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# Nonverbal Communication Styles Of Internship Students From Muhammadiyah University Of Sidenreng Rappang In Taiwan: A Qualitative Study Of Their Influence On Workplace Interaction

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

*This study explores the nonverbal communication styles employed by Indonesian internship students from Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang during their workplace experiences in Taiwan and examines their perceived influence on intercultural workplace interactions. Using a qualitative research design, three internship students were purposively selected based on their direct experiences of communicating with Taiwanese supervisors and coworkers. Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis framework of Miles and Huberman, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings identified several forms of nonverbal communication, including hand gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, smiling, nodding, body movements, and physical demonstrations. Participants demonstrated different communication preferences. Participants 1 and 3 actively integrated gestures and physical demonstrations with verbal expressions to communicate workplace instructions, whereas Participant 2 relied more extensively on digital translation assistance. Nonverbal communication was perceived as facilitating task comprehension, expressing attentiveness, demonstrating politeness, and establishing positive interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, culturally influenced interpretations of nonverbal cues occasionally produced communication difficulties, particularly when nodding was interpreted as complete understanding despite uncertainty. Participants addressed these challenges by observing colleagues, requesting clarification, learning basic Mandarin expressions, demonstrating workplace procedures, and using translation applications. The study concludes that effective intercultural workplace interaction depends not only on the use of nonverbal expressions but also on contextual interpretation, communication flexibility, and verification of intended meanings. The findings offer practical implications for intercultural communication preparation and international internship programs in higher education.*

## INTRODUCTION

International internship programs have become an important component of higher education because they provide opportunities for students to develop professional competencies in authentic workplace environments. Beyond technical knowledge and practical skills, these programs expose students to unfamiliar social practices, communication patterns, organizational expectations, and cultural values. As international mobility increases, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural and linguistic boundaries has become an essential competence for students preparing to enter the global workforce. Deardorff (2006) emphasizes that intercultural competence involves the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable individuals to communicate appropriately and effectively across cultural contexts. Consequently, international internships should be understood not merely as opportunities for professional training but also as environments in which students negotiate cultural differences and develop adaptive communication practices.

For Indonesian university students, international internships provide valuable experiences in countries with different languages, professional expectations, and workplace communication conventions. Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang, Indonesia, has facilitated international internship opportunities for students, including placements in Taiwan. Through these experiences, students encounter workplace situations that require them to interact with supervisors, coworkers, and other individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such interactions may involve instructions concerning daily responsibilities, task coordination, workplace procedures, interpersonal relationships, and professional conduct. Although students may possess basic English communication skills, these competencies do not necessarily guarantee effective communication in workplaces where Mandarin is frequently used.

Communication difficulties become particularly significant when interns must understand unfamiliar instructions while completing practical tasks. In such circumstances, successful communication depends on more than linguistic proficiency. Students may need to interpret gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body movements, demonstrations, and other contextual signals to understand the intentions of their supervisors and colleagues. These forms of communication are commonly categorized as nonverbal communication, which constitutes an important dimension of human interaction. Knapp et al. (2014) explain that nonverbal communication includes behaviors and signals that convey information beyond spoken language. Such behaviors may reinforce, complement, regulate, contradict, or occasionally substitute for verbal messages.

Nonverbal communication is especially relevant in workplace environments because professional interactions frequently involve immediate responses and practical coordination. A supervisor may point toward an object to indicate where it should be placed, demonstrate a procedure to explain how a task should be completed, or use facial expressions to communicate satisfaction or concern. Similarly, interns may respond by nodding, smiling, maintaining eye contact, or physically demonstrating their understanding of an instruction. These behaviors can facilitate communication when spoken explanations are incomplete or difficult to understand. However, their meanings are not necessarily universal, and their effectiveness depends on the interactional context.

Hall (1966) demonstrates that communication practices are closely associated with cultural expectations concerning interpersonal distance, physical behavior, and social interaction. Cultural differences may influence how individuals interpret eye contact, gestures, personal space, and expressions of respect. Nevertheless, cultural practices should not be interpreted as fixed characteristics shared by every member of a national community. Individuals within the same society may communicate differently according to their professional roles, personal experiences, organizational environments, and immediate circumstances. Therefore, understanding nonverbal communication requires attention to both cultural expectations and the specific situations in which communication occurs.

In Taiwanese workplaces, Indonesian internship students may encounter communication practices that differ from those familiar to them. Such differences may involve the expression of politeness, responses to supervisors, interpretation of gestures, and expectations regarding workplace behavior. Hofstede (2011) provides a framework for examining cultural differences, although national cultural dimensions should be used cautiously when interpreting individual interactions. Workplace communication is shaped not only by cultural background but also by organizational routines, linguistic resources, task requirements, and interpersonal relationships. For this reason, nonverbal communication should be investigated through the actual experiences of students rather than explained exclusively through broad cultural comparisons.

An important challenge arises when nonverbal behaviors communicate meanings that differ from the

intentions of the individuals producing them. For example, nodding may be interpreted as confirmation of understanding even when an intern remains uncertain about an instruction. Smiling may express friendliness, politeness, nervousness, or an attempt to maintain a comfortable interaction. Eye contact may indicate attentiveness, but its interpretation can vary according to the relationship between speakers and the surrounding circumstances. Consequently, relying exclusively on nonverbal signals may occasionally increase misunderstanding rather than eliminate it.

