



Nonverbal Communication of Employees with Disabilities (Phenomenological Study of Employees with Disabilities at Isyarat Steam Motor Bandar Lampung)

Weni Safitri*, M Denu Poyo, Budhi Waskito

Universitas Bandar Lampung

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53697/iso.v5i2.2797>

*Correspondence: Weni Safitri

Email: wenisafitri1129@gmail.com

Received: 21-10-2025

Accepted: 12-11-2025

Published: 09-12-2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract: This study explores the use of nonverbal communication among employees with hearing disabilities at Isyarat Steam Motor Bandar Lampung. The study aims to understand how deaf employees interact with customers and managers using alternative communication strategies. As the importance of inclusion in the workplace increases, this study provides insights into how communication can be maintained effectively despite physical limitations. A qualitative method with a phenomenological approach was used to collect data through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participants included deaf employees, customers, and business managers. The results showed that employees communicated nonverbally using BISINDO (Indonesian Sign Language), written messages, facial expressions, gestures, and mobile applications. These tools helped bridge communication gaps and supported smooth interactions in daily operations. Customers responded positively to these interactions, often expressing interest and appreciation for employees' ability to provide professional service. These findings confirm that nonverbal communication not only facilitates interactions in the workplace but also strengthens employees' sense of belonging and self-confidence. In conclusion, nonverbal communication plays a vital role in building an inclusive and respectful work environment, as well as promoting social and economic empowerment for people with disabilities.

Keywords: Deaf Employees, Disability, Nonverbal Communication, Phenomenology

Introduction

Persons with disabilities are part of society who have the same rights and obligations in social life. Law Number 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities defines persons with disabilities as any person who experiences long-term physical, intellectual, mental, and/or sensory limitations who, in their interactions with the environment, may experience obstacles and difficulties in participating fully and effectively in society based on equal rights (Persons with Disabilities, 2020). One group of disabilities that often experiences barriers in communication are persons with hearing impairments. They are individuals with hearing impairments that are generally divided into deaf and hard of hearing (Haliza et al., 2020). Communication is a vital part of human life, including for people with disabilities. Communication is the primary medium for building relationships, expressing feelings, and understanding messages from others. In the context of disabilities, particularly deafness,

conventional verbal communication cannot be maximized, thus the use of nonverbal communication becomes very dominant. Sign language, as part of nonverbal communication, is the primary tool for exchanging messages among the deaf community (Isma, 2018).

Nonverbal communication is not limited to sign language but also includes facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and the use of space to convey meaning (Rakhmaniar, 2024; Gantiano, 2019; Rahmi, 2021). Edward T. Hall, in his proxemics theory, explains that nonverbal communication, through the use of space (distance) in interactions, conveys certain social meanings, such as closeness, intimacy, and formality (Hall, 1966). Meanwhile, Joseph A. DeVito explains that interpersonal communication occurs not only through words but also through nonverbal cues that create shared meaning (DeVito, n.d.; Afrilia et al., 2020). This business employs 12 male deaf employees and provides training in the use of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) as the primary means of communication in work operations. Through this approach, interactions between employees and between employees and customers can be maintained even though nonverbal communication is used (Safitri, 2025). This has attracted the attention of researchers because the presence of people with disabilities in public workplaces has not been widely studied in depth, particularly in the context of nonverbal communication.

Communication between employees with disabilities and customers is complex, involving differences in communication skills and cultural perceptions. Communication challenges arise when customers are unfamiliar with sign language, requiring deaf employees to rely on other assistive devices such as writing, mobile apps, and simple gestures. However, ongoing interactions demonstrate that nonverbal communication can be an effective solution to overcome physical communication barriers (Fianasari & Manafe, 2022; Novita et al., 2016). This study aims to examine in depth the forms of nonverbal communication used by deaf employees in carrying out their duties at Isyarat Steam Motor Bandar Lampung. This study uses a phenomenological approach to understand the meaning of employees' communication experiences directly from their perspectives. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of communication science, as well as practical input for business managers and policymakers in creating an inclusive work environment for people with disabilities.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to deeply understand the meaning of nonverbal communication experiences experienced by employees with disabilities, particularly deaf individuals, in carrying out their roles and duties in the workplace. The phenomenological approach is deemed appropriate because it allows for direct exploration of the subjects' perspectives regarding the social interactions they experience (Nindito, 2013). The research location is Isyarat Steam Motor Bandar Lampung, located at Jalan Panglima Polim No. 1, Bandar Lampung City. This location was chosen purposively because it is a motorcycle washing service business that actively employs deaf people. The research was conducted in March 2025. The research informants were determined using purposive sampling, selecting subjects based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The primary informants consisted of six deaf employees working at Isyarat Steam Motor, one manager, and three customers who had interacted directly with the employees. The informant

selection criteria were those who understood and were directly involved in the communication process in the workplace.

