

AN ANALYSIS OF TOURISM WORKERS' LANGUAGE GAPS BETWEEN VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION AT TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN MAKASSAR CITY

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Abstract: This study investigated the language gaps between verbal and non-verbal communication among tourism workers at two major tourist destinations in Makassar City: Samalona Island and Fort Rotterdam. The primary aim is to analyze the characteristics and aims to examine how these workers perceive and handle communication challenges. Using a qualitative method, the data was collected through unstructured interviews and field notes observations involving 6 tourism workers at each site. The findings reveal that language gaps frequently occur due to limited English proficiency, unclear expressions, and inconsistencies between verbal language and non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. These mismatches often lead to miscommunication, confusion, or reduced tourist satisfaction, especially in cross-cultural interactions. The study also found that many tourism workers are unaware of how cultural differences influence the interpretation of body language and spoken messages. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of enhancing non-verbal awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, and communication competence through targeted and continuous training. Such improvements are essential to ensure effective interaction, better tourist experiences, and professional growth within the tourism sector.

Keywords : Language Gaps, Verbal And Non-Verbal Communication, Cross-Cultural Interactions

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism significantly contributes to economic development worldwide and in Indonesia. In 2023, the sector supported millions of jobs and accounted for a notable share of both global and national GDP, with Makassar City standing out as a strategic hub in Eastern Indonesia due to its growing tourist arrivals.

Beyond infrastructure and attractions, communication plays a central role in delivering quality services. Effective interaction ensures clear information and comfort for visitors, yet tourism workers often encounter difficulties such as limited English proficiency, unclear intonation, or inappropriate non-verbal cues. Previous studies have acknowledged these issues but tend to emphasize verbal skills or general service quality, leaving the specific nature of communication gaps, particularly non-verbal aspects, underexplored. In Makassar, training opportunities remain limited, with only a small portion of workers receiving programs that address these skills.

Makassar City, as the capital of South Sulawesi Province, holds a strategic position in the development of tourism in Eastern Indonesia. The Makassar City Tourism Office recorded a 14.5% increase in the number of domestic tourist visits in 2023 compared to the previous year, reaching a total of 2.1 million visitors. While the number of international tourist arrivals has not fully recovered following the COVID-19 pandemic, it has shown a positive trend with a 9.3% increase.

Communication as a systemic factor influencing the quality of tourism services, not just a matter of individual interaction. For instance, research by Ayyildiz et al.

(2023) and Wang & Mattila (2010) highlights how cross-cultural communication failures significantly impact service quality and tourist satisfaction. The success of the tourism sector is not solely determined by the attractiveness of destinations or physical infrastructure but also by the quality of services particularly communication between tourism workers and visitors. Communication serves as the primary bridge for delivering information, building comfort, and creating enjoyable tourism experiences. Effective communication enhances visitor satisfaction and fosters tourist loyalty toward a destination.

However, in practice, communication among tourism workers still encounters various challenges, particularly in terms of language gaps. These gaps are not limited to verbal communication difficulties such as a lack of foreign language proficiency, especially English but also include non-verbal aspects like facial expressions, voice intonation, body gestures, and eye contact that are inconsistent with the intended message.

A study by Priyanto and Nurhadi (2021) found that 63% of tourism workers in Indonesia struggle to communicate with foreign tourists due to limited vocabulary and difficulties in constructing effective sentences in English. A similar issue is present in Makassar, where an internal survey by the Tourism Office in 2022 revealed that only 27% of tourism workers had ever participated in cross-cultural communication training, most of which focused more on verbal skills while neglecting the importance of body language and non-verbal communication.

In major tourist destinations in Makassar, such as samalona beach, Fort Rotterdam, and sumbo opu, situations are often encountered where tourism workers are unable to respond clearly to questions from foreign tourists or instead use body language that may be confusing or perceived as inappropriate in certain cultures. This poses a threat to the image of local hospitality, which is one of the key strengths of the tourism sector in South Sulawesi.

This study therefore focuses on the communication practices of tourism workers in Makassar. It aims, first, to analyze the characteristics of both verbal and non-verbal strategies used in interactions with foreign tourists, and second, to examine how workers perceive and manage communication challenges. By doing so, the research seeks to provide a clearer understanding of communication dynamics in Makassar's tourism sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication is a core component of tourism services, shaping both the delivery of information and the overall tourist experience. Tourism workers act as intermediaries between destinations and visitors, making communication skills a critical competency. The Next Tourism Generation Alliance (NTG) and Baker & O'Brien (2021–2023) highlight communication and soft skills as essential elements of quality tourism performance.