The relationship between nonverbal communication and workplace interaction is particularly important because communication affects both task performance and interpersonal relationships. Understanding instructions is necessary for completing workplace responsibilities accurately, while demonstrating attentiveness and respect may contribute to positive relationships with supervisors and coworkers. Nonverbal communication can support both functions by providing contextual information and communicating interpersonal attitudes. However, its effectiveness may depend on whether individuals share similar interpretations of the signals being exchanged.

Previous research has examined intercultural competence, nonverbal behavior, and communication adaptation in international contexts. Jackson (2015) investigated the contribution of international educational experiences to students' preparation for global workplaces. Sanchez-Burks et al. (2009) examined cultural differences in responses to behavioral mirroring during workplace interactions, demonstrating the relevance of nonverbal behavior to intercultural professional communication. Pang et al. (2024) explored cultural differences in the interpretation of nonverbal behaviors associated with indirect responses. Together, these studies suggest that nonverbal communication is an important element of intercultural interaction. However, their findings do not directly explain how Indonesian university students experience and negotiate nonverbal communication during international internships in Taiwan.

Research concerning international internships has frequently emphasized language proficiency, intercultural competence, employability, and adaptation to unfamiliar environments. Although these dimensions are important, they do not fully explain the everyday communication strategies employed when interns encounter immediate linguistic difficulties. A qualitative examination of nonverbal communication can contribute to this discussion by identifying how students use gestures, facial expressions, physical demonstrations, and other communication resources to negotiate meaning in workplace situations.

Furthermore, individual differences deserve attention. International interns do not necessarily adopt identical communication strategies when facing similar challenges. Some may actively employ gestures and body movements, while others may prefer translation applications, simple verbal expressions, or observation of experienced colleagues. Such differences suggest that intercultural communication involves flexible combinations of available resources rather than dependence on a single universally effective method.

The present study addresses these issues by exploring the experiences of three internship students from Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang who participated in workplace activities in Taiwan. Drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews, the research examines the nonverbal communication styles used by the participants and their perceived influence on interactions with supervisors and coworkers. Particular attention is given to gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, smiling, nodding, physical demonstrations, communication difficulties, and adaptive strategies.

Accordingly, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do internship students from Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang use nonverbal communication styles in workplace interactions in Taiwan? (2) How do these nonverbal communication styles influence their workplace interactions? By answering these questions, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of intercultural workplace communication and provide practical recommendations for preparing students to participate in international internship programs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Conceptualizing Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication refers to the transmission and interpretation of information through behavioral and contextual signals other than the lexical content of spoken or written language. These signals include facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, interpersonal distance, body orientation, touch, and paralinguistic features. Knapp et al. (2014) describe nonverbal communication as an essential component of interpersonal interaction because it communicates emotional, relational, and contextual information that may not be expressed explicitly through words.

Nonverbal communication performs several interconnected functions. It may complement spoken

messages, emphasize particular information, regulate conversational exchanges, express interpersonal attitudes, or substitute for verbal communication when linguistic resources are limited. For example, pointing toward an object while giving instructions can clarify the intended reference, while demonstrating a physical procedure can communicate practical information without requiring extensive verbal explanation.

However, nonverbal communication is not inherently unambiguous. A single gesture may convey different meanings according to the situation, interpersonal relationship, and cultural background of the individuals involved. Consequently, the interpretation of nonverbal behavior requires attention to contextual information rather than assumptions about universal meanings.

### 2.2. Forms and Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication can be examined through several behavioral categories. Kinesics concerns body movements, including gestures, facial expressions, posture, and movements of the head. Oculesics focuses on eye behavior, including eye contact and gaze direction. Proxemics concerns interpersonal distance and the organization of physical space, while paralanguage refers to nonlexical vocal characteristics such as intonation, volume, and speaking rate.

In practical workplace environments, kinesic behaviors are particularly relevant because tasks frequently require visual demonstrations. Hand gestures can indicate objects, directions, and locations, while physical demonstrations can communicate the sequence of activities involved in completing a task. Facial expressions and eye contact may provide information about attention, uncertainty, agreement, and emotional responses.

Matsumoto (2006) explains that culture can influence the expression and interpretation of nonverbal behavior. Nevertheless, such influence does not imply that every individual within a cultural group follows identical communication patterns. Individual differences, workplace conditions, and immediate interactional purposes remain important.

### 2.3. Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication involves the negotiation of meaning between individuals whose cultural and linguistic experiences differ. Effective intercultural communication requires the ability to recognize differences, interpret unfamiliar behaviors, manage uncertainty, and adjust communication strategies.

Deardorff (2006) conceptualizes intercultural competence as involving attitudes such as openness and respect, together with cultural knowledge, interpretive skills, and appropriate interactional behavior. These competencies are relevant to international internship students because workplace communication requires them to understand not only what colleagues communicate but also how messages are expressed and interpreted.

