How Dogs Understand Us: Words, Tone of Voice, and Gestures

Name Date Class

Reading

1 You come home and say, “Do you want to go for a walk?” Your dog jumps up and runs to the door. But what did the dog understand? Maybe it understood your words. Maybe it only heard your happy **tone** of voice. Or maybe it noticed your **gestures**, such as picking up the leash. Scientists have tested all three ideas. The answer seems to be a mix.

2 Let us start with words. Some dogs can learn a large **vocabulary**. A border collie named Chaser, in the United States, learned the names of 1,022 toys after about three years of daily training. She could bring the right toy when she heard its name. Most dogs are not like Chaser, though. Scientists in Hungary have found only a few dozen dogs, in about nine countries, that learn new toy names quickly. They call them **gifted** word learners. Most pet dogs seem better at learning **commands**, such as “sit” or “come”, than the names of objects. Commands are words that tell a dog what to do.

3 Tone matters too. In Hungary, scientists trained 13 dogs to lie still during a brain **scan**. A trainer spoke to the dogs. Some words were praise, such as “well done.” Other words meant nothing to the dogs, such as “if.” Each word was said in a happy voice and in a **flat** voice, which has very little feeling in it. The scans showed that the dogs’ brains handled the meaning of words and the tone of voice in different places. This is similar to how human brains work. The brain has a **reward** system, the part that reacts to good things. It became very active only when the words and the tone both sounded like praise. Praise words in a flat voice did not have the same effect. Neither did meaningless words in a happy voice.

4 Do dogs like “baby talk”? Many people speak to dogs in a high, slow, singing voice. In one experiment, scientists played recordings of this voice to puppies and adult dogs. Most of the puppies **reacted** strongly, and some barked and ran toward the speaker. The adult dogs seemed to **ignore** the recordings. But the voices belonged to **strangers**. Adult dogs may respond differently to a **familiar** person.

5 Dogs also pay attention to our hands. In many tests, a person points at one of two cups, and the dog looks for food in that cup. Puppies only a few months old can follow a pointing finger, even if they have not spent much time with people. In one study, wolf pups raised by people did not follow a quick point from far away, but they could learn to follow it with training. Scientists still **debate** whether dogs are born with this skill or learn it by living with people.

6 What does this mean for you? The research suggests a few simple ideas. If your words and your tone **match**, your dog will probably find your praise more rewarding. If you are **consistent** and use the same word every time, your dog will probably find it easier to learn. And if you want your dog to look at something, point slowly and clearly. Many dogs will follow your hand.

7 Nobody can say yet how much a typical pet dog understands, because many studies used only small groups of dogs. Every dog is different too. Here is a small test you can try at home. If you say “walk” in a flat, bored voice, will your dog still run to the door?

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**tone**	_____	**A**	hand or body movements that show a meaning
2	**gestures**	_____	**B**	to discuss different opinions
3	**vocabulary**	_____	**C**	to fit well together with something
4	**gifted**	_____	**D**	did something because of what happened
5	**commands**	_____	**E**	something good you get for doing well
6	**scan**	_____	**F**	always done in the same way
7	**flat**	_____	**G**	orders that tell a pet what to do
8	**reward**	_____	**H**	all the words that someone knows
9	**reacted**	_____	**I**	showing no feeling or change in tone
10	**ignore**	_____	**J**	people whom you have never met
11	**strangers**	_____	**K**	well known because you meet it often
12	**familiar**	_____	**L**	having a special natural talent
13	**debate**	_____	**M**	a picture made of the inside of the body
14	**match**	_____	**N**	the way a voice sounds that shows a feeling
15	**consistent**	_____	**O**	to pay no attention to something

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

command	**consistent**	**debate**	**familiar**	**flat**	**gestures**	**gifted**	**ignore**	**match**	**reacted**	**reward**
scan	**tone**	**vocabulary**								

