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THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILL OF THE UNLICENSED TREKKING GUIDES

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the interpersonal communication skills of unlicensed trekking guides in Mount Rinjani National Park, Indonesia. As tourism expands in Lombok, communication plays a central role in ensuring satisfaction, safety, and positive cultural exchange. Effective communication is crucial in the case of trekking activities, which involve physical challenges and require both trust and cooperation between trekking guides and visitors. This research employed a qualitative method, in which the data were collected through interviews, observations, audio, and video recordings of five unlicensed trekking guides with varied educational backgrounds and experiences. The framework applied in this study is Joseph A. DeVito's five indicators of interpersonal communication effectiveness: openness, supportiveness, positiveness, empathy, and equality. The findings showed that unlicensed trekking guides possess strong interpersonal communication abilities in practice, despite the absence of formal training or certification. Their skills help foster mutual understanding and enrich visitors' experiences. However, challenges were also identified, including limited English vocabulary, low confidence, and gaps in intercultural competence. This research highlights the importance of structured communication training for trekking guides and offers insights for tourism educators and policymakers aiming to raise service quality and safety standards in Mount Rinjani National Park.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication; Unlicenced Trekking Guides; Communication Skills

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, has undergone significant growth in recent years, particularly in Mount Rinjani National Park, one of the country's most prominent trekking destinations. In 2023, the Mount Rinjani National Park Office recorded more than 34,000 foreign visitors, showing a sharp increase compared to the previous year. This rapid growth highlights Mount Rinjani's rising international appeal, while simultaneously increasing the demand for professional tour guiding services. Trekking guides play a crucial role not only in ensuring visitors' safety and comfort but also in shaping tourists' overall perceptions of the destination. As representatives of the local community and culture, guides function as cultural mediators and ambassadors whose communication skills significantly influence visitor satisfaction and destination image (Rabotić, 2010).

Effective interpersonal communication is a fundamental competence for tour guides, particularly in destinations dominated by international tourists. Interpersonal communication involves the exchange of messages between individuals through verbal and nonverbal channels, aiming to build understanding, trust, and meaningful relationships (DeVito, 2015, 2016). In tourism contexts, guides are required to communicate information clearly, respond to tourists' questions, manage group dynamics, and handle unexpected situations. Strong communication skills help guides deliver accurate information, convey enthusiasm, and establish rapport, all of which are essential for creating positive tourist experiences (Barrett, 2006). Conversely, poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, and negative impressions of the destination.

Despite the growing importance of communication skills, challenges persist among trekking guides in Mount Rinjani National Park, particularly those who are unlicensed. Visitor complaints and informal reports indicate that some unlicensed guides experience difficulties in using English effectively, especially in explaining trekking routes, safety procedures, cultural values, and environmental conservation practices. Language barriers and limited interpersonal communication skills can reduce the quality of interaction between guides and tourists, potentially harming the destination's reputation in the long term. According to Lunenburg (2010), communication barriers such as limited language proficiency and ineffective message delivery can obstruct understanding and reduce communication effectiveness, particularly in cross-cultural settings like tourism.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of interpersonal communication skills among tour guides in Indonesia. Susilo and Nurdiauwati (2023), for example, found that

effective interpersonal communication contributes significantly to tourists' satisfaction in the Borobudur Temple area. However, research focusing on trekking guides—especially unlicensed ones operating in natural tourism settings such as Mount Rinjani—is still limited. This gap is noteworthy, considering that trekking activities involve prolonged interaction between guides and tourists, often under physically demanding and unpredictable conditions that require clear, empathetic, and adaptive communication.

Based on these concerns, this study is guided by the following research question: *How are the interpersonal communication skills of unlicensed trekking guides in Mount Rinjani National Park?* The purpose of this research is to examine how unlicensed trekking guides use interpersonal communication in English during guiding activities, as well as to identify their strengths and weaknesses in interacting with foreign tourists. The scope of the study is limited to English communication skills within guiding contexts, including explanations, instructions, responses, and interpersonal interactions during trekking activities.