Gudykunst and Kim (2003) emphasize the importance of understanding cultural differences in communication with unfamiliar others. Their perspective suggests that communication effectiveness depends partly on individuals' ability to manage uncertainty and respond flexibly to unfamiliar interactional expectations.

For international interns, intercultural competence may develop through observation, repeated interactions, clarification, and reflection. Students may gradually recognize that certain gestures or expressions are interpreted differently from what they initially expected. Through this process, they can modify their communication practices and become more sensitive to contextual meanings.

### 2.4. Nonverbal Communication in Cross-Cultural Workplaces

Workplace interaction involves the exchange of information, coordination of responsibilities, negotiation of professional relationships, and interpretation of organizational expectations. In multicultural workplaces, these processes may become more complicated because employees and interns possess different linguistic resources and communication experiences.

Sanchez-Burks et al. (2009) demonstrate that responses to nonverbal behavioral mirroring can differ across cultural contexts. Their findings indicate that the interpretation of nonverbal behavior may influence workplace interaction and interpersonal responses. Similarly, Pang et al. (2024) show that cultural differences can affect the use of nonverbal cues when interpreting indirect communication.

These studies highlight the importance of avoiding assumptions that particular nonverbal signals carry identical meanings in all situations. In workplaces involving international interns, supervisors and colleagues may interpret gestures, nodding, and facial expressions according to expectations that are not fully shared by newcomers.

Consequently, effective workplace communication requires mechanisms for confirming intended meanings. Clarification, repetition, demonstration, and translation assistance can complement nonverbal

communication and reduce the risk of misunderstanding.

### 2.5. International Internships and Intercultural Adaptation

International internships provide opportunities for students to experience unfamiliar professional environments while developing communication and adaptation skills. Jackson (2015) highlights the contribution of international educational experiences to students' preparation for global workplaces, particularly in relation to intercultural competence and international readiness.

However, adaptation is not necessarily immediate or uniform. Students may experience different levels of linguistic confidence, cultural familiarity, and willingness to employ particular communication strategies. Some may rely on observation and physical demonstrations, while others may prefer technological support. The increasing availability of digital translation applications also introduces an additional dimension to intercultural workplace communication. Such applications can support verbal understanding, although their use does not eliminate the need to interpret facial expressions, gestures, and contextual signals.

Therefore, intercultural adaptation can be understood as a process involving multiple communication resources, including verbal language, nonverbal behavior, observation, and technological assistance.

### 2.6. Research Gap and Conceptual Orientation

Existing scholarship provides important explanations of nonverbal communication and intercultural competence. Nevertheless, further context-specific investigation is needed to understand how these processes operate during international internships involving Indonesian university students in Taiwan.

The present study adopts a conceptual orientation connecting three dimensions: nonverbal communication styles, intercultural communication challenges, and workplace interaction. Nonverbal behaviors are examined as communication resources that may support task understanding and interpersonal relationships. Intercultural challenges are examined through participants' experiences of language barriers, unfamiliar gestures, and communication misunderstandings. Workplace interaction is considered in relation to instruction comprehension, communication adaptation, and relationships with supervisors and coworkers.

Rather than treating nonverbal communication as an independent variable producing measurable causal effects, this qualitative study examines how participants describe its role and perceived influence within their workplace experiences.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the nonverbal communication styles used by internship students from Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang during their internship experiences in Taiwan. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand participants' experiences, interpretations, communication challenges, and adaptation strategies rather than measure relationships between variables statistically. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for examining social phenomena through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences.

The study focused on naturally occurring workplace communication as described retrospectively by the participants. Particular attention was given to the use of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, smiling, nodding, posture, and physical demonstrations. The research also examined how these behaviors were perceived to influence the participants' understanding of workplace instructions, interpersonal relationships, and responses to communication difficulties.

The descriptive orientation allowed the researchers to organize participants' experiences into meaningful categories while preserving differences between individual communication strategies. The study did not attempt to establish causal relationships or statistically generalizable patterns. Instead, it sought to provide a contextually grounded understanding of nonverbal communication in international workplace interactions.

### 3.2. Research Setting and Participants

The research concerned internship students from Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang who had participated in workplace activities in Taiwan. Taiwan was selected as the research context because the participants encountered professional environments involving communication with individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Three internship students participated in the study. They were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that identifies individuals with direct experience relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015).

The selection criteria included enrollment at Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang, participation in an internship program in Taiwan, experience communicating with supervisors or coworkers, and willingness to describe workplace communication experiences.

To preserve anonymity, the participants were identified as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), and Participant 3 (P3). These identifiers were maintained throughout the analysis.

Table 1. Overview of Research Participants

| Participant | Relevant experience | Reported communication tendency |
|---|---|---|
| P1 | Workplace interactions in Taiwan | Frequent gestures, demonstrations, and clarification |
| P2 | Workplace interactions in Taiwan | Greater reliance on translation applications |
| P3 | Workplace interactions in Taiwan | Gestures, facial expressions, and observation |

Source: Adapted from the participant descriptions and findings in Wirnayanti's thesis (2026).

The relatively small number of participants was consistent with the study's exploratory qualitative orientation. However, the findings were interpreted as individual experiences rather than representative characteristics of all Indonesian internship students in Taiwan.