In general, communication is divided into verbal and non-verbal forms. Verbal communication relies on spoken or written language, while non-verbal communication involves gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact, and tone of voice. Both forms function interdependently; however, when language barriers arise, inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal cues may lead to misunderstanding.

Several studies have identified the challenges faced by tourism workers in these areas. Priyanto and Nurhadi (2021) reported that limited English proficiency remains a major obstacle for Indonesian tourism workers, especially in sentence construction and vocabulary use. Such verbal limitations can reduce service quality and tourist satisfaction. At the same time, non-verbal communication—although less emphasized in training—plays a crucial role in reinforcing meaning and establishing rapport with international tourists.

Theoretical perspectives also shed light on these issues. Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context communication framework explains how cultural differences shape communicative behavior. Indonesia, as a high-context culture, often relies on implicit and non-verbal cues, whereas many foreign tourists originate from low-context cultures that emphasize explicit verbal expression. These cultural contrasts can amplify communication gaps in tourism encounters.

Recent scholarship calls for more comprehensive training in intercultural communication. Gali (2023) stressed the importance of preparing tourism professionals to foster mutual understanding across cultural backgrounds, arguing that competence should extend beyond basic language proficiency to include cultural awareness and non-verbal skills. Nevertheless, most existing research has focused on general communication or verbal proficiency, with limited attention to how verbal and non-verbal gaps manifest simultaneously in real tourism settings.

This study addresses that gap by examining the communication practices of tourism workers in Makassar, a rapidly developing tourism hub in Eastern Indonesia. Despite increasing international arrivals, surveys by the Makassar Tourism Office show that only a minority of workers have received formal training in either verbal or non-verbal communication. As such, the city provides a relevant context for analyzing both forms of communication and the challenges they present in practice.

Language gaps in tourism communication often occur when workers are unable to convey messages effectively through either verbal or non-verbal language. Inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages can lead to misunderstandings that affect the tourist experience and the destination's image. This poses a particular challenge at destinations that receive tourists from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Research by Priyanto and Nurhadi (2021) shows that limited foreign language proficiency, especially in English, is one of the main factors causing verbal communication gaps among tourism workers in Indonesia. These gaps not only hinder information delivery but can also cause discomfort and frustration for tourists. Additionally, non-verbal communication plays an important role in reinforcing messages and building emotional connections between workers and tourists.

In Makassar City, one of the major tourism centers in eastern Indonesia, the need for effective communication is increasingly important. BBTF (Bali & Beyond Travel Fair) In 2023, a BBTF press piece referred to Makassar as deserving increased attention from tourism stakeholders, calling it "a vibrant city that deserves a higher attention from tourism stakeholders" and highlighting it as "the Gateway to Eastern Indonesia". The Makassar Tourism Office records an increase in visits from both domestic and international tourists, requiring tourism workers to adapt to cross-cultural communication needs. However, internal surveys indicate that many workers still lack adequate verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

Besides language ability, workers' attitudes and culture also affect communication effectiveness. High-context cultures like Indonesia rely heavily on rich and implicit non-verbal communication, whereas low-context cultures depend

more on explicit verbal messages. This difference adds complexity to interactions between tourism workers and international tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In a conference paper (INTED 2023), concluded that “The ability and readiness of tourism and hospitality specialists to create conditions for interaction and mutual understanding between people of different countries and their cultural heritage is necessary” (G.Gali 2023). Efforts to develop tourism workers’ communication capacity through language and intercultural communication training are essential to address these gaps. Training that focuses solely on verbal language without incorporating non-verbal aspects tends to be less effective in improving service quality. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the verbal and non-verbal communication gaps experienced by tourism workers at tourism destinations in Makassar to formulate a more comprehensive training strategy.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to portray, in situ, how language gaps arise between verbal and non-verbal communication in tourism encounters. The setting comprised two high-traffic destinations in Makassar. City Fort Rotterdam and Samalona Island, observed between 22 June and 2 July 2025. This design was chosen to capture naturally occurring interactions and to generate a factual account of practices used by tourism workers when communicating with international tourists.

