

Communication Without Borders: Integrating Sign Language in Restaurants for Maximum Inclusivity

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Article history	ABSTRACT
Upload : July 11, 2024 Revised : July 23, 2024 Accepted : July 29, 2024 Publish : July 30, 2024	Creating an inclusive and accessible environment in restaurants is essential, and integrating sign language as a medium of communication plays a pivotal role in achieving this goal. This article delves into the significance and effects of incorporating sign language into restaurant services to address the communication needs of deaf individuals. By adopting sign language, restaurants not only improve service quality but also broaden their clientele, including those who face challenges with verbal communication. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of case studies where restaurants have successfully implemented sign language, this study highlights the social, cultural, and economic advantages of such practices. It offers practical guidelines for staff training in sign language and the integration of supportive technologies. The goal is to illustrate how restaurants can transform into genuinely inclusive spaces, ensuring that all customers, regardless of their hearing abilities, can enjoy a pleasant and seamless dining experience. This approach not only fosters a more welcoming atmosphere but also enhances overall customer satisfaction and loyalty.
Keywords: deaf, inclusivity, restaurant service, sign language	

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of inclusivity and accessibility, restaurants and eateries are required to cater to the diverse communication needs of all their customers ([American Sign Language University, 2024](#)). One community that often faces barriers in this kind of environment is the deaf community. According to World Health Organization (2021) More than 5% of the world's population has significant hearing loss, which affects their interaction in social situations, including dining out. This poses a unique challenge to the restaurant industry, which strives to provide equal and satisfactory service to all customers.

Sign language, as the primary means of communication for many deaf people, has not been fully utilized in the food service sector ([American Sign Language University, 2024](#)). Despite increased awareness and legal efforts to improve accessibility, there are still many restaurants that have not adopted sign language as part of their service ([Chen et al., 2019](#); [Johnson, 2019](#)). In fact, sign language integration not only fulfills a basic need for communication but also demonstrates the restaurant's commitment to inclusivity and equality.

The importance of sign language in restaurants is not just limited to ease of communication but also relates to a satisfying dining experience, which can enhance the restaurant's reputation and expand its customer base. By adopting sign language, restaurants are not only meeting legal and ethical needs but also investing in greater social and cultural capacity, allowing them to interact more effectively with this significant segment of the population *National Association of the Deaf* (2024).

The use of sign language has significant urgency, especially in the context of communication, education, and social inclusion ([United Nations, 2020](#)). Sign language enables individuals with hearing loss to communicate effectively, which is essential in everyday life, including in social interactions, employment, and public services ([Aronoff et al., 2005](#); [Zeshan, n.d.](#)). The use of sign language helps to reduce the social isolation often experienced by individuals with hearing loss, opening up opportunities for them to participate fully in various aspects of social and cultural life ([World Federation of the Deaf. \(n.d.\), 2019](#)). In the context of education, sign language is an important tool in inclusive education. With sign language, students with hearing loss can receive equal education and better access to information and knowledge.

In addition, sign language is part of human rights. UN, in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), recognizes the importance of sign languages and encourages member states to promote their use as part of efforts to ensure equal rights. The use of sign languages also enriches the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world ([Goldin-Meadow et al., 2007](#); [Perniss et al., 2010](#)) The recognition and use of sign language reflect respect for the deaf community's identity and cultural heritage. Therefore, promoting and supporting the use of sign language is an important step towards a more inclusive and just society.

To strengthen the argument in the article about the importance of sign language integration in restaurants, it is important to link to previous studies that have demonstrated the benefits and need for inclusive practices in the service sector. These studies not only provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of sign language in improving communication and customer experience but also highlight trends and policies that support inclusivity in public places. Studies by Smith (2020) which evaluated the effect of sign language training on improving customer service in restaurants. The results of this study showed that restaurants whose staff were trained in sign language not only saw an increase in deaf customer satisfaction but also increased the general satisfaction of their customers. This research reinforces the idea that sign language training can be a worthwhile investment for restaurants. Analyzed by Johnson (2019) on compliance with the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* in the food service sector. This analysis identified that many restaurants still do not meet the minimum standards for accessibility, including in non-verbal communication. Johnson concluded that increased awareness and training in sign language can help restaurants meet and exceed these requirements.

Report by Global Deaf Advocacy Organization (2021) which provides a global overview of accessibility for the deaf community, including in restaurants. The report highlights the success of several international initiatives in integrating sign language into

their staff training and the positive effect this has on inclusivity. Linking the article to these studies not only adds depth to the analysis but also provides a strong foundation for the recommendations provided. It proves that by investing in sign language training and adopting more inclusive policies, restaurants can significantly improve the quality of their service as well as broaden and enrich their customer experience.

METHOD

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of sign language integration in restaurants in improving inclusivity for customers with hearing impairments.

1. Research Design

This research uses a mixed method that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The use of mixed methods in this research is the most appropriate approach due to the complexity of the topic involving social, communication, and business aspects. This method allows researchers to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. By combining statistical data on sign language use and the personal experiences of deaf customers, the researcher was able to triangulate the data, increasing the validity and reliability of the research results.