### 3.3. Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was the researcher, who conducted the interviews and interpreted the participants' responses. The principal supporting instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed around the two research questions.

The interview guide addressed participants' experiences of using nonverbal communication, the situations in which particular behaviors were employed, the challenges encountered during workplace interactions, and the strategies used to overcome communication difficulties.

The semi-structured format provided opportunities for participants to explain their experiences in detail and allowed follow-up questions when additional clarification was required.

Online communication platforms supported the interview process because the participants and researcher were geographically separated. The thesis identifies WhatsApp, Google Meet, and Zoom as possible platforms. The available methodological account does not establish which specific platform was used for each interview.

Field notes and relevant internship documentation were also described as supporting instruments in the thesis. However, the findings presented in the source principally report interview-derived evidence; therefore, the present article does not claim that additional documentation independently verified each finding.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected primarily through online semi-structured interviews with the three participants. The interview process was designed to obtain descriptions of communication experiences occurring during internship activities in Taiwan.

The interviews explored how participants used nonverbal behaviors when communicating with supervisors and coworkers, particularly when language differences made verbal communication difficult. Participants were encouraged to describe specific workplace situations, including receiving instructions, communicating about practical activities, greeting colleagues, responding to unfamiliar gestures, and addressing misunderstandings.

The interviews also examined the participants' perceptions of whether nonverbal communication helped them complete tasks, express attentiveness, establish relationships, and adapt to workplace expectations.

The thesis describes recording interviews with participants' permission and taking notes to support the interpretation of responses. However, specific interview dates, durations, and transcription procedures were not established in the material reviewed. Consequently, these details are not introduced as additional methodological claims.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). This framework involves three interconnected activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

During data reduction, information relevant to the research questions was identified and organized into categories. These categories included gestures and body movements, facial expressions and eye contact, intercultural adaptation, instruction comprehension, misunderstandings, interpersonal relationships, and communication strategies.

During data display, the organized information was presented through descriptive narratives and participant comparisons. This process made it possible to identify similarities and differences in the communication

practices described by the three participants.

The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by examining the relationships between the identified themes and the research questions. Particular attention was given to differences between participants and to situations in which nonverbal communication was insufficient to communicate detailed or safety-related information.

Table 2. Analytical Framework

| Analytical stage | Application |
|---|---|
| Data reduction | Identifying relevant interview responses and communication themes |
| Data display | Organizing findings into thematic descriptions and participant comparisons |
| Conclusion drawing | Interpreting reported communication patterns and their perceived workplace influence |
| Verification | Checking interpretations against the reported participant accounts |

Source: Adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994) and the thesis methodology.

### 3.6. Research Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The credibility of the findings was approached through attention to consistency between participants' reported experiences, the thematic analysis, and the conclusions. Differences among participants were retained rather than eliminated to produce an artificially uniform account.

The use of participant identifiers supported confidentiality in the reporting of findings. The thesis also describes permission-based interview recording. Nevertheless, the available material does not provide sufficient information to report a formal institutional ethics approval number, independent coding procedures, or completed member checking. These procedures are therefore not claimed in the present article.

### 3.7. Scope and Limitations

The study was limited to three internship students and relied primarily on their self-reported experiences. Direct observation of workplace interactions and interviews with Taiwanese supervisors or coworkers were not established as completed sources of evidence.

Consequently, the findings reflect the participants' perceptions of communication rather than independently observed workplace outcomes. The study provides contextual insights into intercultural communication but does not establish causal effects or statistical generalizability.

## RESULTS

The findings were organized into themes corresponding to the two research questions. The first concerned the nonverbal communication styles used by internship students in Taiwan, while the second concerned their perceived influence on workplace interactions. The analysis revealed differences in the participants' communication preferences, together with several shared experiences involving language barriers, task comprehension, interpersonal relationships, and intercultural adaptation.

### 4.1. Nonverbal Communication Styles Used by Internship Students

The participants reported using several forms of nonverbal communication, including hand gestures, body movements, facial expressions, eye contact, smiling, nodding, and physical demonstrations. However, the extent to which they relied on these behaviors varied.

Participants 1 and 3 actively incorporated gestures and physical demonstrations into workplace communication. Participant 2, by contrast, relied more heavily on translation applications and used nonverbal behaviors less frequently as deliberate communication strategies.

Table 3. Nonverbal Communication Styles Identified in the Study

| Communication style | P1 | P2 | P3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hand gestures | Actively used | Limited use | Actively used |
| Facial expressions | Used | Used situationally | Used |
| Eye contact | Used | Used situationally | Used |
| Smiling | Used | Used | Used |
| Nodding | Used, with later clarification | Not emphasized | Used |
| Physical demonstrations | Actively used | Not emphasized | Actively used |
| Translation applications | Supporting strategy | Primary strategy | Supporting strategy |

Source: Synthesized from Chapter IV of Wirnayanti's thesis (2026). The categories describe reported practices, not measured frequencies.

### 4.2. Gestures and Body Movements as Communication Resources

Gestures and body movements emerged as important communication resources for Participants 1 and 3. These behaviors were particularly useful when verbal explanations involved unfamiliar words or when the participants needed to identify objects and locations.