Sulawesi Selatan province exhibited monthly growth momentum in international tourist arrivals, ending December 2024 with 1,085 visits—an increase of 14.6% from November’s total of 947 visitors (BPS Sulawesi Selatan, 2025). So this research will be conducted in two prominent tourist destinations located in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Namely Samalona Island and Fort Rotterdam. These sites were selected due to their popularity among both domestic and international tourists, as well as their unique characteristics that represent the diversity of tourism experiences in Makassar, one being a marine tourism destination and the other a historical and cultural heritage site.

Samalona Island is a small island situated approximately 7 kilometers off the coast of Makassar. It is well-known for its coral reefs, clear waters, and vibrant marine life, making it a favored destination for snorkeling and diving activities. The island's growing popularity makes it an ideal site for observing tourist behavior and assessing the impacts of tourism on the natural environment.

Fort Rotterdam, on the other hand, is a historical fort built during the Dutch colonial period. It is located in the city center of Makassar and functions as a cultural heritage site that attracts visitors interested in history, architecture, and local culture. As such, it provides a contrasting setting to Samalona Island, allowing the researcher to explore different dimensions of tourist motivations and experiences.

The exact timeframe for the data collection has not been finalized at the time of writing. However, the fieldwork is expected to take place over a period of several weeks, during which observations, interviews, and/or questionnaire distributions will be conducted at both locations. The schedule will be adjusted according to weather

conditions, accessibility, and the operational hours of the selected sites to ensure the optimal collection of data

3.2. Population and Sample

The target population included (a) tourism workers (e.g., guides, security, vendors, boat operators, accommodation/restaurant staff) actively serving visitors at the two sites, and (b) international tourists present at the sites during the study period.

A total of 12 participants were recruited: six workers (W1–W6) and six tourists (T1–T6), split across both locations. To minimize selection bias while keeping fieldwork feasible, participants were recruited on-site using random selection within time–location windows. Operationally, during each observation session the researcher approached eligible individuals encountered in public areas at regular intervals and invited them to participate until the quota for each group and site was met. Eligibility criteria were: aged 18+, present at the site during the study window, and willing to provide informed consent.

3.3. Research Instruments

In this study, the instruments used for data collection include unstructured face-to-face interviews and field notes observations. The unstructured interviews will be conducted with both tourism workers and tourists in order to explore their experiences and perspectives regarding verbal and non-verbal communication. Prior to each interview session, the researcher will provide brief guidelines to direct the flow of the conversation while still allowing flexibility for natural responses.

this research consist of unstructured interview guides and field note sheets. The unstructured interview guides serve as a flexible tool to explore participants' responses without predetermined questions, while the field note sheets are used to record observational data related to both verbal and non-verbal communication during the research process.

Two primary instruments were used:

- a. Semi-structured interview guide consisting of 15 questions grouped into three domains:
 - 1) Verbal communication (greetings, clarity, speed, lexical choice, accent/pronunciation)
 - 2) Non-verbal communication (gestures, eye contact, proxemics, touch/haptics),
 - 3) Language gaps (idioms/slang, use of translation apps, strategies for breakdowns). The guide provided structure while allowing probing and follow-ups.
- b. field-note observation to record non-verbal cues (facial expressions, gestures, posture, proxemics, paralanguage), interactional context (location, activity), and salient episodes of breakdown/repair.

All interviews were face-to-face, audio-recorded on a mobile device to ensure accuracy, and supported by contemporaneous field notes.

3.4. Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through two main techniques: semi structured interviews and field notes observation. The data collection technique employed by the researcher is random sampling at samalona and fort rotterdam, which allows each member of the population an equal chance of being selected, ensuring the representativeness and objectivity of the sample., while the observation were handed out to research informants to supplement the interview data.

In addition to interviews, the researcher was conduct non-participant observations and take detailed field notes during the interactions between tourism workers and foreign tourists. These field notes will serve to capture non-verbal cues, contextual behaviors, and relevant situational factors that may not be revealed through interviews alone.

Together, these instruments aim to collect rich, qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of communication issues encountered in tourism settings, particularly those involving language gaps and intercultural exchanges.

