

THE INVESTIGATION OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION TOWARDS AN AUTISM CHILD

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Abstract: This research purposes to investigate the types of nonverbal communication used by an autism child during his activity in **Pusat Layanan Autis Jati Kersa** and home, and to describe the meanings of those nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is a communication form that delivers the message without word, written or spoken, but uses body language including facial expression, gesture, posture, eye contact, touching, clothing, space, and paralanguage. Autism is developmental disorder especially in the brain that causes autism people are difficult to communicate and interact. The research employed a qualitative method to collect and analyze the data. This research involved an autism child in low function level. The data were collected through observation and interview. The result of this research shows that an autism child uses several nonverbal communication types such as body movement; gesture, posture, eye contact, and facial expression; paralanguage; and personal presentation; touching (haptics) as well. Then, the meanings of nonverbal communication used by the autism child are various. Each nonverbal communication used by him has its own meaning.

Key words: *communication, nonverbal communication, autism*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the term of autism is commonly talked by many people in the world without exception in Indonesia. According to Rodriguez (2011), the numbers of autism children have increased every year. Unfortunately, there are many people who are still unable to treat children suffering autism because they do not know how to treat them well. One of their problems faced by them is how to create good communication with autisms.

Language as the tool of communication is something that we can never stop learning. As human, we use language to communicate and exchange our thoughts, ideas, feelings, knowledge, and assumption (Brown, 2000). By communication, we share information to other people and make our knowledge wider. Human communication consists of

two types, namely verbal communication and nonverbal communication (Dodd, 2005).

Verbal communication is a form of communication in which the information is delivered by words, either orally or in a written form. Nayab (2015) explained that "verbal communication entails the use of words in delivering the intended message. The two major forms of verbal communication include written and oral communication." In contrast, nonverbal communication is a communication form in which the information is expressed through body language, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and posture. As stated by Devito (2002, p. 134) that "nonverbal communication is communication without words."

Communication will not be separated from disruption. An example

of disruption is caused by neuro-developmental disorder namely autism (Dodd, 2005). Autism is not a disease but a developmental disorder resulting disruption to communicate and interact. This statement is supported by Ernsperger (as cited in Simmons, 2006, p. 4) who argued that "autism refers to neurologic disorders involving serious impairment of abilities to interact and communicate socially, and repetitive and restricted interests and activities."

Actually, autism children have the ability to communicate in both verbal and nonverbal, but it is different from normal children. According to Dodd (2005, p. 24), "children with autism usually demonstrate an uneven pattern of development with verbal and nonverbal communication skills and social skills being limited but visual spatial skills a relative strength." Thus, it can be concluded that autism children basically have skill to communicate in both verbal, nonverbal, and social interaction, but their ability are obviously limited. Autism children are more interested in visual spatial skills.

Nonverbal communication is an important communication form for autism people because they are difficult to communicate each other orally. Furthermore, nonverbal communication can be an alternative for them to send their messages to the others (The National Autistic Society, 2016). Therefore, this research is aimed to analyze the types of nonverbal communication used by an autism child, and the meanings of those nonverbal communication.

METHOD

This research applies a qualitative method. Lodico, Spaulding, dan Vogetle (2010) said that qualitative research is a research method to get the data through observing, reading, and so on. Here, the

researcher tries to be the observer to get the data.

In selecting the participant, the writer uses purposeful sampling technique. It is a sampling technique in which the writer selects individual and site based on her judgment that the participant can give relevant information needed by the writer to conduct the research. This statement supported by Lodico *et al.* (2010, p. 34) who argued that "purposeful sampling involves the selection of participants who have key knowledge or information related to the purpose of the research."

This research conducted in **Pusat Layanan Autis Jati Kersa**, located in Sadamantra village, Jalaksana district, Kuningan-West Java. It is the only autism service center in West Java (Situs Resmi Pemerintah Kabupaten Kuningan, 2014). In addition, the writer observed the autism child at his home located in Bandorasa Kulon village, Cilimus district, Kuningan-West Java because the writer needs to get the data more accurately.

The participant in this research is an 8 years old autism child (C) in low functioning level. Low functioning level is a level of autism characterized by having IQ below 70, rather use nonverbal in communication than verbal because the autism child in this level is difficult to use word in communication (Miller & Wilson). The writer chooses this level because the autism child has difficulty in conducting verbal communication at the time.