Participant 1 described using hand gestures to indicate objects, identify areas requiring cleaning, and explain where particular items should be placed. These gestures supported communication during practical activities requiring immediate understanding.

The participant also relied on physical demonstrations and observation of experienced coworkers. By watching how colleagues performed specific tasks, the participant could understand workplace procedures without depending entirely on spoken explanations.

Participant 3 reported similar experiences. Hand gestures were used to identify objects, explain activities, and provide directions. These behaviors were especially helpful when the participant and colleagues did not share sufficient vocabulary to communicate effectively.

Participant 2 demonstrated a different approach. Rather than regularly using gestures to explain information, the participant preferred translation assistance. This difference indicates that the participants adopted communication strategies according to their preferences and available resources.

The findings suggest that gestures were particularly useful for communicating concrete information associated with visible objects, movements, and workplace activities. However, they were generally combined with other communication resources rather than functioning as complete substitutes for verbal language.

### 4.3. Facial Expressions, Eye Contact, and Smiling

Facial expressions and eye contact contributed to the interpersonal dimension of workplace communication.

Participant 1 reported smiling and maintaining attentive facial expressions when interacting with coworkers. Smiling was perceived as a way of communicating friendliness and maintaining a positive atmosphere. Eye contact was used to demonstrate attention when receiving instructions or participating in conversations.

Participant 3 similarly used smiling, eye contact, and facial expressions during daily interactions. Smiling was particularly associated with greeting colleagues and supervisors, while facial expressions helped communicate attention, confusion, or the need for assistance.

Participant 2 also reported smiling and making eye contact, particularly when someone was speaking directly to the participant. However, these behaviors were described more as natural interpersonal responses than as primary strategies for overcoming language barriers.

These findings indicate that nonverbal communication was not limited to transmitting task-related information. It also helped participants communicate interpersonal attitudes and participate in everyday social interactions.

### 4.4. Nodding and the Risk of Misinterpretation

One important finding concerned the ambiguity of nodding during workplace communication.

Participant 1 described situations in which nodding could be interpreted by supervisors or coworkers as confirmation that an instruction had been fully understood. However, the participant sometimes nodded despite feeling uncertain or nervous.

This discrepancy created the possibility of misunderstanding because the intended meaning of the gesture did not necessarily correspond to the interpretation made by the recipient.

After recognizing this problem, Participant 1 began confirming instructions through additional communication strategies, including asking questions, repeating information, and demonstrating the expected actions.

This finding illustrates that nonverbal behaviors may communicate misleading information when individuals assume that gestures have shared meanings.

### 4.5. Understanding Workplace Instructions

Nonverbal communication was perceived as particularly helpful for understanding practical workplace instructions.

Participant 1 explained that gestures and demonstrations helped connect unfamiliar words with visible actions. For example, instructions involving cleaning areas, arranging linen, or placing objects became easier to understand when colleagues pointed toward relevant locations or demonstrated the required procedures.

Participant 3 similarly reported that observing colleagues' movements helped clarify practical instructions. Physical demonstrations provided contextual information that was sometimes easier to interpret than

unfamiliar verbal explanations.
Participant 2 relied more on translation applications when receiving instructions. This approach was perceived as helpful when Taiwanese coworkers communicated in a language the participant did not fully understand.
Nevertheless, the participants' experiences indicated that nonverbal communication was not sufficient for every type of instruction. Participant 1 emphasized the importance of verbal clarification or translation when instructions involved chemicals, safety procedures, or other technical information.
This distinction is significant because misunderstanding safety-related instructions could have more serious consequences than misunderstanding routine directions.

**4.6. Nonverbal Communication and Workplace Relationships**

The participants perceived nonverbal communication as contributing to positive workplace relationships.
Participants 1 and 3 described smiling, maintaining attentive expressions, and making appropriate eye contact as ways of demonstrating friendliness and respect toward colleagues and supervisors.
These behaviors helped them participate in daily interactions despite linguistic limitations. In particular, smiling provided a simple means of greeting colleagues without requiring extensive verbal communication.
Participant 2 also reported using smiling and eye contact during interactions with coworkers, even though translation applications remained the participant's preferred strategy for communicating detailed information.
The findings therefore suggest that nonverbal communication served both practical and relational functions. It helped participants express interpersonal attitudes while also supporting communication about workplace responsibilities.
However, the interviews did not establish that nonverbal communication alone determined the quality of workplace relationships. Other factors, including supervisor support, verbal communication, and individual attitudes, may also have contributed.

