



## **Toward Improving Nonverbal Communication Skills in Hausa Sign Language**

By

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### **Abstract**

*Nonverbal communication plays a vital role in Sign language, as it conveys emotions, attitudes, and intentions. This article aims to explore the categories of nonverbal communication language and provide a methodological approach to improving nonverbal communication skills in Hausa Sign Language (HSL). An Eclectic approach is employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. The results indicate that awareness, practice, and feedback are essential components in improving nonverbal communication skills in Hausa sign language.*

Keywords: Nonverbal, Categories of Nonverbal, Hausa Sign Language and Roles of Nonverbal Communication,

### **1. Introduction**

The non-verbal is a combination of two words, *non* which means “no”, and verbal means “spoken/oral/unwritten” then it seems logical that nonverbal communication means communication that does not use words. Different scholars gave various definitions such as

Verderber (1999: 77) describes nonverbal behaviours as “those bodily actions and vocal qualities that typically accompany a verbal message and are usually interpreted as intentional. We communicate nonverbally even when we aren’t speaking; our nonverbal behaviours are seen as well as heard. And because our nonverbal behaviour is often reactive, it may be used as a guide to the nature and depth of our feelings. In fact, it is often our nonverbal behaviour that others regard as the true measure of our feelings. They have agreed-upon interpretations among members of our speech community in a given culture.

The real value of nonverbal communication lies in the insight it can give to your own behaviour. It is impossible to discuss oral communication without taking nonverbal communication into account because “only up to one-third of a message in a person-to-person situation is conveyed by words alone (Beisler F, Scheeres H, & Pinner D. 1990, p. 38). Even silence and absence can be considered as nonverbal messages because it encompasses all forms of human interaction (s) that do not rely on verbal cues, such as words or written text. However, sign language is a unique and complex form of nonverbal communication. It has its own grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, and is used by Deaf and hard of hearing (impaired) communities to communicate with each other. Sign language is not a simplified version of spoken language, but rather a distinct language with its own cultural and historical context. In addition, Hausa sign language is a visual-gestural language that relies heavily on nonverbal communication. Nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and handshapes, convey emotions, attitudes, and



intentions. Effective nonverbal communication is crucial in sign language, as it facilitates clear understanding and builds strong relationships to promote successful communication. However, many sign language users struggle to develop and refine their nonverbal communication skills, leading to misunderstandings and miscommunications.

Numerous scholars have extensively researched verbal and nonverbal communication, yielding valuable insights. Notable contributors include:

Peter (1999), explored nonverbal communication forms and functions, highlighting their significance in interpersonal interactions. Adler & Elmhorst (2002), focused on workplace communication, emphasising the role of nonverbal cues in professional settings. Barrot & Sipacio (2016) developed *Communicate Today*, a resource for academic and professional English communication. Beisler, Scheeres, & Pinner (1990), authored *Communication Skills*, a comprehensive guide to effective communication. Bovee, Thill, & Schatzman (2003), wrote *Business Communication Essentials*, a foundational text for business communication. Buller, Dasvid, & Burgoon (1986), investigated vocalics and nonverbal sensitivity in relation to compliance. In addition, De Vito (1993) published *Messages: Building Interpersonal Communication Skills*, a book on developing effective communication and Grothe (2022), discussed various types of nonverbal communication. Burgoon et al (2017) composed on Nonverbal signals. And finally, Hargie (2019), edited *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, a comprehensive resource.

Recent studies continue to build upon these foundations. For instance, research emphasises the importance of nonverbal cues in perceived responsiveness, highlighting the role of facial expressions, vocal tone, touch, and body language in conveying empathy and understanding. Understanding these cues can enhance relational dynamics, particularly in therapeutic contexts

Nonverbal communication encompasses various aspects, including Kinesics (Body language and movement), Haptics (Touch and physical contact), Proxemics (Space and distance) and Paralinguistics (Vocal tone and pitch) as well as Chronemics “Time and its usage” (Andersen, 1999).

Effective communication relies on aligning verbal and nonverbal messages, as incongruence can lead to confusion and reduced trustworthiness. By mastering nonverbal communication skills, individuals can convey confidence, enthusiasm, and empathy, ultimately fostering deeper connections.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language. By exploring the categories of nonverbal communication, investigating its importance, and developing strategies for improvement, this study can provide valuable insights and practical recommendations for sign language educators,

learners, and users.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To identify and categorise the different types of nonverbal communication used in Hausa sign language:
- ii. To investigate the importance of nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language:



- iii. To develop strategies for improving nonverbal communication skills in sign language:
- iv. To provide recommendations for sign language educators, learners, and users.

