of "body language" expression, one can say that gymnastics is one of the athletic disciplines in which the expressiveness and the relevance of non-verbal language is highlighted in the inter-human relationships. H. Rûckle (2000) believes this form of communication to be "an expression of energy and information through posture, movement and indices", a psycho-somatic connection (body-soul) through which feelings and emotions can be expressed. The communication through body language is constant; the messages sent this way are continuous, making a permanent dialogue between the internal and the external easier.

2. Material and methods

The starting point in choosing this theme was the belief that in the professional athletic instructive activity, specific to gymnastics, the non-verbal communication is dominant in the coach-athlete relationship, and has important implications for the improvement of the training process. The *aim* of this paper is to identify certain applicative alternatives of non-verbal communication in the coach-athlete relationship and the role they play in the process of learning the motor content that is specific to gymnastics. The *hypothesis* of the research stems from the assumption that the identification of the most important aspects of non-verbal communication in the aerobic gymnastics sports training process, can direct an improving intervention in the sense of optimizing the coach-athlete relationship. The research consisted of a sociological approach based on an inquiry conducted with 10 female gymnasts of the "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacau aerobic gymnastics team. The questionnaire comprised 15 items with prefigured and open answers to facilitate the research in the target group chosen from the female students of the Faculty of Movement, Sports, and Health Sciences.

The following *research methods* were used: the study of the professional literature, observation, the inquiry, the statistical-mathematical method, and the graphical representation method.

The perceptions identified on groups of items were assessed by grouping the questions related to the subjects in 5 categories, according to the importance that each subject gave it. The normative assessments led to certain value judgments and seeing the subjects' opinions through the prism of the categories of assertions, identified and assessed on a scale from 1 to five for each item.

3. Results

The first items of the questionnaire emphasized that most female athletes (93.33%) believe communication to be indispensable in the sports training process; 60% recognize it as the sine qua non of the coach-athlete relationship; 35% as the sine qua non of the relationship between athletes, and 5% as the sine qua non between athletes and other external factors (opponents, referees, spectators) (Fig. 1).

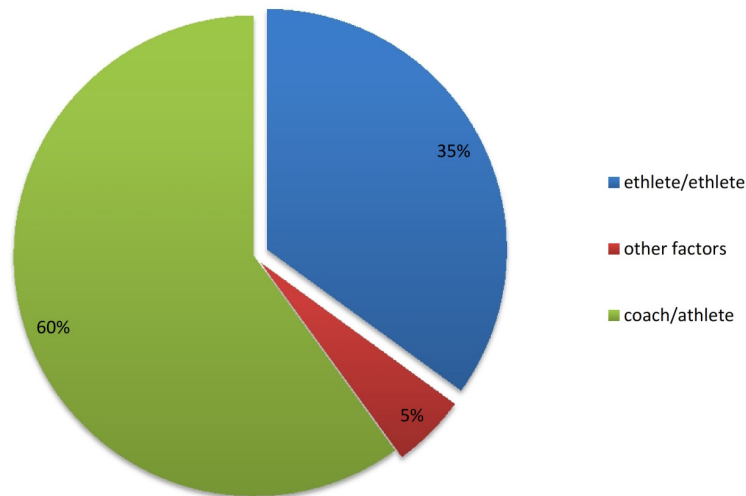


Fig. 1. Graphical representation of the answers given to question 2

In the next section, most of the female gymnasts in the study group answered that during training there is good communication (95%), out of which 86.66% say that non-verbal communication is preferred for the learning of new motor skills, and 73.34% identify the visual transmission channel as being more important than the auditory one.

In regard to the sixth item, concerning the dominant form of communication during the process of learning specific skills, 53.33% of the female gymnasts appreciated the primordial role played by non-verbal communication, 26.66% supported the value of the verbal messages and explanations, and only 20% of the subjects thought that the vocal traits that accompany the words (para-verbal communication) are useful (Fig. 2).