**4.7. Communication Challenges and Misunderstandings**

The participants experienced several communication challenges associated with linguistic differences, unfamiliar gestures, and workplace conditions.
Participant 1 described difficulties interpreting gestures made quickly by coworkers. The participant also reported that face masks sometimes made facial expressions more difficult to recognize.
Participant 3 experienced difficulties when workplace activities occurred rapidly or when gestures were unfamiliar. These situations sometimes required additional observation or clarification.
Participant 2 did not report significant misunderstandings and attributed smoother communication partly to translation assistance. However, the absence of reported misunderstandings does not establish that all workplace interactions were completely understood.
Table 4. Reported Workplace Communication Challenges

| Participant | Main challenges | Responses |
|---|---|---|
| P1 | Ambiguous nodding, rapid gestures, limited facial visibility | Clarification, repetition, observation, demonstrations |
| P2 | Limited confidence in interpreting or using body language | Translation assistance |
| P3 | Language differences, unfamiliar gestures, rapid workplace communication | Observation, questions, simple words, gestures |

Source: Adapted from the thesis findings.
These experiences demonstrate that nonverbal communication could both facilitate understanding and create uncertainty when gestures were interpreted differently.

**4.8. Intercultural Adaptation Strategies**

The participants adopted different strategies to manage communication difficulties and adapt to their workplace environments.
Participant 1 reported observing experienced colleagues, learning basic Mandarin expressions, taking notes, repeating information, and using translation assistance. The participant also became more careful about confirming instructions rather than relying exclusively on nodding.
Participant 3 described learning through observation and gradually becoming more familiar with the communication practices of coworkers. Gestures, simple verbal expressions, and basic Mandarin were combined to support understanding.
Participant 2 preferred digital translation assistance and did not report extensive changes in nonverbal communication practices.

Table 5. Adaptation Strategies and Their Communication Functions

| Strategy | Communication function |
|---|---|
| Observing coworkers | Understanding workplace procedures and communication habits |
| Learning basic Mandarin | Improving access to everyday verbal communication |
| Using gestures | Communicating objects, directions, and practical activities |
| Asking for clarification | Reducing uncertainty about instructions |
| Demonstrating actions | Confirming understanding of procedures |
| Using translation applications | Supporting communication across language barriers |
| Repeating information | Checking the intended meaning of instructions |

Source: Thematic synthesis of the three participant accounts.

### 4.9. Participants' Perceptions of the Importance of Nonverbal Communication

All three participants recognized the relevance of nonverbal communication, although their practical use differed.

Participant 1 considered gestures and demonstrations important for understanding instructions but emphasized that clarification was essential when accuracy or safety was involved.

Participant 3 similarly regarded nonverbal communication as valuable for understanding tasks and maintaining interactions with coworkers.

Participant 2 estimated the importance of nonverbal communication at approximately 80%, while personally relying more heavily on translation assistance. This estimate represents an individual perception and should not be interpreted as a quantitative measure of communication effectiveness.

Overall, the findings indicate that the participants considered nonverbal communication a useful component of workplace interaction. Nevertheless, its practical effectiveness depended on the communication situation, the individuals involved, and the availability of other resources.

### 4.10. Summary of the Findings

The analysis identified three central findings. First, internship students used different combinations of nonverbal behaviors and communication resources. Second, gestures, facial expressions, and physical demonstrations were perceived as supporting task understanding and interpersonal interaction. Third, nonverbal communication required contextual interpretation and additional confirmation to prevent misunderstandings.

The findings therefore suggest that effective workplace interaction depends on flexible communication strategies rather than reliance on a single nonverbal behavior.

## DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Nonverbal Communication as a Resource for Workplace Interaction

The findings demonstrate that nonverbal communication functioned as an important resource for internship students navigating linguistic and cultural differences in Taiwanese workplaces. Participants 1 and 3 actively used gestures, facial expressions, body movements, and physical demonstrations to support their communication with supervisors and coworkers. These behaviors were particularly relevant when verbal explanations were difficult to understand or when practical tasks required immediate clarification.

This finding is consistent with Knapp et al. (2014), who explain that nonverbal behaviors can complement, regulate, and occasionally substitute for verbal messages. In the present study, gestures and demonstrations provided contextual information that helped participants connect unfamiliar expressions with observable workplace activities. For example, pointing toward objects or demonstrating cleaning procedures enabled participants to interpret instructions without relying exclusively on linguistic knowledge.

The findings also indicate that nonverbal communication was not necessarily employed independently. Participants frequently combined gestures with simple words, observation, and demonstrations. This combination suggests that workplace communication should be understood as a multimodal process in which individuals use different resources to negotiate meaning.

However, Participant 2 demonstrated a different communication preference by relying primarily on translation applications. This difference is important because it challenges the assumption that individuals facing language barriers will necessarily depend on gestures or other nonverbal strategies. Communication preferences may vary according to confidence, previous experiences, workplace expectations, and available technological resources.

The participants' experiences therefore suggest that effective communication depends on selecting strategies appropriate to particular situations rather than applying a single communication method

universally.

### 5.2. Nonverbal Communication and Workplace Instruction Comprehension

One of the most important findings concerns the role of nonverbal communication in supporting the comprehension of workplace instructions. Participants 1 and 3 reported that gestures and physical demonstrations helped them understand practical activities when spoken explanations were unfamiliar.

This finding can be interpreted through the relationship between nonverbal communication and contextual meaning. Hall (1966) emphasizes the importance of contextual information in communication, particularly when individuals rely on environmental and behavioral cues to interpret messages.

