
THE ROLE OF GERKATIN IN EDUCATING DEAF CULTURE THROUGH INCLUSIVE LEARNING SPACES IN BAHASA ISYARAT INDONESIA (BISINDO) CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of GERKATIN in educating about Deaf culture through inclusive learning spaces in Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO) classes. GERKATIN (Gerakan untuk Kesejahteraan Tunarungu Indonesia) is an organization established to advocate for the rights, welfare, equal access, and empowerment of people with hearing disabilities in Indonesia. Deaf culture is understood as an identity and way of life rooted in the values, norms, and language inherent within the Deaf community. Meanwhile, an inclusive space refers to an environment intentionally designed to ensure that all individuals—without exception—can access, participate in, contribute to, and feel equally accepted within an activity, such as a learning process. This study employs a qualitative method with a constructivist paradigm and a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) with Deaf teachers and hearing students who participated in the sign language class, as well as through participatory observation in which the researcher took part as a hearing student in the class. The theoretical framework used in this study is symbolic interactionism, which posits that individuals act based on the meanings derived from their past experiences with objects, people, and events. The findings indicate that GERKATIN, through its educational institution Pusbisindo, has successfully created an inclusive learning environment. The sign language class also fosters symbolic interaction that enables hearing students to develop an understanding of Deaf culture. Moreover, GERKATIN has empowered Deaf teachers to serve as agents of inclusion, functioning not only as educators but also as cultural representatives of the Deaf community for hearing learners. The inclusive nature of the classroom is reflected in the rules implemented by the Deaf teacher, who instructs hearing students to communicate solely using sign language and prohibits the use of spoken language. This pedagogical approach aims to normalize Deaf culture within the classroom setting.

Keywords: Bisindo, Deaf Culture, GERKATIN, Symbolic Interaction, Inclusive Space.

INTRODUCTION

Gerakan untuk Kesejahteraan Tunarungu Indonesia (GERKATIN) is an organization established to advocate for the rights, welfare, and social inclusion of the Deaf community in Indonesia. According to data provided by the Center for Data and Information of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia (PUSDATIN

KEMENKES), the total number of persons with disabilities in Indonesia in 2021 was recorded at 211,766 individuals, of whom approximately 14,499 were identified as having hearing disabilities (Safitri & Ratnasari, 2022). It is important to note a distinction between the terms “tunarungu” (hearing-impaired) and “Deaf.” The term tunarungu is a medical diagnosis referring to a limitation or loss of auditory function. In contrast, Deaf (with a capital D) refers to individuals who identify with a distinct mode of communication and cultural identity, which reflects the values and norms of the Deaf community (Bramantyo, 2019).

Sign language has become a central element of communication among Deaf individuals. In Indonesia, there are two recognized sign language systems: Sistem Isyarat Bahasa Indonesia (SIBI), which is adapted from American Sign Language (ASL), and Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO), which has developed naturally within the Deaf community and is considered their native language. BISINDO varies significantly across regions due to its diverse dialects and local interpretations (Nugraheni et al., 2021). Over time, BISINDO has evolved into a form of expression through which the Deaf community constructs and affirms its cultural identity, known as Deaf Culture (Gumelar et al., 2023). Deaf Culture encompasses values, norms, traditions, and practices unique to the Deaf community. Thus, for Deaf individuals, the word “Deaf” is capitalized to emphasize its role as a marker of cultural identity (Bramantyo, 2019).

According to Rapisa (2023), identity within Deaf culture is not solely determined by individuals who experience hearing disabilities, but also by the acceptance and participation of individuals within the Deaf community. Today, Deaf culture has been packaged and introduced through various art forms such as theatrical performances, sign language poetry recitals, and other cultural arts. These artistic activities have significantly contributed to raising public awareness and understanding of Deaf culture (Palfreyman, 2015). Access to learning Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO) has become increasingly accessible with the establishment of the Pusat Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (Pusbisindo) in 2009. Pusbisindo is an institution dedicated to the education, instruction, and development of BISINDO. As part of the Gerakan untuk Kesejahteraan Tunarungu Indonesia (GERKATIN), Pusbisindo aims to promote Deaf cultural education through the regular implementation of BISINDO sign language classes (Rubiyanto & Clara, 2019). Several previous studies serve as references for this research.