1 She spoke in a kind _____ , so the baby stopped crying.

2 Tourists often use _____ when they do not speak the local language.

3 Reading every day can help you build a larger _____ .

4 The _____ child learned to read at the age of three.

5 The police dog obeyed every _____ from its trainer.

6 The doctor used a brain _____ to look for the problem.

7 He answered in a _____ voice, and nobody could tell how he felt.

8 The dog got a small piece of chicken as a _____ .

9 The puppy _____ to the noise by jumping into my arms.

10 It is hard to _____ a barking dog at night.

11 Her face was _____ , so I knew we had met before.

12 Experts still _____ the best way to train a young dog.

13 Your socks do not _____ your shirt.

14 To train a dog well, you need to be _____ every day.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What three ideas do scientists test about what a dog understands when you speak to it?

2 What did Chaser learn, and how are most pet dogs different?

3 What are gifted word learners?

4 What did the brain-scan study show about word meaning and tone of voice?

5 When did the dogs' reward system become very active, and when did it not?

6 What happened when puppies and adult dogs heard recordings of “baby talk”? What does the writer say about the adult dogs?

7 How do scientists test whether dogs understand pointing?

8 What do scientists still debate about the pointing skill?

9 What advice does the reading give to dog owners, and how sure is the writer about it?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *“Chaser learned the names of her toys in less than one year.”* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *“The writer believes that scientists already know how much a typical pet dog understands.”* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with a question about saying “walk” in a flat voice? Is the aim to prove that dogs ignore tone, to invite readers to test the ideas at home, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** The writer says scientists have tested three ideas about what a dog understands.

2 **T / F** Chaser learned the names of about 100 toys.

3 **T / F** Most pet dogs seem to be better at learning commands than the names of objects.

4 **T / F** In the brain-scan study, praise words in a flat voice caused the strongest reward response.

5 **T / F** The scans showed that dogs' brains handle the meaning of words and the tone of voice in different places.

6 **T / F** Adult dogs reacted more strongly than puppies to the “baby talk” recordings.

7 **T / F** The voices in the recordings belonged to strangers.

8 **T / F** The reading says wolf pups raised by people could never learn to follow a point.

9 **T / F** Scientists still disagree about whether dogs are born with the pointing skill.

10 **T / F** The writer says you should use a different word every time you give a command.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Do you have a dog, or have you ever had one? What was the dog like?

2 Which words or commands does a dog you know understand?

3 When you speak to a dog, do you change your voice? How?

4 Which matters more to a dog, the words you say or the way you say them? Explain your answer.

5 Have you seen an animal follow someone's pointing hand? What did it do?

6 Chaser learned 1,022 toy names, but most dogs do not. Why do you think some dogs learn more than others?

7 Do you use gestures when you talk to someone who speaks a different language? Which ones?

8 In your country, what jobs do dogs do, for example helping people, guarding places, or herding animals? How are they trained?

9 Many people talk to pets in a high, slow voice. What might be the reason?

10 Would you like to teach a dog many words? Why or why not?

11 The scientists in the reading used small groups of dogs. Why can small studies be a problem?

12 Do you think it is acceptable to use animals in scientific studies, even when the tests are gentle? Why or why not?

13 Dogs and people have lived together for a very long time. How do you think this has changed dogs, and how has it changed us?

14 If you could ask scientists to study one more thing about animals and language, what would it be?

Language Focus: First Conditional for Likely Results

The first conditional describes a real or likely situation and its probable result. Use if plus the present simple in the if-clause. In the result clause, use will, or an imperative for advice.

In the reading:

- "**If** your words and your tone match, your dog **will** probably find your praise more rewarding."
- "**If** you are consistent and use the same word every time, your dog **will** probably find it easier to learn."
- "And **if** you want your dog to look at something, **point** slowly and clearly."

Practice: Complete the sentence with the correct verb forms: *"If you (praise) your dog in a happy voice, it (enjoy) the praise more."*

_____

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/dogs-understand-us

Notes