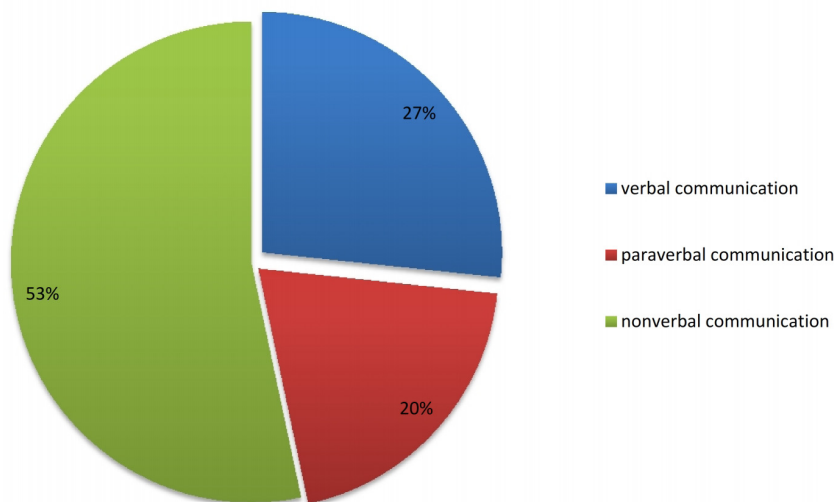


Fig. 2. Graphical representation of the answers given to question 6

In relation to the functions identified in the professional literature (Bougnoux, 2000) that non-verbal communication has in the coach-athlete relationship, 52% of the subjects opted for the supporting role of verbal

communication, 16.66% for a better decoding of verbal messages, 23.34% thought that it can replace words entirely, while 8% opted for the transmission of signals in opposition. None opted for the accentuation and regulating function of verbal communication (Fig. 3).

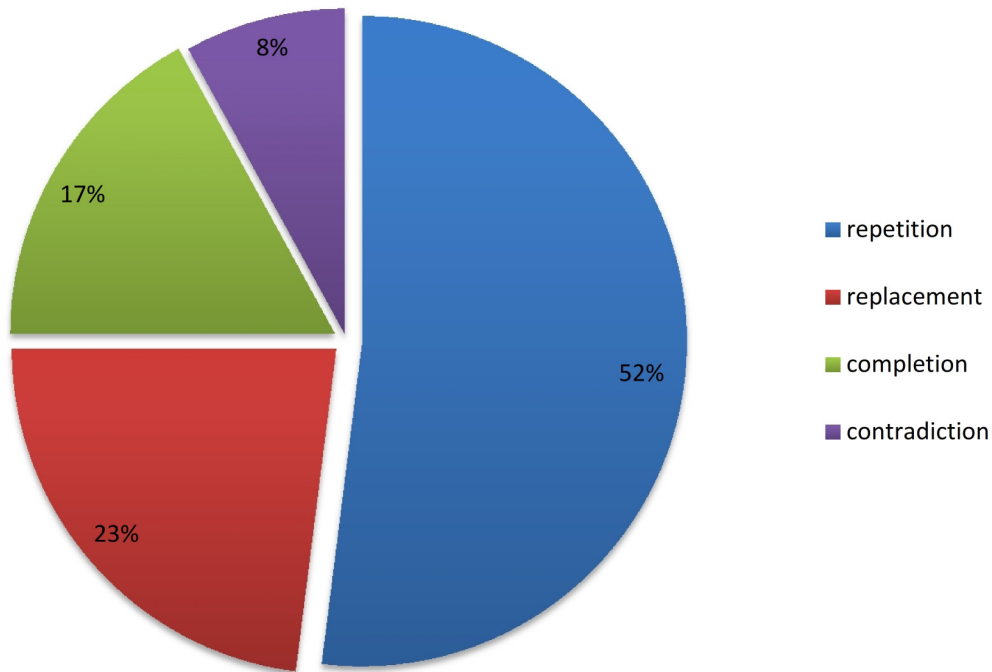


Fig. 3. Graphical representation of the answers given to question 7

The assertion regarding the coded transmission of information through various signs was chosen by 56.66% of the female athletes questioned, and the effectiveness of these means was recognized by the majority of the subjects (68%) in the learning and consolidation of the motor content part of the training.