### **3. Research Questions**

- i. What are the different categories of nonverbal communication used in Hausa sign language?
- ii. How important is nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language?
- iii. What strategies can be used to improve nonverbal communication skills in Hausa sign language?
- iv. What recommendations can be made for sign language educators, learners, and users to promote effective nonverbal communication?

### **4. Hausa Sign Language**

Hausa sign language (HSL) is the language used by deaf people in the Hausa speaking areas of Kano State in the northern Nigeria. There are no records on when deaf Hausa people began using HSL, the way it is being used today. The HSL on the other hand is language produced and perceived in fundamentally different ways. While Hausa spoken language is produced by the vocal tract and perceived by the auditory channel, Hausa Sign Language is produced by the hands and other non-manual articulators like the head, face, and body, and are perceived visually. HSL is typically appearing as the primary communication system of Hausa people for whom the use of spoken language is blocked, either by deafness or muteness. Generally, HSL is referred to as “*maganar bebaye* or *zancen bebaye*”. The language of deaf can also be referred to as *maganar hannu (bebananci)* or *zancen hannu* (the language of the hands) (Schmaling, 2000; cited in Gwammaja, 2018).

### **5. Methodology of the Study**

This study employed an Eclectic approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods.

#### **5.1 Data Collection**

A corpus of 100 HSL signs was collected through participant observation, interviews, and video recordings of Deaf individuals using HSL in naturalistic settings. The signs were selected to represent a range of concepts, including objects, actions, and abstract ideas.

#### **5.2 Data Analysis**

Each sign of Hausa sign language was analysed for its iconic properties, using a coding scheme adapted from existing works on Hausa sign language, such as Gwammaja (2009, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018, and 2019) and Schmaling (2000, 2011, 2013, and 2016).

The coding scheme includes categories such as:

- Facial expressions: Happy/positive, Sad/negative, Neutral, Surprised and Angry
- Handshapes and finger placement: Specific handshapes (e.g., flat hand, curved hand),

Finger placement (e.g., index finger, thumb) and Hand orientation (e.g., palm up, palm



down).

- Proximity and distance: Close proximity, far distance, moving closer and Moving farther away
- Touch and physical contact: Light touch, Firm touch, holding hands and Patting on the Back
- Posture and orientation: Upright posture, Slouching, Turning away and Turning towards

### **5.3 Participants**

Thirty-five (35) Hausa Deaf individuals, with fluency in Hausa sign language (HSL), participated in the study. Participants were selected from some frequent Deaf joints in Kano Metropolitan, to mention them are: Kwanar Jaba, Kurna, Kōki, Gidan Shatima, Gwale, Tarauni and Kumbotso. The selection process was conducted without consideration of participants' demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, qualifications, or linguistic background, ensuring a diverse and representative sample..

### **5.4 Data Triangulation**

To ensure data triangulation, multiple data sources were used, including:

- Observing sign language interactions among HSL signers
- Conducting interviews with Deaf and hard of hearing individuals with aid an expert
- Analysing the extracted sign from recorded conversations
- Using surveys to gather data on nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language.

Data were analysed using both quantitative (frequency counts) and qualitative (thematic analysis) methods.

### **5.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were based on the followings:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage.

By using an Eclectic approach, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the non-verbal communication, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to shed light on the improvement of non-verbal communication skills in Hausa sign language.

## **6. Categories of Nonverbal Communication in Hausa Sign Language**

Nonverbal communication encompasses various categories, including kinesics, paralinguistic, proxemics, haptics. The nonverbal communication use by the Hausa Sign Language can be divided into four (4) categories based on the demand of this study.



- **Kinesics** (Body Language) is the study of how we use body movement and facial expressions (method of sharing emotions and feelings), and handshapes.
- **Paralinguistic** (Vocal Cues) refers to the vocalised but nonverbal parts of a message. *Vocalics* is the study of paralinguistics, which includes the vocal qualities (Rate of speech, Pause and hesitation) that go along with verbal messages, such as *pitch*, *volume*, *rate*, *vocal quality*, and *verbal fillers* (Andersen, 1999).
- **Proxemics** (Personal Space and physical distance) is a form of nonverbal communication in which you maintain distance. We all have varying definitions of what our “personal space” is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship (Andersen, 1999).
- **Haptics** (Touch and physical contact). It is a branch of nonverbal communication in which people interact or communicate by touch without using words. Think of how touch has the power to comfort someone in moment of sorrow when words alone cannot. This positive power of touch is countered by the potential for touch to be threatening because of its connection to sex and violence. We probably get more explicit advice and instruction on how to use touch than any other form of nonverbal communication (Andersen, 1999).