In practical workplace settings, physical demonstrations provide immediate information about the actions required to complete particular tasks. For example, observing a colleague arrange linen or demonstrate a cleaning procedure may communicate information that is difficult to understand through unfamiliar spoken language alone.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal limitations. Participant 1 emphasized that gestures and demonstrations were insufficient when instructions involved safety procedures, chemicals, or technical details. Such situations required additional verbal clarification or translation assistance.

This distinction indicates that the usefulness of nonverbal communication depends partly on the complexity and consequences of the information being communicated. Gestures may adequately identify objects or directions but may not communicate detailed warnings or procedural requirements.

Consequently, nonverbal communication should be regarded as a complementary resource rather than a complete replacement for verbal communication. International internship programs should emphasize the importance of confirming instructions, especially when misunderstanding could compromise workplace safety.

### 5.3. Cultural Interpretation and Communication Misunderstandings

The findings demonstrate that nonverbal communication can create misunderstandings when individuals interpret behaviors differently.

Participant 1's experience with nodding provides an important example. The participant sometimes nodded despite remaining uncertain about an instruction. Supervisors or coworkers could interpret this behavior as confirmation that the instruction had been understood.

This situation illustrates the distinction between the intention of a communicator and the interpretation of a recipient. Although nodding may indicate agreement or understanding in many contexts, it may also communicate politeness, attentiveness, or an attempt to maintain the flow of conversation.

Pang et al. (2024) highlight the importance of cultural differences in interpreting nonverbal behaviors associated with indirect communication. Their research provides a useful theoretical perspective for understanding why nonverbal signals cannot always be interpreted consistently across cultural contexts.

Similarly, Matsumoto (2006) emphasizes the relationship between culture and nonverbal behavior. Cultural expectations may influence how individuals express emotions, interpret gestures, and respond to interpersonal signals.

However, the findings of the present study should not be interpreted as evidence that all communication misunderstandings resulted from differences between Indonesian and Taiwanese cultures. Individual habits, language proficiency, workplace routines, and situational uncertainty may also contribute to communication difficulties.

The participants' experiences indicate that successful communication requires awareness of these possible differences and a willingness to verify intended meanings.

### 5.4. Nonverbal Communication and Interpersonal Relationships

Another important finding concerns the perceived contribution of nonverbal communication to workplace relationships.

Participants described smiling, eye contact, and attentive facial expressions as ways of demonstrating friendliness and respect toward supervisors and coworkers. These behaviors helped them participate in everyday interactions despite limited shared vocabulary.

The findings are consistent with the broader understanding of nonverbal communication as a means of expressing interpersonal attitudes (Knapp et al., 2014). Smiling and attentive posture may help communicate openness and willingness to cooperate, while facial expressions can provide information about emotional responses.

Sanchez-Burks et al. (2009) demonstrate that nonverbal behaviors can influence interpersonal responses in intercultural workplace interactions. Their findings support the relevance of considering behavioral signals when examining professional relationships across cultural backgrounds.

Nevertheless, the present study does not establish that smiling or eye contact directly caused stronger workplace relationships. The participants reported their perceptions of these behaviors, but the research did not independently measure relationship quality or collect corresponding evaluations from supervisors.
Therefore, the findings are best interpreted as evidence that participants perceived nonverbal communication as supporting positive interpersonal interaction.
This interpretation is important because workplace relationships develop through multiple factors, including cooperation, organizational support, communication opportunities, and individual behavior.

**5.5. Intercultural Adaptation Through Observation and Experience**

The participants' experiences demonstrate that intercultural adaptation involved learning and adjusting communication practices during workplace activities.
Participants 1 and 3 described observing colleagues, interpreting gestures, learning basic Mandarin, and modifying their responses according to workplace situations. These behaviors suggest that adaptation developed through repeated interactions rather than through prior knowledge alone.
Deardorff (2006) identifies openness, observation, interpretation, and behavioral flexibility as important elements of intercultural competence. The experiences reported in this study reflect several of these elements.
Participant 1's adjustment in the use of nodding is particularly significant. After recognizing that nodding could be interpreted as complete understanding, the participant began requesting clarification and demonstrating expected actions.
This change suggests increased awareness of the relationship between personal communication behavior and others' interpretations.
Participant 3 demonstrated adaptation through observation of experienced colleagues and the combined use of simple language and gestures.
Participant 2 adopted a different approach by relying more heavily on translation assistance. This finding indicates that intercultural adaptation does not necessarily involve adopting identical nonverbal behaviors. Instead, individuals may develop different strategies to achieve communication goals.
Jackson (2015) emphasizes the importance of international educational experiences in developing students' readiness for intercultural environments. The present findings extend this discussion by illustrating how everyday workplace interactions provide opportunities for students to develop practical communication strategies.