When required to choose the factors that influence the use of various types of communication through non-verbal activities, the subjects opted for the athletes' training stages (39%), the tasks and objectives of the training session (31.34%), and the gymnasts' age and training level (29.66%). In regard to the question concerning the use of specific non-verbal graphical symbols in transmitting new performance techniques, 78% of the subjects confirmed the presence of these operational means foreseen in the international aerobic gymnastics scoring code.

The normative assessments were based on the subjects' answers, given on a scale of 1 to 5, based on the 5 means considered to be important to ensure good communication between the coach and the athlete. Out of the alternatives of non-verbal communication identified in the professional literature, the following were used: posture, movement, gestures, facial expression, and eye contact. (Luca, 2006). For the statistical interpretation of the results, the average value, the maximum value, and the minimum value were taken into consideration.

Following the statistical assessments, the first position is occupied by the body *movements*, with an average value of 4.82 points, and the second by the specific aerobic gymnastics *gestures*, with an average of 4.74 points. These results are supported by a maximum value of 5 points, in both cases, and a minimum value of 4.33 and 2.66 points, respectively. The third place is occupied by *posture*, with an average value of 4.45 points, a maximum value of 4.66 points, and a minimum value of 3.33 points. The influence of the *eye contact* (3.70 points) is much less recognized in the communication relationship between coach and athlete. (Fig. 4).

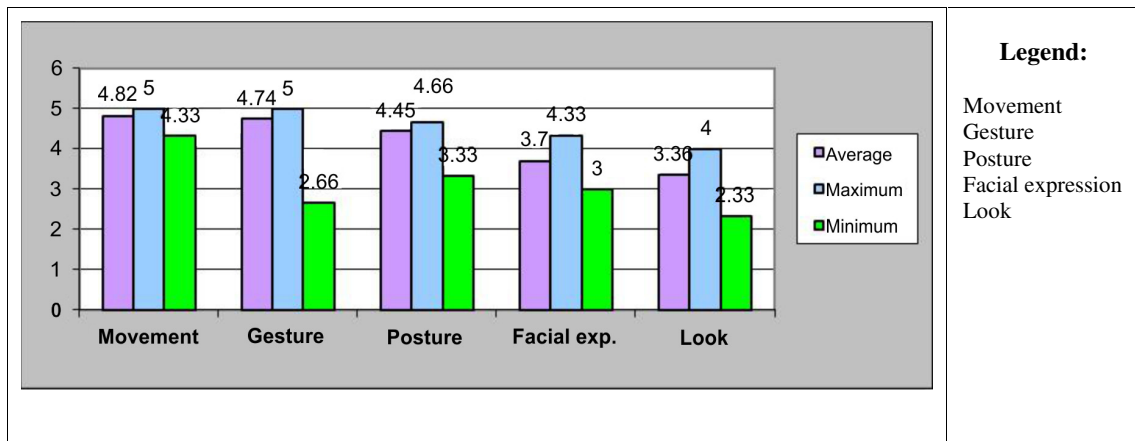


Fig. 4. The average, maximum, and minimum results of the nonverbal communication means

The questionnaire also emphasized the components of facial expressiveness as means of non-verbal communication, which, in the female gymnasts' perception, constitute important elements for transmitting messages - the degree of openness of the eyes (33.34%), eyelid movement (41.66%), pupil movement (11%), and type of regard (14%). Communication elements were also identified in the components of a facial expression, among which the subjects highlighted frowning (34.66%), eyebrow raising (23%), nose curling (22.34%), and lip pursing (20%).

Starting from the directions for capitalizing on non-verbal communication derived from the theoretical basis, one can group its effectiveness in improving the processes of knowledge - self-knowledge, assessment - self-assessment, directive feedback, correction - prevention, and relating.