## **7. Roles of nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal communication plays some vital roles in the Hausa deaf language. The role comprises the followings items:

- i. **Facilitating Clear Understanding:**
  - Nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, can help clarify the meaning of signs and prevent misunderstandings.
  - Nonverbal cues can provide context for the conversation, such as indicating the topic or tone of the conversation.
  - Nonverbal cues can convey emotions and attitudes, such as enthusiasm, interest, or boredom.
  - Nonverbal cues can regulate the conversation, such as indicating when it's someone's turn to speak or when the conversation is ending.
- ii. **Building Relationships:**
  - Nonverbal cues, such as maintaining eye contact and using open body language, can help establish trust and build rapport.
  - Nonverbal cues, such as nodding or using supportive gestures, can show empathy and understanding.
  - Nonverbal cues, such as leaning forward or using engaged facial expressions, can convey interest and attention.
  - Nonverbal cues, such as using touch or proximity, can build intimacy and closeness.



## 8. Data Presentation

The data analysis of this study will be based on the above five division of nonverbal communications such as, facial expressions, handshapes and finger placement, proximity and distance, touch and physical contact as well as posture and orientation.

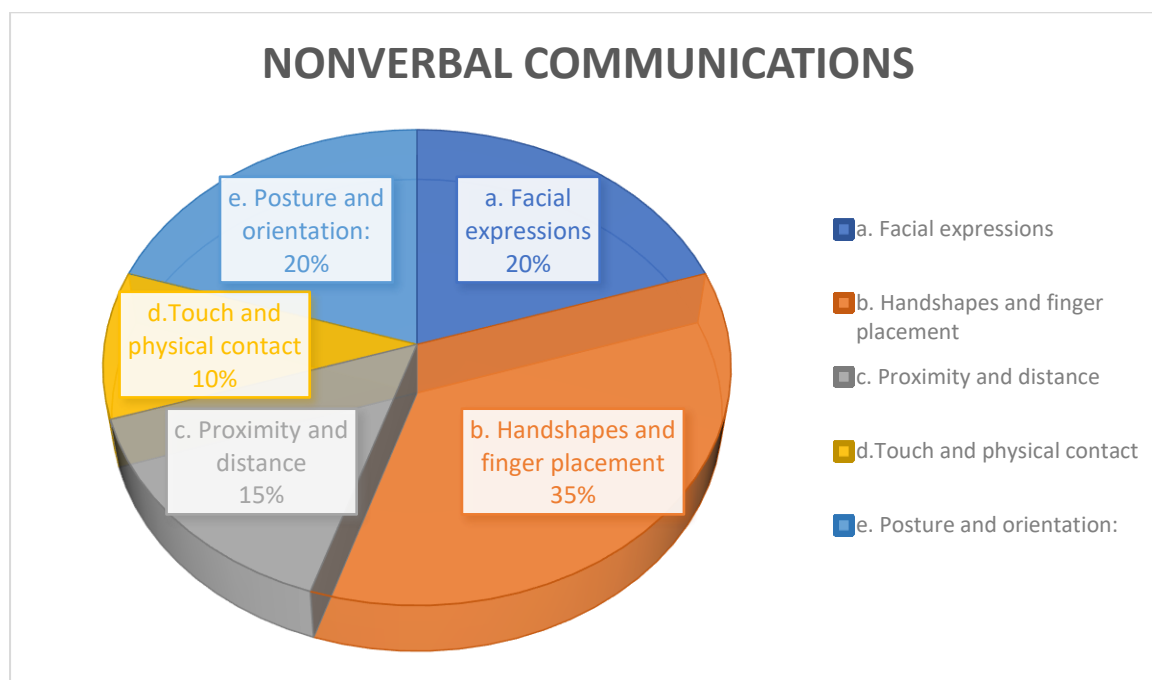


Figure 1: percentage for nonverbal communication component

Let us break down the given percentages for nonverbal communication components and visualise them in a pie chart:

### Components and Percentages with Pie Chart Representation

- Facial Expressions: 20% (72 degrees)
- Handshapes and Finger Placement: 35% (126 degrees)
- Proximity and Distance: 15% (54 degrees)
- Touch and Physical Contact: 10% (36 degrees)
- Posture and Orientation: 20% (72 degrees)

## Discussion

The pie chart shows that Handshapes and Finger Placement account for the largest portion of nonverbal communication (35%). This suggests that gestures and hand movements play a significant role in conveying meaning and emphasis.

Facial Expressions as well as Posture and Orientation are tied for second place, each accounting for 20% of nonverbal communication. These components are crucial in conveying emotions, attitudes, and intentions.



Proximity and Distance account for 15%, highlighting the importance of physical space in nonverbal communication. Standing too close or too far can significantly impact the message being conveyed.

Touch and Physical Contact account for the smallest portion (10%). While touch can be an effective way to convey empathy or support, it can also be perceived as intrusive or aggressive if not used carefully. Touch and physical contact account for the smallest portion (10%) likely because of:

- i- Touch can be highly culture-specific and personal. What feels comfortable for one person might be invasive for another.
- ii- Touch can be easily misinterpreted, leading to discomfort or conflict.
- iii- In many settings (work, formal interactions), touch is limited to avoid misunderstandings.
- iv- People have varying comfort levels with physical contact, making it a tricky communication tool for general use.