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the field of English for Tourism and interpersonal communication studies by providing empirical insights into real-world communication practices among trekking guides, enriching existing communication theories proposed by DeVito (2015, 2016). Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore communication phenomena in depth, in line with the qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Practically, the findings are expected to provide constructive feedback for trekking guides, tourism students, and local authorities, particularly in designing targeted communication training programs and policy regulations to improve the quality and professionalism of guiding services in Mount Rinjani National Park.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal Communication Skills in English

Communication is fundamentally the process of exchanging ideas, information, and meaning between individuals through verbal and nonverbal channels (Barrett, 2006; Lunenburg, 2010). Barrett (2006) emphasizes that effective communication requires clarity of message, audience awareness, and responsiveness, especially in professional contexts where communication outcomes directly affect performance and relationships. Similarly, Lunenburg (2010) explains that communication effectiveness is influenced not only by

message delivery but also by feedback, context, and potential barriers such as language differences and cultural misunderstandings.

Interpersonal communication refers specifically to communication that occurs between individuals who are connected in some way and who mutually influence one another (DeVito, 2016). It is considered the most effective form of communication because it allows immediate feedback, adjustment of messages, and emotional connection. DeVito (2015) identifies five key indicators of effective interpersonal communication: **openness**, **supportiveness**, **positiveness**, **empathy**, and **equality**. These indicators are particularly relevant in English-language interactions, where speakers must not only demonstrate linguistic competence but also the ability to build rapport and mutual understanding.

In tourism contexts, English functions as a global lingua franca, making interpersonal communication skills in English essential for tour guides. Rabotić (2010) highlights that tour guides are not merely information providers but cultural interpreters and mediators who shape tourists' experiences through communication. Effective use of English enables guides to explain cultural values, manage group dynamics, and respond appropriately to tourists' needs. Studies by Susilo and Nurdiawati (2023) show that tour guides who apply interpersonal communication indicators—such as empathy and openness—are more successful in engaging visitors and enhancing satisfaction. Likewise, Wahyuni et al. (2023) confirm that strong interpersonal communication contributes to improved tourism quality and visitor perceptions.

Furthermore, intercultural communication competence is inseparable from interpersonal communication in English. Ting-Toomey (1999) stresses that communicators must be sensitive to cultural differences in values, communication styles, and expectations. For tour guides interacting with international tourists, interpersonal communication in English therefore involves not only grammatical accuracy but also cultural awareness, politeness strategies, and adaptive communication behaviors.

Challenges in Developing Interpersonal Communication Skills

Despite its importance, developing effective interpersonal communication skills—particularly in English—poses several challenges. Lunenburg (2010) identifies language barriers, psychological factors, and cultural differences as common obstacles to effective communication. For tour guides, limited English proficiency can restrict message clarity, reduce confidence, and hinder the ability to provide immediate feedback during interactions.

Cultural differences also present significant challenges. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), misunderstandings may arise when communicators are unfamiliar with culturally specific norms related to directness, eye contact, or expressions of politeness. Tour guides who lack intercultural competence may struggle to interpret tourists' expectations accurately, leading to ineffective or uncomfortable interactions.

Another challenge lies in professional training and recognition. Rabotić (2010) notes that not all guides receive formal communication training, particularly unlicensed or informal guides. This lack of structured training can limit their exposure to effective interpersonal communication strategies, including the five indicators proposed by DeVito (2015). Previous tourism studies (Susilo & Nurdawati, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023) suggest that while guides may intuitively communicate with tourists, consistent application of interpersonal communication skills often requires guided practice and reflective learning.

From a research perspective, exploring these challenges often relies on qualitative approaches to capture real-life communication experiences. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) emphasize that qualitative data analysis allows researchers to understand patterns of interaction, perceptions, and difficulties faced by participants in natural settings. This approach is particularly relevant for studying unlicensed trekking guides, whose communication practices may differ from formally trained professionals.