Using the same answer-evaluation procedure, the results obtained for the group of influence on the *knowledge - self-knowledge* process turn out to be at the top of the subjects' choices, recording an average value of 4.88 points, a maximum value of 5 points, and a minimum value of 4.33 points. Thus, one can say that the subjects questioned are aware of the special role that body language plays in increasing one's ability to internalize the specific sports training motor content.

The second place in the subjects' assessment is taken by the influence on the *assessment - self-assessment* process, with an average value of 4.62 points, a maximum value of 4.80 points, and a minimum value of 3.80 points. These results prove that, according to the subjects' answers, the effects of the studied means on increasing the ability to assess a correct performance are recognized.

The third position is occupied by the *directive feedback* process, which leads to the correct learning of the technical components, assessed with an average value of 3.57 points, a maximum value of 4.22 points, and a minimum value of 3.20 points.

The next category is the one regarding the correction-prevention, in the sense of forming the correct automatisms, with an average of 3.36 points, a minimum value of 2.55 points, and a maximum value of 3.80 points.

The last group of non-verbal communication influences, as perceived by the subjects, is the one favouring the process of *coach-athlete relating*, with an average of 2.88 points, a maximum value of 3 points, and a minimum value of 2.07 points, depicting the synchronization tendencies between the emitter and the receiver. (Fig. 5).

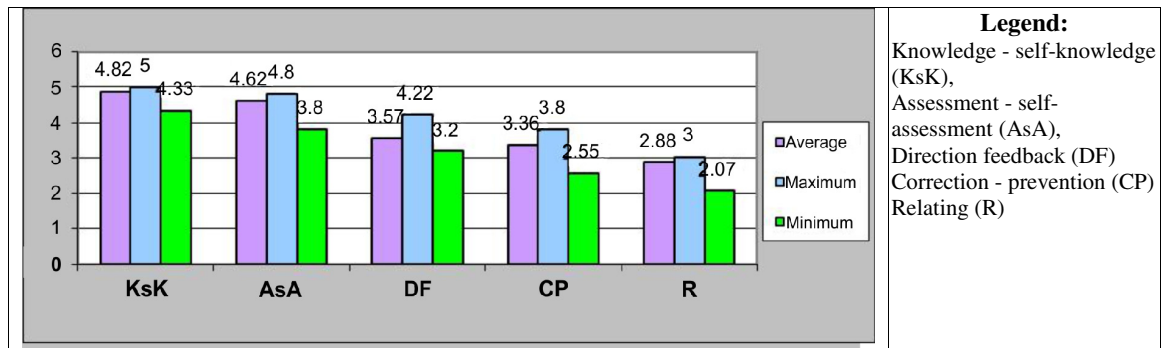


Fig. 5. The average, maximum, and minimum results of the capitalization of nonverbal communication

These results highlight the importance of using nonverbal communication together with the other two types, paraverbal and verbal, while during the training process the coach and the athlete must master and use opportunistically and harmoniously all the communication techniques.

4. Conclusions

In communicating certain implicit contents, such as motor contents that are specific to sports training, the role played by non-verbal forms is very important, many of these contents being otherwise undetectable.

The coach and the athlete must know and use the types of non-verbal communication as best as possible, according to the goals of the training, taking into consideration the techniques identified in this study.

The identification of the subjects' perception regarding the importance of non-verbal communication can influence the result of the sports training process and, implicitly, can lead to better performance during competitions.

A dominant form of expression in the training lesson is represented by body movements as an expression of energy and information through posture, movement and indices; a psycho-somatic connection (body-soul) through which feelings and emotions are expressed.

The gestures of illustration, the artefacts, the facial expressing are other hallmarks of the existence of non-verbal communication perceived by the athletes in the instructional process.

The variety of the non-verbal communication types can be a solution for the various stages of the sports training process.

In order to verify the ways in which this form of communication can be capitalized on, in the sense of improving the instructive process, this research can be followed by an applicative intervention. Thus, the identified types of non-verbal communication can be operationally objectified for each sports training stage and can take into consideration aspects regarding the athletes' age, training levels and the framework within which they are applied (training or competition).

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