Abdillah & Andamisari (2024), in their study titled “*Communication Strategies of the Indonesian Deaf Welfare Movement Community in Promoting Indonesian Sign Language in Jakarta*,” found that GERKATIN Jakarta employed strategic communication methods, including the careful selection of communicators and well-targeted audiences, particularly those in need of BISINDO-related information. Aprilia et al. (2022), in their research titled “*The Effectiveness of Communication between Hearing Lecturers and Deaf Students through Sign Language Interpreters in the Classroom*,” identified two communication processes: one-way and two-way communication. Despite barriers such as differing interpretations, ethnocentrism, non-verbal misunderstandings, and language issues, effective communication was achieved through strong social relationships, mutual respect, openness, and equality.

Mandasari & Winduwati (2022), in their study titled “*Public Relations Efforts of Pusbisindo in Promoting the Use of Indonesian Sign Language among the Public*,”

reported that Pusbisindo promoted BISINDO by organizing sign language classes in collaboration with various institutions and universities. Pusbisindo also engaged actively with media outlets, particularly those that advocate for inclusivity on social media platforms, and frequently participated in seminars as guest speakers. Lastly, Rubiyanto & Clara (2019), in their research “*Interaction Adaptation in BISINDO Teaching and Learning Activities at Pusbisindo Jakarta,*” revealed that both Deaf teachers and hearing students shared a common need to communicate effectively with the Deaf community. Specific interaction patterns emerged that facilitated the teaching-learning process in line with mutual expectations, supported by a shared understanding between Deaf teachers and hearing students.

Based on the descriptions above, this study aims to examine the role of GERKATIN in educating Deaf culture through inclusive learning spaces within Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO) classes. It further explores the cultural approaches applied in the classroom for hearing students and investigates the implications of Deaf cultural education for those students.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

This study employs the theory of symbolic interactionism developed by George Herbert Mead, which posits that individuals continuously act based on the meanings they assign to objects, people, and events they have experienced (West & Turner, 2018). In this theory, a symbol is defined as a meaning collectively agreed upon within a society. Symbolic interactionism asserts that society is composed of individuals who not only engage in interactions but also actively observe, interpret, and construct meaning (West & Turner, 2018).

There are three fundamental assumptions within symbolic interactionism. The first is the concept of mind, which refers to the ability to use symbols that carry socially shared meanings. In this context, individuals must develop their thinking through interactions with others. The second is the concept of self, which denotes an individual's ability to reflect on themselves based on how they are perceived from others' perspectives. The third is the concept of society, which refers to how social relationships are created, formed, and constructed by individuals within a community. In general, symbolic interactionism explains that humans inherently strive to understand social reality through the use of symbols. This theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of social actions and relationships, highlighting human behavior within the context of society and group interactions (West & Turner, 2018).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method within a constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as a construct formed by individuals based on their experiences of human interaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In addition, this research adopts a phenomenological approach, which seeks to explore how individuals create meaning and understand the phenomena they experience (Moleong, 2017). Data collection methods used in this study include focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, observations, and literature review. The interview and FGD data were obtained from several categories of informants: Deaf teachers, Deaf activists, and hearing students

participating in sign language classes. The observational data were derived from the researcher's direct observations in a BISINDO class organized by Pusbisindo Jakarta, in which the researcher also took part as a student. Meanwhile, the literature review data were collected from previous research articles relevant to the topic of this study. This study applies the Miles and Huberman data analysis model, which outlines three stages of qualitative data analysis: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Moleong, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deaf culture is a distinct culture that has developed within the Deaf community. It encompasses not only the use of sign language but also unique ways of interacting, exchanging group values, and perceiving the world from the perspective of Deaf individuals. This notion is supported by Adhika, a Deaf individual, who asserts that Deaf culture is a symbol of identity embedded within every Deaf person. GERKATIN, through Pusbisindo, plays a strategic role in broadening public understanding of Deaf culture. Through its sign language class programs, GERKATIN has not only created an educational space but has also established a platform for social advocacy. Yanti, a Deaf teacher who regularly teaches in these classes, stated that sign language classes serve as a valuable opportunity for the Deaf community to introduce Deaf culture to the general public and hearing peers.