In the context of Mount Rinjani, where guides interact with diverse international trekkers in demanding physical and environmental conditions, these challenges are intensified. The combination of limited English proficiency, cultural diversity, and lack of formal training underscores the need for focused research on how unlicensed trekking guides develop and apply interpersonal communication skills. This gap in the literature provides a strong rationale for the present study.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore communication skills as they naturally occur in real-life trekking guide interactions. A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate when the objective is to obtain rich, straightforward descriptions of social phenomena without heavy abstraction or theory generation (Miles et al., 2014). This design allows the researcher to capture authentic

communicative behaviors, verbal and non-verbal expressions, and interpersonal dynamics between guides and tourists.

Communication is a complex, dynamic process involving message transmission, interpretation, and relational meaning (DeVito, 2015; Lunenburg, 2010). In tourism contexts, particularly guiding, communication plays a crucial role in shaping tourist satisfaction, safety, and cultural understanding (Rabotić, 2010). Therefore, a qualitative approach was deemed suitable to investigate how guides apply interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills in situ.

Research Participants

The participants consisted of five unlicensed trekking guides, purposively selected based on their active involvement in guiding tourists. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants possessed direct experience relevant to the research focus (Miles et al., 2014). The guides were aged between 25 and 40 years and represented diverse educational backgrounds, guiding experiences, and levels of interaction with domestic and international tourists.

Unlicensed guides were selected to reflect authentic grassroots tourism practices, which are common in developing tourism destinations. Previous tourism studies highlight that informal or community-based guides often rely heavily on interpersonal communication skills rather than formal training (Rabotić, 2010; Wahyuni et al., 2023). This diversity enriched the data and allowed for broader insights into naturally developed communication competencies.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques, namely observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio-video recordings. The use of multiple methods supports data triangulation and enhances research credibility (Miles et al., 2014).

Observation

Non-participant observations were conducted during actual guiding sessions to document real-time communication practices. Observation sheets were used to record verbal communication, non-verbal cues (e.g., gestures, facial expressions), interaction patterns, and responses to tourists' questions. Observational data are essential in communication studies, as much interpersonal meaning is conveyed beyond spoken language (DeVito, 2016; Barrett, 2006).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, intentions, and reflections regarding their communication practices. This method allowed flexibility while ensuring consistency across participants. Interview questions focused on interpersonal communication strategies, handling misunderstandings, cultural differences, and barriers to effective communication. According to DeVito (2015), reflective self-reporting helps reveal communicative intentions that may not be visible through observation alone.

Audio-Video Recordings

Audio-video recordings were used to capture authentic guiding interactions in detail. These recordings enabled repeated review of communication episodes, supporting accurate analysis of speech patterns, tone, turn-taking, and non-verbal behaviors. Recording interactions is particularly valuable in interpersonal communication research, where subtle communicative cues influence meaning-making (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study included observation sheets and semi-structured interview guides. Observation sheets were designed to systematically capture communication behaviors based on interpersonal communication concepts such as clarity, empathy, feedback, and adaptability (DeVito, 2016; Lunenburg, 2010). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives and informed by prior tourism communication research (Susilo & Nurdiawati, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three interconnected steps:

Data Condensation

Data from observations, interviews, and recordings were transcribed, coded, and categorized. Coding focused on recurring communication patterns such as information delivery, interpersonal sensitivity, cultural adaptation, and problem-solving strategies.

Data Display

The condensed data were organized into thematic matrices and tables to facilitate comparison across participants and data sources. Data displays help researchers identify patterns, relationships, and emerging themes more effectively (Miles et al., 2014).