Data collection techniques used three main methods: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Observations were conducted in a participatory manner to understand interaction patterns between employees and customers. In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face with the assistance of a sign language interpreter, aiming to explore personal experiences and perceptions of nonverbal communication. Documentation studies included the collection of activity photographs, internal notes, and other supporting data from the research locations. To ensure data validity, source and method triangulation techniques were used. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from employees, customers, and managers. Method triangulation was conducted by combining the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis process began with data transcription, coding, identifying themes, and interpreting the meaning of the findings based on the theoretical framework used. This analysis aimed to identify the nonverbal communication patterns used, the context in which they were used, and the social meanings inherent in these communication practices. With this phenomenological approach, the research is expected to be able to provide an authentic and reflective picture of how deaf people build effective nonverbal communication in an inclusive work environment.

Results and Discussion

Based on research conducted at Isyarat Steam Motor Bandar Lampung, nonverbal communication was found to be a key aspect in supporting the work and social interactions of deaf employees. This study revealed the various forms and strategies of nonverbal communication used, as well as the dynamics of interactions between employees, managers, and customers.

1. Background and Characteristics of Deaf Employees

All employees at Isyarat Steam Motor are deaf. They have diverse backgrounds, ranging from working in internet cafes to other informal experiences that have shaped their character and basic skills. This background provides added value in terms of adaptability and building social interactions. Management's decision to employ only one type of disability (deaf) also aims to focus employee training and development.

2. Implementation of Sign Language Training (BISINDO)

All employees receive training in Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) as the primary means of communication in the workplace. This language is used throughout the work process, both among employees and in coordination with management. In addition to BISINDO, they are also trained in the use of facial expressions and body gestures to support communication.

3. Nonverbal Communication Between Employees

Interactions between deaf employees are smooth, utilizing BISINDO and natural facial expressions. They can effectively convey both technical and emotional messages. Misunderstandings sometimes occur, but these are quickly resolved through clarification using more specific gestures or adjusting expressions.

4. Nonverbal Communication with Management

Business managers also learn basic BISINDO to build two-way communication with employees. They also use visual media such as whiteboards, pictures, or writing to convey work instructions. This communication process is conducive and demonstrates a mutually respectful working relationship.

5. Nonverbal Communication with Customers

Interactions between deaf employees and hearing customers demonstrate adaptive dynamics. Employees use a variety of nonverbal communication strategies, such as:

- Writing in a book or on a blackboard
- Using the notes app on your phone
- Give simple hand signals
- Pointing to a price list or specific object

Customers responded positively, and some expressed interest in learning basic gestures. The interaction went smoothly, despite the lack of verbal communication.

6. Challenges and Solutions in Communication

The most common challenge is difficulty understanding requests from customers who speak quickly or use unfamiliar terms. To address this, employees use clarification techniques through writing or pointing to objects. Some customers also take the initiative to use their own phones to type messages.

7. Employee Emotional Responses to Customers

Employees express pride and excitement when customers return to their services. This builds confidence and motivation in their work. They feel valued and equal, despite their physical limitations.

8. An Inclusive and Supportive Work Environment

Isyarat Steam Motor provides an inclusive workplace, provides ongoing training, and supports the use of disability-friendly communication channels. Its work culture focuses on collaboration, equality, and employee empowerment.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that nonverbal communication is the primary means used by deaf employees in carrying out work activities at Isyarat Steam Motor Bandar Lampung. Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) is used as the primary means of communication, supplemented by facial expressions, body movements, eye contact, and assistive media such as writing or mobile applications. Communication between employees runs smoothly because they have similar backgrounds, experiences and abilities. This harmony creates efficient cooperation and minimizes miscommunication. Communication with management is also conducive, due to the management's initiative to learn basic sign language, as well as the use of visual media to convey work instructions.

This creates a work atmosphere of mutual respect and equality. In interactions with customers, employees demonstrated high levels of adaptability. Even though customers didn't understand BISINDO, they were able to convey their messages through various alternative forms of nonverbal communication, such as writing in books, using cell phones, or pointing to objects. Customer responses were generally positive, with some customers even impressed and actively engaged in the communication process. Challenges that arose, such as customer impatience or the use of unfamiliar terms, were overcome by employees

with patience, creativity, and visual communication skills. This strategy demonstrated that hearing impairments are not a barrier to providing quality service. More than just a means of interaction, nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in building employees' self-confidence and self-esteem. Their success in serving customers, completing tasks, and building professional relationships creates experiences that reinforce their identity as independent and empowered individuals. This communication process also reflects the realization of real social empowerment. Employees are no longer viewed as passive participants, but as active participants in the workplace. An inclusive work environment, supported by management and a culture of mutual respect, strengthens the role of nonverbal communication as the foundation for creating a fair and disability-friendly workplace.

In addition to its operational function, nonverbal communication also has an emotional dimension that strengthens social relationships. Gestures and facial expressions serve as a medium for conveying warmth, empathy, and openness. This helps build positive interpersonal relationships, both among employees, with managers, and with customers. This experience demonstrates that nonverbal communication can not only replace verbal communication but also shape an inclusive and humanistic work culture. The practices implemented at Isyarat Steam Motor can serve as a model that can be replicated in other workplaces in an effort to create a workspace that is open to all groups, including people with disabilities.