Data collection followed the steps below at both sites:

- a. Time–location sessions. The researcher scheduled multiple sessions across different days and times (morning–afternoon) within 22 June–2 July 2025 to capture variation in visitor flow.
- b. Approach & consent. Potential participants were approached in public areas (e.g., entrance, promenade, jetty). The study purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and right to withdraw were explained. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation.
- c. Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet spot near the activity area. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded; brief post-interview memos captured immediate reflections.
- d. Non-participant observation. With site and worker permission, the researcher observed live interactions between workers and tourists, recording field notes on non-verbal behaviors and contextual factors (without intervening in service delivery).
- e. Anonymization & data management. Each participant received a code (W1–W6, T1–T6). Audio files and notes were stored in a password-protected folder; transcripts removed direct identifiers.

3.5. Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in four stages to ensure transparency and replicability:

- a. Preparation. Audio transcribed verbatim; field notes typed and merged. Non-relevant chatter unrelated to the research questions was set aside to maintain focus.
- b. Coding in NVivo. Using NVivo (version stated in the manuscript's methods appendix), the researcher conducted inductive thematic coding: initial open codes were generated from the data (verbal clarity, lexical choice, accent/pronunciation, gestures, eye contact, proxemics, touch, idioms/slang, translation-app use, repair strategies), then iteratively refined into higher-order categories.
- c. Conclusion drawing & verification. Themes were interpreted against the research objectives. Triangulation was implemented by cross-checking interview themes with field-observation evidence (e.g., gestures observed vs.

gestures reported). An audit trail (coding decisions, theme revisions) and reflective memos were maintained to document analytic decisions.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Participants provided written informed consent. Identities were anonymized; data were stored securely. Trustworthiness was addressed through:

- Method triangulation (interviews + observations),
- Source triangulation (workers and tourists; two sites), and
- Transparency (clear coding procedures and an audit trail).

Verbatim quotes are presented with participant codes only (e.g., W2, T4).

4. RESULTS

This chapter explains the discovery of verbal and nonverbal language gaps based on data from semi-interviews and field observation notes.

Table 1 Informants Data

Informant Code	Occupation	Site
W1	Guide	Fort Rotterdam
W2	Meatball seller	Fort Rotterdam
W3	Security	Fort Rotterdam
W4	Boat rental operator	Samalona Island
W5	Villa caretaker	Samalona Island
W6	Restaurant owner	Samalona Island
T1	Unknown	Fort Rotterdam
T2	Unknown	Fort Rotterdam
T3	Unknown	Fort Rotterdam
T4	Unknown	Samalona Island
T5	Unknown	Samalona Island
T6	Unknown	Samalona Island

This study involved 12 informants, consisting of six tourism workers (W1–W6) and six tourists (T1–T6). Codes beginning with “W” represent workers, while “T” represents tourists. At Fort Rotterdam, the workers included a tour guide (W1), a meatball seller (W2), and a security guard (W3). At Samalona Island, they included a boat rental operator (W4), a villa guard (W5), and a restaurant owner (W6). The tourists’ occupations were not specified. Data were collected at Fort Rotterdam and Samalona Island, two of the main tourist destinations in Makassar.

4.1. Verbal Communication

The findings indicate that tourism workers in Makassar demonstrate varying levels of English proficiency depending on their roles. Professional tour guides, especially those working at Fort Rotterdam, generally showed higher competence in English, supported by training and daily interaction with foreign visitors. They were able to provide structured explanations about history and culture, which tourists found clear and engaging. In contrast, community-based workers such as boat operators or street food vendors relied on short phrases, simple vocabulary, and body language. For example, one vendor explained food options by pointing and asking, “Spicy or not?” (W2), while a boat operator used a direct question, “Mr, Mrs, you need a boat, Samalona or Lae-lae?” (W4).

Tourists reported that overall, workers’ speaking speed was manageable and often intentionally slowed down to aid comprehension. However, misunderstandings occasionally occurred due to pronunciation or lexical choices. One tourist shared that the word “homestay” was confusing because they were unsure whether it meant hotel (T2). Another recalled a local driver misunderstanding Fort Rotterdam as Fort Somba Opu (T4). These experiences reveal that while basic communication was usually successful, there were still moments of misinterpretation due to accent, vocabulary, or limited fluency.

The results of the study reveal that the English proficiency of tourism workers in Makassar varies significantly depending on their roles and level of exposure to foreign tourists. Workers who serve as professional tour guides generally demonstrate a high level of competence in English. This is because many of them have obtained formal training or certification and are accustomed to interacting with international visitors on a daily basis. For instance, at Fort Rotterdam, several tour guides were observed using well-prepared explanation templates related to the history of the fort, the architectural features of the buildings, and the collections in the museum. Their fluency and ability to deliver structured explanations not only facilitated smooth communication but also enhanced the overall visitor experience.