The data in this research is taken through observation and interview. The first method is observation. Observation is one of the methods to get the information in the real setting by observing the object directly. As stated by Creswell (2012, p. 213) that "observation is the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site" (Creswell, 2012, p. 213). In

this research, the writer observes the nonverbal communication used by an autism child during his activity in the autism service center and his home. Nonparticipant observer role is used by the writer in conducting the observation. Nonparticipant observer is an observer

who observes the participants through visiting a site and recording note without doing the participants' activities (Creswell, 2012). The field notes proposed by Creswell (2012) was used by the writer in doing this observation. The field notes is shown below.

Table 1. *Observational Field Notes*

Observational Field Notes			
Setting	:		
Observer	:		
Role of Observer	:		
Time	:		
Length of observation:			
Name of participant	:		
No.	Types of Nonverbal Communication	Behavior	
1.	Body Movement	Gesture	---
		Posture	---
		Facial Expression	---
		Eye Contact	---
2.	Paralanguage	---	
3.	Personal Presentation	Clothing	---
		Grooming	---
		Touching/Haptics	---
4.	Proxemics	---	

The second method in collecting the data is interview. Gay *et al.* (2012, p. 386) explained that "an interview is a purposeful interaction in which one person obtains information from another." Here, the writer asks some questions about the meanings of nonverbal behavior in a communication of autism to the teacher in autism service center and autism child's parents. Unstructured interview is employed in this research. Gay *et al.* (2012, p. 386) described that "unstructured interview is little more than a casual conversation

that allows the qualitative researcher to inquire into something that has presented itself as an opportunity to learn about something at the research setting." Moreover, the writer uses one-on-one interview type in conducting the interview. It is a process to collect the data through asking some questions to the only one participant and recording it (Creswell, 2012). The examples of question asked to the interviewee are suggested by Royal College of Psychiatrist (2011). Those questions are as follows:

Table 2. *Interview Questions by Royal College of Psychiatrist (2011)*

1.	How do <Name's> feelings show in his/her expression and gesture? - Not just angry/frightened but also shy, puzzled?
2.	What is his/her usual facial expression-across the range from a poker-face to one that is vivacious and expressive?
3.	How far does s(he) uses his/her eyes to give messages?
4.	How much does s(he) use gesture (especially to describe actions/things)?
5.	What are the meanings of nonverbal communication (smiling, laughing, pointing, etc.) used by him/ her?

In analyzing the data, there are several stages done by the writer in this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including reduce the observation result based on the research questions, classify the observation result based on the appropriate types, transcribe interview result from audiotape recording into text data, translate the interview data, and describe the result of interview with the observation result.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated previously, observation and interview were used by the researcher to collect the data needed. Observation conducted for 12 times; 8 times in Pusat Layanan Autis Jati Kersa, and 4 times in autism child's home. The activities done by the participant at Pusat Layanan Autis Jati Kersa are conducted in three days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) and took an hour for each session (1 p.m to 2 p.m). These activities done in different rooms, namely behavioral therapy room and sensory therapy room. Behavioral therapy room is a room where the participant learns, such as arranging puzzle, matching colors, matching shapes, etc. On the other hand, sensory therapy room is a room where the participant trains their sensory by doing several fun activities, such as swing, playing football, etc.

Regarding the types of nonverbal communication used by an autism child during his activity in Pusat Layanan Autis Jati Kersa and his home, the writer found three types of nonverbal communication used by the participant, namely body movement, paralanguage, and personal presentation. Besides, the writer also found the meaning of each type of nonverbal communication as explained below.

1. Body Movement

a. Gesture

The gestures used by the participant (C) to express his feeling and the meaning of those gestures are explained below.

- *Clap hands*
Clap hands indicates that the participant is happy. Clap hands occurs when the participant successfully does a task given by the teacher, puts the ball to the right place, or arranges the puzzle well. Besides, it can also show autism characteristic. The participant always claps his hand when playing at home.
- *Point swing*
Point swing indicates that the participant wants to play it. This gesture is used when the participant is going to play the swing in sensory therapy room.
- *Hold the head*
Hold the head occurs when the participant learns. It indicates that he feels bored.
- *Hit the table*
Hit the table indicates that the participant is happy. This gesture happens when the participant finishes the task given by the teacher. Besides, hitting the table also indicates that he is not patient.
- *Clap a pen*
This gesture demonstrates one of autism characteristics. The participant always claps anything that he holds, including pen.
- *High five*
The high five demonstrates a reward because he finishes the task successfully.
- *Slap forehead*
Slap forehead is shown by the participant when he does the task from the teacher. It indicates that he feels bored.