Generally, Pusbisindo sign language classes are held quarterly and are available in several provinces across Indonesia. Each class is divided into three levels (Levels 1–3), with 10 sessions per level and a final examination to determine certification eligibility. Level 1 is the most basic, where students are introduced to Deaf culture, the alphabet, numbers, days of the week, and basic conversational signs. Upon completing the final exam, students receive a Level 1 certificate, allowing them to proceed to Level 2. At Level 2, students expand their vocabulary and learn two-way dialogue structures, facial expressions, and sentence construction using sign language. Following another exam, successful students can advance to Level 3. In Level 3, students are taught to use sign language in more complex ways, including interpreting narratives and engaging in topic-based discussions. This level prepares students to become future Sign Language Interpreters.

During the research period, the researcher also had the opportunity to join a Level 1 sign language class at Pusbisindo Jakarta. The class consisted of 13 students and was led by one Deaf teacher who conducted all the sessions, each lasting 120 minutes. The class included 10 sessions, culminating in a final exam for certification. Students were also given quizzes and assignments, such as producing videos to demonstrate their understanding of the sign language material taught. This structured learning process illustrates that the sign language classes offered by GERKATIN through Pusbisindo are not merely informal gatherings, but are supported by a professional and well-organized assessment framework. Throughout the course, the researcher observed an interactive and supportive classroom atmosphere. In the first session, hearing students were encouraged to introduce themselves using sign language. The Deaf teacher was highly expressive and dynamic, using an engaging teaching style that went beyond passive content delivery. Hearing students were frequently invited to practice in front of the class, and various mini games were

included to help them learn new sign language vocabulary. These activities contributed to a dynamic and inclusive learning environment led by the Deaf instructor.

The learning space concept implemented by Pusbisindo strongly supports the principles of inclusivity. The classroom is arranged in a U-shaped seating layout, allowing hearing students to maintain visual contact with one another and directly engage with the Deaf teacher during instruction. This setup reflects the success of the inclusive learning space in sign language classes, emphasizing equality, active participation, and the elimination of communication barriers commonly found in conventional education settings. During class sessions, hearing students are not permitted to communicate using their voice. This practice serves as part of the learning concept aimed at normalizing Deaf culture within the classroom, where sound is not the primary medium of communication. Therefore, hearing students are required to communicate in ways aligned with Deaf culture through sign language or written notes. By centering the classroom experience on Deaf culture, the researcher and other hearing students were able to immerse themselves in the world as it is experienced by the Deaf community one that is filled with silence yet rich in visual and gestural meaning. This approach indirectly invites hearing students to enter and experience the non-verbal communication world that forms the foundation of social life within the Deaf community. Thus, it can be concluded that in this inclusive classroom setting, it is not the Deaf individuals who are expected to adjust to the hearing world, but rather the hearing students who are encouraged to adapt by understanding and embracing Deaf culture. This conclusion is supported by a statement from Ivan, one of the hearing students in the class, who remarked that the silent classroom environment successfully encouraged him and his peers to become accustomed to using sign language an experience that naturally deepened their understanding of Deaf culture.

In addition, one of the cultural practices taught in the class is the assignment of a "sign name" by the Deaf teacher to each hearing student. Before receiving a sign name, each student is first asked to introduce themselves. Typically, the sign name is given by the Deaf teacher based on the student's visible characteristics or personal hobbies. For example, Ivan, a hearing student with a passion for motorbikes, was given a sign name that mimics the motion of twisting a motorcycle throttle with a pinky finger forming the letter "I." Another student, Esa, who enjoys playing the guitar, received a sign name involving a hand gesture that imitates strumming a guitar, using the index, middle, and ring fingers partially bent, combined with the letter "E." The researcher, also a hearing student named Bagus and known for wearing glasses, was given a sign name that combines a thumbs-up gesture performed near the face and glasses. The sign name symbolizes a form of identity, symbolic exchange, and a gesture of equality and acceptance from the Deaf community. In this context, the practice of giving sign names is an important cultural tradition in Deaf communities, and it illustrates that learning in sign language classes is not only cognitive and linguistic but also deeply sociocultural. Moreover, the sign language classes conducted by GERKATIN through Pusbisindo serve not only to educate hearing students about Deaf culture but also to empower Deaf teachers as agents of change in the field of education. As change

agents, Deaf teachers fulfill dual roles: they are educators and simultaneously serve as representatives of Deaf identity. Thus, their presence in the classroom is not merely instrumental but symbolic they are not only facilitators of knowledge but also active subjects and cultural icons within Deaf culture.