In contrast, community-based tourism workers or informal tourism service providers, such as boat operators in Samalona Island or local sellers around Fort Rotterdam, were found to have limited English-speaking ability. Their communication with foreign tourists often relied on basic vocabulary, short phrases, or even gestures when they were unable to find the correct words. While this sometimes allowed tourists to understand the general meaning, it also led to miscommunication and reduced effectiveness in service delivery.

Table 2 Verbal Communication Challenges and Strategies

Theme	interview results	Interpretation
Clear explanations by guides	“I explain everything about this place almost every day” (W1)	Guides’ fluency aids smooth interaction
Limited vocabulary	“Spicy or not?” (W2)	Sellers simplify language to ensure understanding
Pronunciation issues	Misheard price during food purchase (T3)	Accent differences cause minor confusion
Lexical choice	“Take rest first” (T3)	Unfamiliar expressions temporarily confuse tourists

4.2. Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication emerged as a highly effective tool for bridging language limitations. Smiles, hand gestures, and eye contact were frequently used, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Workers with limited English proficiency especially relied on these strategies, often combining one or two English words with gestures. As one worker explained: “My English not so go. But I always smile, show with hand, like this (pointing to the boat or life jacket). Tourists understand if I make gesture.” (W4).

Tourists generally responded positively, describing workers as friendly and respectful. Eye contact and comfortable physical distance were interpreted as signs of politeness, while gestures such as pointing or drawing in the air were appreciated for making explanations clearer (T2, T4). Light touch, such as a handshake or high five, was also reported, though workers adjusted carefully to avoid discomfort.

Nevertheless, cultural differences sometimes caused initial confusion. For instance, the gesture “come here” was perceived by one tourist as rude in their culture (T1), while a shoulder tap felt uncomfortable for another (T3). Despite these moments, tourists understood that such differences were unintentional and did not consider them serious issues. Instead, they often viewed them as part of the cross-cultural experience.

Based on the interview results, international tourists generally expressed that they felt comfortable with the non-verbal communication used by tourism workers. They considered that gestures and body language were friendly and helpful during interactions. Although tourists occasionally encountered situations where certain gestures carried different meanings in their own cultures, they understood that workers might not be aware of these differences and did not perceive them as a serious issue.

On the other hand, tourism workers with limited English proficiency reported that they relied heavily on non-verbal communication to interact with tourists. They often used only two to three words in English, supported by body language, smiling, or direct pointing. For instance, one worker stated:

“My English not so go. But I always smile, show with hand, like this (pointing to the boat or life jacket). Tourists understand if I make gesture. They laugh, smile back, and feel okay. I want them happy.” (W4)

This statement illustrates that, despite language barriers, workers were able to establish effective and positive communication through simple verbal cues combined with gestures. Tourists’ positive responses and their willingness to appreciate workers’ efforts further contributed to a harmonious interaction between both sides.

Table 3 Non-Verbal Communication Practices

Strategy	Tourist Perception
Smiles & eye contact	Created comfort and friendliness
Gestures (pointing, drawing in air)	Helpful for clarifying meaning
Proxemics (keeping distance)	Respected personal space
Touch (handshake, high five)	Positive if applied politely and selectively
Culturally different gestures	Initially confusing, but not harmful

4.3. Language Gaps

Language gaps were found mainly in verbal communication. Workers sometimes struggled with pronunciation, slang, or idiomatic expressions used by tourists. For example, one worker misunderstood “piece of cake” as food rather than something easy (W5). Similarly, tourists occasionally found workers’ accents difficult to follow, which led to minor mistakes such as giving the wrong amount of money when paying for food (T3).

Translation apps were used as a supplementary tool, particularly during peak tourist seasons. While helpful in basic exchanges like prices or directions, both workers and tourists noted that apps disrupted the natural flow of conversation and sometimes produced inaccurate translations (W1, T4, T5). Some tourists also felt that overreliance on apps reduced opportunities for genuine cultural interaction (T6).

Despite these challenges, both sides showed patience and adaptability. Workers often used gestures or referred tourists to colleagues with stronger English skills. Tourists, on the other hand, reported that these moments were not entirely negative; instead, they provided opportunities to learn about cultural differences. As one tourist stated: “It happens sometimes, but I enjoy it because I can learn something new about the culture, even though it slows down communication.” (T3).