- *Clap a drawing book*
It shows one of autism characteristics. This gesture occurs when he learns and holds a drawing book. This gesture always used by him every time he holds a drawing book.
- *Pointing the toes*
This gesture demonstrates that his toes are sick. It shows after the participant plays swing.
- *Wave hands*
Wave hands demonstrate that the participant says good bye. It is used by the participant when he will go home.
- *Put his palm on his cheek*
This gesture indicates that the participant tries to think. It occurs when he puts the color cylinders to the place.
- *Move his hands to his face*
This gesture shows that the participant is enthusiastic. It occurs when he learns in behavioral therapy room.
- *Push a fish picture*
The participant pushes a fish picture when the teacher gives the picture to him. It indicates that he refuses it since he does not like it. It usually happens because he knows that it is one of difficult pictures to be arranged by him.
- *Push the teacher's hands*
Push the teacher's hands indicates that he refuses the teacher's action. This gesture occurs when he plays the teacher's hand phone and the teacher will take it or when the teacher tries to take a guitar played by him.
- *Push the squares*
The participant pushes the squares when he finished arranging them. It indicates that he realizes that he has finished arranging it.
- *Close the big jar*
This gesture occurs when the teacher takes some balls from the jar. It indicates that he does not like it. He wants the teacher only focuses on him.
- *Clap a plastic glass*
This gesture is one of autism characteristics. He always claps anything that he holds. The participant claps the plastic glass after he drank it.
- *Give milk to the observer*
This gesture indicates that the participant asks for help to open the milk. He gives the milk to the observer when he will drink it.
- *Stick the thumb and index finger*
This gesture shows a punishment for naughty children. The participant sticks his thumb and index finger when his grandmother scolds him.
- *Give a snack to the observer*
This gesture indicates that the participant asks for help to open the snack. It occurs when the participant will eat the snack.
- *Push the observer's friend*
Push the observer's friend demonstrates that the participant refuses the observer friend's action. This gesture shows when she tries to take his color pencil.
- *Clap his chest and mouth*
Clap his chest and mouth indicates that the participant feels sad. This gesture used by the participant when he watches television.
- *Clap a hanger*
It shows one of autism characteristics. The participant claps a hanger when he holds it.
- *Clap a pillow*

This gesture shows one of autism characteristics. It occurs when the participant lies on a chair.

b. Posture

The postures used by the participant (C) to express his feeling and the meaning of those postures are explained below.

- *Shake head*
Shake head indicates one of autism characteristics or bad habit of the participant. The participant often uses this posture in his activities, such as when he learns, prays, and plays. Besides, shaking head indicates that the participant does not understand yet about the instruction.
- *Walk on tiptoe*
Walk on tiptoe as one of autism characteristics indicates bad habit of the participant. This gesture is often used by the participant when he walks both of in autism service center and his home.
- *Lean forward posture*
Lean forward posture shows that the participant pays attention. This posture occurs when the participant prays with the teacher before going home and when his grandmother gives suggestions to him.

c. Facial Expression

The facial expressions used by the participant (C) to express his feeling and the meaning of those facial expressions are explained below.

- *Smile*
Smile used by the participant indicates that he is happy. This facial expression occurs when the participant finishes his task from the teacher, operates the

teacher's hand phone, arranges the puzzle, plays a guitar, drinks milk, does high five, and when the teacher says that the participant is smart.

- *Close the eyes*
Close the eyes indicates that the participant feels annoyed. The participant closes his eyes when he wants to go home, but the time is not over yet. Besides, it can also indicate that he feels shy. It occurs when he realizes that he is noticed by the observer.
- *Hide his face by his hand while screaming or laughing*
This facial expression shows that the participant feels shy. It occurs when he realizes that he is noticed by the observer.
- *Close the eyes and bite his teeth while screaming and hitting his chin*
It indicates that the participant feels annoyed or angry because his wish is not fulfilled. It occurs when he wants to play, but he is asked to learn by the teacher.
- *Hide his face by his hand while laughing*
Hide the face while laughing indicates that he feels shy. This facial expression shows when he realizes that he is noticed by the observer.

d. Eye Contact

- *Look at the teacher*
This eye contact indicates that the participant responds the teacher's instruction. The participant looks at the teacher when his named is called and when the teacher shows something such as picture, squares, etc.
- *Look aside*
Look aside shows one of autism characteristics. The participant

always looks aside when he looks something such as looks at the observer and watches television.

2. Paralanguage

The paralanguage used by the participant (C) to express his feeling and the meaning of those paralanguage are explained below.