The findings of this study are closely aligned with the theory of symbolic interactionism, in which George Herbert Mead asserts that humans continually create meaning through their daily social interactions. In this context, symbolic interaction occurs when Deaf teachers and hearing students exchange meaning through sign language via body movements, facial expressions, and other non-verbal symbols during classroom learning activities. Furthermore, Mead emphasizes that meaning is not inherently fixed to objects or actions, but is shaped through ongoing processes of communication. This idea is particularly relevant in situations where Deaf teachers assign "sign names" to hearing students. The process of assigning a sign name requires continuous communication and observation by the teacher, based on the student's hobbies, interests, or appearance. Thus, the "sign name" becomes a symbol of identity with specific social meaning within the interaction between teacher and student.

The mind concept in symbolic interactionism refers to the human capacity to use symbols in thinking and meaning-making through social interaction. In this case, the concept of mind is highly applicable to the process by which hearing students learn Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO). These students must develop their thinking abilities through direct experience using sign language as a communication tool something fundamentally different from the verbal language they are accustomed to. They are not merely memorizing signs but must understand the meaning behind each gesture and facial expression. Moreover, the Deaf teacher does not simply teach a "language," but also demonstrates a way of thinking that is deeply rooted in the visual and expressive characteristics of Deaf culture.

The self concept in symbolic interactionism refers to self awareness that emerges through social interaction when individuals begin to see themselves as they are perceived by others. In this context, the involvement of hearing students in learning sign language allows them to develop a new sense of self not merely as language learners, but as individuals becoming part of the Deaf community. Through the interactive dynamics within the classroom, hearing students gradually experience a shift in their self perception. This transformation becomes evident when they receive a "sign name" from the Deaf teacher. The students are not only given a new label but are also assigned a social identity within a different cultural group. This process encourages self-reflection, prompting students to ask themselves questions such as, "How am I perceived by the Deaf community?" or "What is the meaning of my presence in this class?" These questions reflect the development of the self, shaped through the symbols and interactions between Deaf teachers and hearing students in the classroom.

The society concept in symbolic interactionism refers to the context in which symbolic interaction takes place and serves as the foundation for the development of both mind and self. In this concept, society is not merely a collection of individuals, but a social system shaped through interactions involving meaningful symbols. In this regard, the sign language class organized by Pusbisindo has successfully established

itself as an inclusive space for members of society seeking to learn about Deaf culture. This is evident in how the class has formed a social system grounded in norms and rules rooted in Deaf cultural practices for instance, the rule that students are not allowed to communicate verbally and must instead use sign language, emphasizing non-verbal communication. Thus, the concept of society in this classroom becomes a symbolic and inclusive space, demonstrating that society is not a passive entity, but one that is continually shaped and transformed through ongoing symbolic interactions.

CONCLUSION

GERKATIN, through Pusbisindo, has successfully played a significant role in educating the public about Deaf culture through the regular implementation of Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO) classes held quarterly. These learning spaces are designed with an inclusive concept, in which the number of hearing students is limited to ensure an effective learning process. The seating arrangement is set in a “U” formation to allow students to maintain visual contact with one another and to connect directly with the Deaf teacher leading the class. During the learning sessions, hearing students are strictly prohibited from using spoken language and are only allowed to communicate using sign language. This rule is intended to help hearing students adapt and gain a deeper understanding of Deaf culture. Through the symbolic interactions that occur in the classroom, hearing students gradually develop an understanding of sign language as a social symbol, which in turn fosters a new self-awareness and encourages them to adapt to the norms of the Deaf community. This study recommends that Pusbisindo sign language class programs be expanded in the future, including integration into mainstream educational institutions, in order to promote greater equality for Deaf students in accessing formal education. Furthermore, this research suggests that future scholars explore the learning experiences of hearing students using quantitative methods to measure attitudinal and social changes following their participation in sign language classes.

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