These examples reflect that verbal language gaps—such as pronunciation difficulties, double negatives, or overcomplicated phrasing—often emerged during interactions. However, they rarely led to serious miscommunication, as both sides showed patience and willingness to clarify.

In contrast, non-verbal communication generally played a supportive role in overcoming these gaps. Nevertheless, cultural differences sometimes caused initial confusion. One tourist shared:

“Yes, there was one moment when a worker made a hand gesture to call me, like ‘come here.’ At first, I laughed nervously and didn’t move, because in my country that gesture can feel rude, almost like calling an animal. But then I realized the worker did it with a smile and very politely. Later another guest explained that here it is normal and friendly. After that, I felt comfortable, and I understood that the worker was just being welcoming.” (T1)

This example highlights that non-verbal communication may be interpreted differently depending on cultural background. However, these differences did not escalate into serious misunderstandings; instead, tourists tended to appreciate the friendliness and politeness of local workers.

Tourism workers also admitted that non-verbal strategies often helped them compensate for limited English proficiency. One worker stated:

“Yes, many times. When tourists don’t understand my words, I use my hands to show direction or make a picture in the air. Usually, they smile and say ‘oh, I understand.’” (W1)

Thus, while verbal communication gaps were more frequent, non-verbal communication served as an effective bridge, fostering understanding and maintaining positive interaction between tourists and tourism workers.

4.4. Field Notes Observation

The field observations provided further evidence of communication gaps between tourism workers and international tourists. For example, a meatball seller (W2) at Fort Rotterdam demonstrated very limited English vocabulary, often relying

on template phrases such as “Meatball sir/ma’am?” or “Spicy/no?”. His utterances were restricted to two or three words, without greetings or complete sentences, which sometimes reduced clarity. Despite this, he occasionally used polite expressions like “Enjoy your holiday”, showing efforts to maintain friendliness.

In terms of non-verbal communication, the same worker relied heavily on gestures, smiling, and pointing to menus or screens to convey meaning. These cues were often effective in bridging gaps when words failed, although at times they appeared awkward or overly simplistic.

By contrast, a tour guide (W1) at Fort Rotterdam displayed clearer and more structured verbal communication, using simple and appropriate language that was generally easy for tourists to understand. However, his strong local accent occasionally caused misunderstandings. Non-verbally, he maintained good eye contact and used open body language, which helped tourists feel engaged and comfortable.

Overall, the field notes confirmed that verbal limitations were more pronounced among workers with less exposure to formal communication training, such as vendors or casual staff, whereas non-verbal strategies smiling, pointing, and maintaining eye contact played a vital role in sustaining interaction. These observations triangulate with the interview data, reinforcing that verbal communication gaps remain the primary challenge, while non-verbal communication often compensates for these shortcomings.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Confirmation of Prior Literature

a. Verbal Communication Barriers

Priyanto & Nurhadi (2021) emphasize that limited English proficiency is a major factor causing verbal communication gaps, often making tourists feel uncomfortable. The findings of this study are consistent: tourism workers in Makassar also face challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction. However, unlike previous research, workers in Makassar demonstrate persistence and a strong willingness to communicate despite linguistic barriers, highlighting the importance of motivation and effort in interaction.

b. Makassar as a Tourism Gateway

The BBTF (2023) report describes Makassar as “a vibrant city that deserves higher attention” and “the Gateway to Eastern Indonesia”, illustrating the city’s significant tourism potential. The findings show that while tourist arrivals continue to increase, the communication readiness of workers in the field has not yet fully reflected this strategic role. This indicates a dissonance between the city’s branding and the preparedness of its human resources.

c. Fostering Mutual Understanding

Gali (2023) stresses the importance of tourism in creating interaction and mutual understanding across cultures. The findings of this study support this claim: non-verbal communication such as smiles, gestures, and body language were highly effective in bridging verbal gaps, making tourists feel welcomed and comfortable. This strongly reflects Gali’s notion of cross-cultural understanding

5.2. Contrast with Prior Literature

While Priyanto & Nurhadi (2021) concentrated on verbal limitations as the main challenge, this study highlights that non-verbal communication plays a crucial mediating role in Makassar. Instead of being only a complementary factor, non-verbal strategies were found to be a highly effective tool in reducing tourists' frustration and ensuring that hospitality was perceived positively.