**5.6. Digital Translation and Multimodal Communication**

The findings also highlight the relevance of digital translation applications in intercultural workplace communication.
Participant 2 relied more heavily on translation assistance than on gestures or physical demonstrations. Participants 1 and 3 also identified translation as a supporting strategy in situations requiring additional clarification.
These experiences suggest that digital technology can complement nonverbal communication by providing access to linguistic information that may otherwise remain unclear.
However, translation applications do not eliminate the importance of contextual interpretation. A translated instruction may still require observation of the relevant task, while gestures may remain necessary to identify objects, locations, or procedures.
Consequently, effective communication may involve the integration of several resources: verbal expressions, translation technology, nonverbal behaviors, and workplace demonstrations.
This interpretation is relevant to educational research on technology-supported language learning. For example, the study by Junandar et al. (2026), indexed in Sam Hermansyah's SINTA profile, examines mobile learning applications in English education. Although its context differs from international workplace communication, it illustrates the broader relevance of digital resources in supporting language-related learning experiences.
The present study contributes a complementary perspective by showing how translation assistance was perceived as a practical communication resource during international internships.

**5.7. Implications for International Internship Preparation**

The findings have practical implications for universities preparing students to participate in international internship programs.
First, pre-departure preparation should include intercultural communication training that addresses nonverbal behavior. Students should become familiar with the possibility that gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact may be interpreted differently according to context.

Second, training should emphasize practical communication strategies for receiving and confirming workplace instructions. Role-playing activities could involve situations in which students must understand directions, identify objects, request clarification, and demonstrate completed tasks.
Third, basic Mandarin communication skills may help students manage routine workplace interactions in Taiwan. Relevant vocabulary could include greetings, common workplace instructions, requests for assistance, and expressions used to confirm understanding.
Fourth, students should receive guidance on using translation applications appropriately. Digital tools can support communication, but important technical and safety-related information should still be verified with supervisors.
Fifth, international internship preparation should develop students' confidence in asking questions. Participants' experiences suggest that clarification is an important strategy for reducing uncertainty.
The study also has implications for workplace supervisors. Clear explanations, physical demonstrations, opportunities for clarification, and supportive interpersonal communication may help international interns adjust to unfamiliar working environments.

### 5.8. Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to intercultural communication research by highlighting the relationship between nonverbal communication, workplace interaction, and individual adaptation strategies.
First, it demonstrates that nonverbal communication is perceived as serving both instrumental and relational functions. Instrumentally, gestures and demonstrations help participants understand workplace activities. Relationally, smiling and eye contact support expressions of friendliness and attentiveness.
Second, the findings illustrate the importance of contextual interpretation. Nonverbal behaviors cannot be assumed to communicate identical meanings across individuals or situations.
Third, the study identifies differences in communication preferences among international interns. These differences indicate that adaptation may involve gestures, observation, language learning, translation assistance, or combinations of these resources.
Fourth, the findings emphasize the importance of communication verification. Effective interaction depends not only on producing nonverbal signals but also on confirming that the intended message has been understood.
Together, these contributions support an understanding of intercultural workplace communication as a flexible and context-dependent process.

### 5.9. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.
The study involved only three participants, limiting the range of workplace experiences represented. The findings cannot be generalized statistically to all Indonesian internship students in Taiwan.
Furthermore, the study relied primarily on interview accounts. The absence of direct workplace observation means that the reported communication behaviors could not be independently examined during actual interactions.
The study also did not include interviews with Taiwanese supervisors or coworkers. Consequently, the interpretation of workplace communication reflects the perspectives of the interns rather than those of all individuals involved.
Future research could involve larger and more diverse participant groups, including interns working in different industries. Comparative studies could examine communication practices across different internship destinations and workplace environments.
Further investigations could also incorporate workplace observation, video-based interaction analysis, and interviews with supervisors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how nonverbal communication is produced and interpreted.
Longitudinal research may be particularly useful for examining how students' communication strategies change throughout an internship period.
Despite these limitations, the present study provides context-specific insights into how Indonesian internship students perceive and manage nonverbal communication during international workplace experiences.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the nonverbal communication styles used by internship students from Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang during their workplace experiences in Taiwan and examined their perceived influence on workplace interaction. The findings revealed that participants employed several nonverbal communication behaviors, including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, smiling, nodding, body movements, and physical demonstrations. However, their communication preferences differed. Participants 1 and 3 actively used gestures and demonstrations to support communication, while Participant 2 relied more extensively on digital translation assistance. Nonverbal communication was perceived as helping participants understand practical workplace instructions, express attentiveness, maintain friendly interpersonal relationships, and manage certain language barriers. Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrated that nonverbal signals could create misunderstandings when their meanings were interpreted differently. In particular, nodding could be interpreted as complete understanding despite uncertainty. These findings suggest that nonverbal communication serves an important supporting function in intercultural workplace interaction, but its effectiveness depends on contextual interpretation and confirmation of intended meanings.

The study emphasizes the importance of preparing international internship students to communicate flexibly in multicultural workplaces. Universities should integrate intercultural communication awareness, practical nonverbal communication strategies, basic host-country language skills, and communication clarification techniques into internship preparation programs. Students should be encouraged to observe workplace communication practices, request clarification when necessary, and combine verbal expressions, nonverbal behaviors, and translation assistance according to situational requirements. Workplace supervisors can also support international interns by providing clear instructions and opportunities to verify understanding. Although the study was limited to three participants and relied primarily on interview accounts, it contributes to the understanding of nonverbal communication in international internship settings. Future research involving additional participants, workplace observations, and supervisor perspectives is recommended to develop a broader understanding of intercultural workplace interaction.

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