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusions were drawn by interpreting patterns and themes related to communication skills in guiding contexts. Verification was conducted through continuous comparison across data sources and revisiting raw data to ensure consistency and validity.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was applied by combining observation, interview, and audio-video data. Triangulation reduces researcher bias and strengthens interpretive accuracy (Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, prolonged engagement in the field allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the guiding context and communication dynamics.

Effective communication is influenced by contextual, cultural, and interpersonal factors (Ting-Toomey, 1999; DeVito, 2016). Therefore, cross-checking multiple data sources ensured that interpretations reflected participants' actual communicative practices rather than isolated observations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Interpersonal Communication Skills of Trekking Guides

The findings indicate that all five unlicensed trekking guides—Jumana, Supratno, Kasnadi, Mustaman, and Muslin—demonstrated notable interpersonal communication skills, although each exhibited strengths in different dimensions. These skills align closely with DeVito's (2015, 2016) interpersonal communication framework, which emphasizes openness, supportiveness, positiveness, empathy, and equality as essential components of effective interpersonal interaction.

Openness was reflected in the guides' willingness to share accurate and relevant information with visitors. Jumana and Supratno consistently provided clear trekking itineraries, safety briefings, and historical narratives about Mount Rinjani, while Muslin offered factual explanations regarding volcanic activity and past eruptions. Such transparency reduces uncertainty and enhances tourists' trust, which is particularly crucial in high-risk tourism settings such as mountain trekking (DeVito, 2015; Rabotić, 2010). Open communication also supports visitors' sense of preparedness and perceived control, contributing to overall satisfaction.

Supportiveness emerged through interactive communication practices. Jumana and Muslin actively encouraged tourists to ask questions and express opinions during the

trek. Muslin further demonstrated supportiveness by suggesting the use of WhatsApp groups to share photographs and experiences after the trip, extending communication beyond the immediate tour context. According to Barrett (2006), supportive communication fosters engagement and strengthens relational bonds, while Susilo and Nurdiauwati (2023) similarly found that interactive dialogue enhances tourists' comfort and participation.

Positiveness was particularly evident in Mustaman's communication style. His use of humor, friendly facial expressions, and relaxed conversational tone helped create a pleasant and less stressful trekking environment. DeVito (2016) notes that positive affect in communication increases approachability and emotional connection, which is vital in tourism contexts where guides serve not only as information providers but also as companions and facilitators of experience. This finding echoes Wahyuni et al. (2023), who emphasize the role of positive interpersonal communication in improving tourism service quality.

Empathy was demonstrated through attentiveness to tourists' physical and emotional conditions. Supratno routinely checked visitors' equipment, stamina, and health, while Mustaman paid close attention to dietary restrictions and allergies. Such empathetic behaviors contribute to a sense of safety and care, reinforcing the guide-tourist relationship. Empathy, as DeVito (2015) explains, is fundamental to effective interpersonal communication because it enables communicators to respond appropriately to others' needs and feelings.

Equality was most visible in Kasnadi's approach to intercultural interaction. He engaged tourists in conversations that acknowledged cultural differences without positioning himself as superior, thereby fostering mutual respect. This aligns with Ting-Toomey's (1999) concept of intercultural communication competence, which emphasizes respect, mindfulness, and identity validation in cross-cultural encounters. In contemporary tourism, guides play a mediating role between cultures, and treating tourists as equal partners enhances mutual understanding and positive impressions of the destination (Rabotić, 2010).

Overall, these findings confirm that interpersonal communication skills are central to guides' professional effectiveness. Consistent with previous studies in tourism contexts (Susilo & Nurdiauwati, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023), the guides' ability to build rapport,

convey information clearly, and demonstrate emotional sensitivity significantly shapes tourists' experiences.

Communication Challenges Faced by Trekking Guides

Despite demonstrating strong interpersonal qualities, the guides faced several communication challenges that limited the effectiveness of their interactions, particularly with international tourists. The most prominent issue was limited English proficiency, which often restricted the clarity and depth of explanations. Guides frequently relied on basic vocabulary, resulting in oversimplified descriptions of historical, cultural, or environmental information. Lunenburg (2010) identifies language barriers as a major obstacle to effective communication, particularly in service-oriented professions that require nuanced explanation.

