

An exploratory study of the instrumental use of finger counting in adults

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Fingers offer a practical tool for learning to count but little is known about their use in adults performing numerical activities, in particular how often and for what reason they would use them. The way adults use their fingers for counting is typically assessed by asking them to show how they count from 1 to 10, but such an assessment might reveal a different pattern than the one exhibited in daily activities, because this “show me” task is devoid of any numerical purpose. We surveyed finger counting in 594 French-speaking adults who estimated the frequency of finger use in different contexts and described their manner of counting in a demonstrative “show me” task and in an instrumental “keep track” task where the use of fingers was kept implicit. Results showed that finger counting is frequently used by adults, especially when they communicate numbers or count invisible elements, with higher percentages for math-anxious participants. The finger counting patterns slightly differ between the “keep track” and “show me” tasks. Results suggest that anatomical factors (i.e., hand dominance and mirror movement) play a greater role in the instrumental than in the demonstrative condition, the latter being further influenced by spatial factors (i.e., left-to-right mapping of numbers on the ten fingers). In conclusion, finger counting remains instrumental to adults in daily life, and a systematic evaluation is important to fully capture the heterogeneity of finger counting practices.