5.3. Insights from Broader Non-Verbal Communication Literature

a. Mehrabian's 7-38-55 Rule

Albert Mehrabian proposed that in conveying emotions, only 7% is expressed through words, 38% through tone of voice, and as much as 55% through facial expressions. The findings of this study align with this rule: when verbal communication was unclear, workers' facial expressions and smiles became the main conveyors of friendliness and hospitality.

b. Hospitality Industry Evidence

Research on hotel front-office staff in Nusa Dua and Seminyak revealed that friendly gestures, consistent smiles, and clear verbal delivery significantly enhance guest experience. This parallels the findings in Makassar, where workers also relied on smiles and gestures to maintain a welcoming atmosphere despite limited verbal ability.

c. Non-Verbal Communication and Tourist Experience

A quantitative study in Bali showed that both verbal and non-verbal competencies had a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction. This resonates with the present study, where despite verbal communication gaps, strong non-verbal practices sustained positive tourist experiences.

d. Workplace Hospitality Dimension

Studies in workplace hospitality demonstrate that non-verbal elements—such as facial expressions, kinesics, and paralinguage—greatly contribute to effective engagement and customer satisfaction. This study confirms that tourism workers in Makassar implicitly utilized these dimensions to establish stronger connections with tourists.

5.4. Synthesis: Contribution of the Study

Table 4 Contribution of the Study

Aspect	General Literature	Findings
Verbal Barriers	Common issue, often frustrating (Priyanto & Nurhadi, 2021)	Present as well, but mitigated by workers' persistence and effort
Non-Verbal as Mediator	Known to be important (Mehrabian; hospitality studies)	Highly effective in sustaining comfort despite verbal limitations
Branding vs Reality	BBTF highlights Makassar's role as gateway	Field reality shows workers are not yet fully equipped
Cross-Cultural Understanding	Gali (2023) emphasizes mutual understanding	Non-verbal strategies foster cross-cultural harmony in Makassar

5.5. Implications

a. Applied Language Training

Training programs should not only focus on grammar, but also on simple expressions, tone, and building confidence in real-life communication.

b. Non-Verbal Skills Enhancement

Workshops on warm smiles, appropriate eye contact, open gestures, and welcoming posture are strongly recommended, as these have proven to improve the tourist experience.

c. Human Resource Branding Strategy

Local tourism authorities and businesses must ensure that city branding is supported by strengthening the communication competencies of tourism workers.

6. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the language gaps between verbal and non-verbal communication of tourism workers in Makassar, specifically at Fort Rotterdam and Samalona Island. The findings highlight that communication between tourism workers and international visitors is shaped by both linguistic ability and cultural understanding.

First, in terms of verbal communication, the study found that workers' English proficiency varied significantly depending on their role and exposure to tourists. Professional tour guides generally displayed higher competence in delivering structured information, while community-based workers such as boat operators, food sellers, and villa caretakers relied on limited vocabulary, short phrases, or code-mixing. As a result, tourists occasionally experienced confusion due to accents, pronunciation, lexical choice, and unfamiliar expressions. Despite these gaps, workers' persistence and willingness to communicate ensured that interactions could still proceed, though sometimes with reduced clarity.

Second, non-verbal communication emerged as a highly effective strategy for bridging verbal limitations. Smiles, gestures, body movements, eye contact, and appropriate use of personal space were consistently used to create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere. While certain cultural differences led to minor misunderstandings—such as hand gestures interpreted differently across cultures—these incidents did not escalate into serious communication problems. Instead, tourists generally appreciated the friendliness and effort shown by workers, often perceiving non-verbal cues as a source of comfort and warmth.

Third, the study revealed that language gaps were more prominent in verbal interaction, particularly in pronunciation, vocabulary use, and understanding of idiomatic expressions. However, these challenges were largely mitigated by non-verbal strategies, which functioned as a bridge to maintain effective interaction and positive tourist experiences.

In conclusion, the research shows that while tourism workers in Makassar face notable verbal communication challenges due to limited English proficiency, non-verbal communication plays a crucial mediating role. The persistence of workers, their reliance on gestures, and their willingness to engage with tourists help sustain mutual understanding and create a positive cultural exchange. Strengthening both verbal and non-verbal communication skills is therefore essential to enhance the overall quality of tourist interactions in Makassar's growing tourism sector.

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