Related to this limitation was a lack of confidence when interacting with foreign tourists. Hesitation, long pauses, and avoidance of extended dialogue were observed, suggesting communication anxiety. DeVito (2016) notes that low self-confidence can inhibit message delivery and reduce communicative effectiveness, even when the communicator possesses adequate interpersonal awareness.

Another challenge involved the underutilization of non-verbal communication. Gestures, eye contact, and body language—key components of meaning-making in intercultural contexts—were often minimal. Given that non-verbal cues can compensate for linguistic limitations and enhance understanding (DeVito, 2015), their limited use weakened interaction quality. Ting-Toomey (1999) emphasizes that effective intercultural communication requires sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal dimensions.

Finally, intercultural misunderstandings occasionally occurred due to insufficient cultural knowledge. Differences in communication styles, humor, or expectations were not always anticipated or managed effectively. This finding reinforces Ting-Toomey's (1999) argument that intercultural competence involves not only language skills but also cultural awareness, adaptability, and emotional intelligence.

From a methodological perspective, these themes emerged through systematic qualitative analysis following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) data condensation, display, and conclusion-drawing procedures. The recurring patterns highlight the need for targeted training that integrates language development, intercultural sensitivity, and non-verbal communication skills.

In sum, while the guides demonstrate strong interpersonal foundations, addressing these challenges is essential for improving service quality and ensuring sustainable tourism development at Mount Rinjani. Strengthening linguistic competence, confidence, and cultural awareness will enable guides to communicate more effectively with diverse tourist groups, aligning local guiding practices with global tourism standards.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that unlicensed trekking guides in Mount Rinjani National Park demonstrate meaningful interpersonal communication competencies, particularly in the dimensions of openness, supportiveness, positiveness, empathy, and equality. These skills enable guides to build trust, foster comfort, and create positive relational experiences with tourists, even in challenging trekking environments. Each guide exhibits distinctive strengths, indicating that interpersonal communication is practiced in varied but effective ways.

However, the findings also reveal persistent challenges that limit communication effectiveness, especially in interactions with international tourists. Limited English proficiency, low communicative confidence, minimal use of non-verbal strategies, and insufficient intercultural awareness reduce message clarity and may lead to misunderstandings. These challenges suggest that while interpersonal sensitivity is present, communication competence remains incomplete without adequate linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. Overall, the study reinforces the view that effective tourism communication requires an integrated combination of interpersonal skills, language ability, and intercultural competence to support safe, satisfying, and sustainable tourism experiences at Mount Rinjani.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed. First, targeted English language training tailored to trekking and ecotourism contexts should be provided to improve guides' vocabulary, fluency, and confidence when communicating with foreign tourists. Second, confidence-building programs, such as role-playing, simulation-based training, and peer mentoring, can help guides communicate more assertively and reduce anxiety during intercultural interactions.

Third, intercultural communication workshops are recommended to enhance guides' cultural sensitivity, awareness of diverse tourist expectations, and understanding of both verbal and non-verbal communication norms. Such training would help minimize

misunderstandings and promote respectful, inclusive interactions. Fourth, the implementation of structured certification and professional development programs by tourism authorities and local stakeholders is essential. These programs would not only standardize guiding competencies but also legitimize guides' roles as cultural and environmental ambassadors of Mount Rinjani.

For future research, comparative studies between licensed and unlicensed trekking guides are recommended to identify differences in communication competence and service quality. Further research could also examine tourists' perceptions of guides' interpersonal communication and its impact on satisfaction and safety. Additionally, exploring the use of digital communication tools, such as translation applications or online briefing platforms, may provide insights into how technology can help bridge language barriers and enhance guide-tourist interactions in nature-based tourism settings.

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