- *Raving*
Raving shows one of autism characteristics. This paralanguage used by the participant in his activities, such as when he learns, prays, plays, and when he is asked to sit in another swing.
- *Raving with high volume*
Raving with high volume indicates that the participant feels annoyed or does not like the teacher's action. The participant uses this paralanguage when he wants to go home but the time is not over yet, when the teacher asks him to put the squares in the right place, when the toy is taken by the teacher, and when the teacher gives the color cards.
- *Raving while pushing the teacher*
Raving while pushing the teacher indicates that he refuses the teacher. This paralanguage occurs when the teacher sits beside him in swing. The teacher should not sit beside him.
- *Scream*
Scream indicates that the participant feels excited or happy. It occurs when he plays swing and when he sees cars. Besides, it also indicates that the participant does not like something or refuses. It occurs when the teacher takes another pictures, when the toys is taken by the teacher, when the teacher gives many squares that should be arranged by him, when he

takes the squares from the teacher, and before he starts to learn because he still want to play.

- *Scream while hitting his chin*
Scream while hitting his chin demonstrates that the participant is angry or feels annoyed. This behavior happens when the toy is taken by the teacher because he should learn.
- *Laugh*
Laugh indicates that the participant is happy. It occurs when the participant plays swing and when he hits the piece of wood by hammer.
- *Cry*
Cry indicates that the participant feels sad. It occurs when his grandmother says that he will be sent to Bandung. When his grandmother says it, he will remember about his mother who lives in Bandung.

3. Personal Presentation

a. *Touching (Haptics)*

- *Take the teacher's hands*
Take the teacher's hands indicates that the participant asks for help. He takes the teacher's hands when he plays swing, arranges the puzzle, and sees a puzzle that fall. Besides, it indicates that the participant asks to pray. At the autism service center, the teacher teaches that they should pray before and after learning. This touching occurs when the participant starts to learn or wants to go home.
- *Hug the observer*
This touching shows that the participant is happy and feels comfort. The participant hugs the observer when she helps him to wear his jacket.
- *Shake Hands*

This touching indicates that the participant is farewell. The participant always shakes hands when he will go to home.

Based on the result stated above, it was clear that the participant uses many nonverbal behaviors in communication. Those nonverbal behaviors are included into three types of nonverbal communication, namely body movement, paralanguage, and personal presentation (Fujishin, 2009). Then, the meanings of nonverbal communication used by him are various since each nonverbal communication has its own meaning.

The body movement used by the participant consists of gesture, posture, facial expression, and eye contact. As stated by Fujishin (2009) that body movement consists of gesture, posture, facial expression, and eye contact. The examples of body movement used by the participant are when he refuses something he will push it, when he feels angry he will close his eyes, and bite his teeth while screaming and hitting his chin, etc. On the other hand, there are some body movements used by the participant that show autism characteristic such as shaking head, walking on tiptoe, clapping hands, clapping thing that he holds, and looking aside (Shore & Rastelli, 2006; John, 2015).

The participant shows that he has been good enough in eye contact such as when his name is called by the teacher or his grandmother, he will look at him or her. Besides, the participant has understood how to use expression. He can express his feeling or emotion through expression and gesture, such as when he is happy he will smile, when he feels shy he will close his face, and when he is angry he will scream.

The participant also used paralanguage type, such as raving,

scream, laughing, and crying. Raving indicates autism characteristic because he is difficult to speak and it is repetitive behavior (Shore & Rastelli, 2006; John, 2015). So, it does not have meaning. But, sometimes his raving has meanings such as raving with high volume indicates that he is angry or annoyed, and raving while smiling indicates that he is happy.

Then, the personal presentation used by the participant is touching (haptics). The touching that is often used by the participant is taking the people's hand indicating that he needs help.

Furthermore, there are some nonverbal communication used by the participant that have different meaning from normal, such as hitting the table demonstrates that the participant is happy and impatience, slapping forehead indicates that he feels bored, moving his hands to his face demonstrates that he is enthusiastic, stick the thumb and index finger demonstrates a punishment, clapping his chest and mouth indicates that he feels sad, closing the eyes indicates that he feels annoyed, hiding the face by the hands while screaming and laughing indicates that he feels shy, closing the eyes and biting his teeth while screaming and hitting his chin indicates that he feels annoyed or angry, screaming while hitting his chin indicates that he is angry or feels annoyed, etc.

CONCLUSION

Basically, autism child is a child who has a developmental disorder in terms of communication and interaction. The participant in this research is an autism child in low function level. So, he rather does nonverbal communication than verbal because he is difficult to communicate orally. Based on the result of this research, the autism child uses several nonverbal communication types such as body movement; gesture,

posture, eye contact, and facial expression; paralinguistic; and personal presentation; touching (haptics) well. The nonverbal behaviors shown by him are the form of desire to interact with us. Then, the meanings of nonverbal communication used by an autism child are various. Each nonverbal communication used by him has its own meaning.

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