Conclusion

This study concludes that nonverbal communication is a key component in building social and professional interactions in an inclusive workplace, particularly for deaf employees. The use of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO), gestures, facial expressions, and assistive media such as writing and digital applications have proven effective in bridging communication between employees and customers and managers. This demonstrates that physical limitations are not a barrier to effective communication, as long as there is understanding, adaptation, and support from the work environment. Communication among employees demonstrates the strength of solidarity and social cohesion based on shared experiences. Meanwhile, interactions with customers demonstrate employees' flexibility and adaptability in creating two-way communication. These findings demonstrate that nonverbal communication can replace verbal communication in certain contexts, both functionally and emotionally. Furthermore, the research findings confirm that the presence of disabled employees in public workplaces has a positive impact on economic empowerment, social recognition, and a shift in stigma toward the disabled. The Bandar Lampung Steam Motor Signal provides a concrete example of how an empathy-based approach, training, and managerial commitment can create an inclusive and productive workplace. Thus, nonverbal communication not only functions as a tool for exchanging information, but also as a means of forming meaning, identity, and equal social relations in an inclusive workplace.

References

- Afrilia, M.A., Sari, R.M., & Widodo, A.A. (2020). *Interpersonal Communication*. Deepublish.
- Alhammadi, M.M. (2024). Availability of disability specialists for students with vision or hearing impairment in the United Arab Emirates: current status and future needs. *Disability and Rehabilitation Assistive Technology*, 19(4), 1709–1717. ISSN 1748-3107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17483107.2023.2228827>
- Arndt, S.R. (2024). Case Study: Can Deaf Truck Drivers Be Trained in a Reasonably Safe Manner; An Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Suit. *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, 68(1), 285–289. ISSN 1071-1813. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10711813241275933>
- Aulia, D.N., Sinambela, M.P., & Mubarok, A. (2024). *Verbal and Nonverbal Communication in Social Interaction*. UMSU Press.
- Chelius, S. (2024). Exploring the job resources experienced by employees with hearing impairment in South Africa. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22. ISSN 1683-7584. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2786>
- DeVito, J.A. (n.d.). *The Interpersonal Communication Book* (14th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Dong, S. (2023). Workplace accommodation requests: Experiences of barriers and facilitators among deaf and hard-of-hearing. *Work*, 76(4), 1565–1578. ISSN 1051-9815. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-220632>
- Faniasari, I., & Manafe, G. (2022). Communication Strategy in Consumer Service. *Journal of Communication and Business*, 6(1), 45–58.
- Forman, J. (2023). Creating a culture of inclusivity for employees with sensory disabilities: Best practices for organizations. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 75(3), 225–239. ISSN 1065-9293. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000226>
- Gantiano, D. (2019). Nonverbal Communication in Social Interaction. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 8(2), 120–127.
- Grech, L.B. (2023). Furthering the person-first versus identity-first language debate. *Australian Psychologist*, 58(4), 223–232. ISSN 0005-0067. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2023.2192863>
- Haliza, I., Irwanto, D., & Sari, A. (2020). Communication Understanding in Deaf Children. *Journal of Special Education*, 5(1), 22–31.
- Hall, E.T. (1966). *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hopipah, N., & Khairi, L. (2022). Challenges for People with Disabilities in the World of Work. *Journal of Social and Welfare*, 4(2), 55–66.

- Idaini, N. (2021). Social Inclusion and Education for Children with Special Needs. *Indonesian Journal of Special Education*, 2(1), 34–42.
- Isma, N. (2018). Sign Language as the Identity of the Deaf Community. *Journal of Linguistics and Communication*, 3(2), 78–85.
- Lyons, B.J. (2023). Disability severity, professional isolation perceptions, and career outcomes: When does leader–member exchange quality matter?. *Journal of Management*. ISSN 0149-2063. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221143714>
- Nindito, A. (2013). Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology and Its Relevance in Social Research. *Journal of Sociotechnology*, 12(3), 311–320.
- Novita, A.W., Rahmawati, D., & Wahyuni, S. (2016). Service Quality and Consumer Loyalty. *Journal of Economics and Business*, 3(1), 40–48.
- Persons with Disabilities. (2020). Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities.
- Rahmi, Y. (2021). Interpersonal Communication from a Disability Perspective. *Journal of Social and Cultural Communication*, 5(1), 50–59.
- Rakhmaniar, I. (2023). The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Team Collaboration. *Journal of Psychology and Communication*, 4(2), 44–53.
- Rakhmaniar, I. (2024). Nonverbal Communication in an Inclusive Workplace. *Journal of Social Innovation and Communication*, 5(1), 61–70.
- Sarmiati, E.R.R. (2019). Interpersonal and Nonverbal Communication in Social Relationships. *Journal of Human Communication*, 7(1), 12–23.
- Zuriekat, M. (2024). The audiological rehabilitation of workers with hearing loss in the UK: a qualitative study of workers' perspectives. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 46(17), 3946–3960. ISSN 0963-8288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2023.2261375>