This makes touch a less universally applicable communication method, limiting its portion to 10%. This analysis suggests that nonverbal communication is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. By being aware of these components and their relative importance, individuals can tailor their nonverbal cues to convey their intended message more effectively.

By paying attention to handshapes and finger placement, facial expressions, and posture and orientation, individuals can convey confidence, enthusiasm, or empathy. Being mindful of proximity and distance can help individuals respect personal boundaries and avoid miscommunication. Finally, using touch and physical contact judiciously can help build rapport or convey support.

## **9. Strategies of Improving Nonverbal Communication Skills in Hausa Sign Language**

The strategies of improving Nonverbal Communication Skills in Hausa Sign Language comprises the following:

- i. The first step of improving nonverbal communication skills is to become aware of your own nonverbal cues. Practice self-reflection and seek feedback from others, that is to develop an understanding of the importance of nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language.
- ii. Practice is key to improving nonverbal communication skills. Practice using different nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures. Then, engage in regular practice to develop and refine nonverbal communication skills.
- iii. Seek feedback from others on your nonverbal communication skills. Ask for constructive criticism and use it to improve your skills.
- iv. Be aware of cultural differences in nonverbal communication. What is considered polite in one culture may be considered rude in another. Certain types of nonverbal



communication can mean different things in different cultures. They can also vary based on someone's personality. Before assuming that a person's body language or tone means something definitively, ask. "I notice that you won't look me in the eye when we speak. Are you upset with me?" Give them the opportunity to explain how they are feeling so you know for sure.

- v. Active listening is an important aspect of nonverbal communication. Pay attention to the other person's nonverbal cues and respond accordingly.

## **10. Practical suggestions offering for incorporating nonverbal communication skills into Hausa sign language education and practice.**

Here are some practical suggestions for incorporating nonverbal communication skills into Hausa sign language education and practice.

### **i. Hausa Sign Language Educators**

- Integrate nonverbal communication skills into the curriculum, include lessons on nonverbal communication skills, such as facial expressions, body language, and eye contact.
- Use video recordings and observations to provide feedback to students on their nonverbal communication skills.
- Encourage students to practice their nonverbal communication skills through role-playing and interactive activities.
- Invite Deaf or hard of hearing guest speakers to share their experiences and provide insights on nonverbal communication in sign language.

### **ii. Hausa Sign Language Learners:**

- Practice signing in front of a mirror to observe and improve your nonverbal communication skills.
- Record yourself signing and review the video to identify areas of improvement.
- Seek feedback from Deaf or hard of hearing individuals, or from Hausa sign language instructors, on your nonverbal communication skills.
- Immerse yourself in the Deaf community by attending their events, joining their clubs or organisations, and interacting with them

### **iii. Hausa Sign Language Interpreters:**

- Develop your observational skills to accurately interpret nonverbal cues in Hausa sign language.
- Practice interpreting nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, in Hausa sign language.
- Seek feedback from Deaf individuals on your interpretation of nonverbal cues in Hausa sign language.



- Stay up-to-date with Deaf culture and that of the community by attending their workshops, conferences, and Deaf events.
- iv. Hausa Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals:
- Be conscious of your own nonverbal communication skills and how they may impact your interactions with others.
  - Provide feedback to Hausa sign language learners and interpreters on their nonverbal communication skills.
  - Share your experiences and insights on nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language with others.
  - Advocate for the Deaf awareness and education for the impaired individuals, including the prominence of nonverbal communication in Hausa sign language.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Nonverbal communication carries a great deal of meaning, but where words normally express ideas, nonverbal messages convey attitudes and emotions. Nonverbal messages are always available, since it is impossible to avoid communicating nonverbally. These messages should be interpreted with caution, however, since they are usually ambiguous and are often culture-bound. Nonverbal messages can be expressed vocally, through appearance (physical stature and clothing), and through the face, eyes, posture, gesture, distance, and time. Since communication is unavoidable, even our silence and absence in a situation tend to send messages to individuals.

Monitoring your own nonverbal behaviour is a critical component of interpersonal goal attainment. By engaging in self-reflection, one will be better able to judge if he using nonverbal cues to project the message you hope to send. The study identifies that by being aware of and effectively utilising handshapes and finger placement, facial expressions, posture and orientation, proximity and distance, as well as touch and physical contact, individuals can enhance their communication skills and build stronger relationships. It also discovers that by mastering these nonverbal cues, individuals can convey confidence, enthusiasm, and empathy, respect personal boundaries, and foster deeper connections with others.

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