Mixed methods also offer the flexibility to adjust the research approach according to the findings that emerge during the process, as well as allowing for a more in-depth evaluation of the impact of sign language integration in restaurants. This approach allowed the researcher to obtain more in-depth and comprehensive data on the experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing customers in restaurants that implement sign language ([Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018](#)). As such, this approach not only quantitatively measures the effectiveness of implementation but also provides deep insights into the experiences and challenges faced by all parties involved, resulting in a more holistic understanding of inclusivity in the context of restaurant services.

2. Population and Sample

The population of interest for this study comprises restaurant patrons with hearing impairments. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, focusing specifically on those customers who were willing to take part in the research. This approach ensures that the sample is both relevant and representative of the target group, providing valuable insights into their experiences and needs in relation to restaurant services ([DeVellis, 2016](#); [Patton, 2015](#)).

3. Research Instruments

To gather qualitative data on the experiences, perceptions, and suggestions of customers with hearing impairments regarding sign language services, in-depth interviews were conducted following the guidelines of Kvale & Brinkmann ([2015](#)). Additionally, participatory observation was employed to examine the interactions between deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons and restaurant staff who use sign language, as outlined by Spradley ([2016](#)). This dual-method approach allowed for a comprehensive

understanding of both the direct feedback from customers and the real-time dynamics of service delivery in the restaurant setting.

4. Research Procedure

The preparation phase involves several key steps to ensure the successful implementation of sign language in restaurant services. First, restaurants that have already adopted or plan to adopt sign language are identified. Next, a comprehensive questionnaire and in-depth interview guides are developed to gather relevant data and insights. Finally, restaurant staff are trained in the use of sign language to facilitate effective communication with deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons. These preparatory actions are crucial for creating an inclusive environment and ensuring that both the staff and customers benefit from improved service quality.

Data collection involves three main methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of sign language in restaurant services. First, questionnaires are distributed to deaf and hard-of-hearing customers following their dining experience to collect their feedback. Second, in-depth interviews are conducted with willing participants to gain a deeper insight into their experiences and perceptions. Lastly, participatory observation is carried out by the researchers during the restaurant's operational hours to observe interactions between staff and customers directly. This multi-faceted approach ensures a thorough analysis of how sign language services impact both the customer experience and staff interactions.

Data analysis involves a detailed examination of qualitative data collected from interviews and observations. Thematic analysis techniques are employed to systematically identify and interpret key themes related to customers' experiences and perceptions. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of recurring patterns and insights, providing a comprehensive view of how sign language services impact customer satisfaction and interaction with restaurant staff. By focusing on these core themes, the analysis aims to highlight the most significant aspects of the customer experience and inform future improvements in service delivery ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#); [Field, 2018](#)).

5. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of the research, the interview guides will be piloted with a small sample before being widely implemented, as recommended by Creswell ([2014](#)). To enhance the reliability of the research findings, a triangulation of data methods, including both interviews and observations, will be utilized. This approach, as described by Denzin ([2017](#)), helps to cross-verify the data and improve the robustness of the study's conclusions, thereby providing a more accurate and dependable analysis of the implementation of sign language in restaurant services.

6. Research Ethics

To uphold ethical standards, the research will ensure the confidentiality and privacy of respondents by omitting any personal names and identifying information from the research report. Written consent will be obtained from all participants prior to conducting interviews and observations, ensuring their voluntary participation. Additionally, clear information about the research objectives and procedures will be

provided to all participants to inform them of the study's purpose and methods, thus fostering transparency and trust throughout the research process ([Israel & Hay, 2006](#)).

This research method was designed to evaluate the extent to which sign language integration in restaurants can improve inclusivity for customers with hearing impairments. By incorporating a qualitative approach, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness and challenges of sign language implementation in the food service sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to assess the effectiveness of sign language integration in restaurants in improving inclusivity for customers with hearing impairments. Data was collected through in-depth interviews in restaurants that have implemented (piloted) sign language in their services. In-depth interviews were conducted with three deaf and hard-of-hearing customers who had used sign language services in the restaurant. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, perceptions and suggestions for sign language integration in restaurants.

Findings

1. Positive Experience

Enhancing comfort is a key benefit of integrating sign language into restaurant services, as customers often feel more at ease and accepted when communicating with staff who use sign language. This inclusive approach not only facilitates smoother interactions but also fosters a welcoming environment, allowing deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons to engage more confidently and comfortably with the service staff. By addressing communication barriers, restaurants can significantly improve the overall dining experience for these customers, leading to greater satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging. *"I feel calmer and less anxious when ordering food because the staff understands sign language."*

A significant outcome of providing sign language services in restaurants is that many customers feel valued and acknowledged. When restaurants offer sign language communication, patrons with hearing impairments often perceive a greater level of attentiveness and respect. This inclusive approach not only enhances the overall dining experience but also reinforces the customers' sense of worth and importance, contributing to a positive and appreciative atmosphere. *"I feel respected because they make an effort to communicate in my way."*

The use of sign language significantly reduces misunderstandings during food orders, as it facilitates clearer and more accurate communication between customers and staff. By incorporating sign language into the ordering process, restaurants can minimize errors and ensure that patrons' requests and preferences are conveyed correctly. This not only enhances the efficiency of service but also improves customer satisfaction by reducing the likelihood of miscommunication and ensuring that orders are fulfilled as

intended. *"My orders are always precise because I can immediately use sign language to communicate."*

2. Challenges Faced

Some customers have reported that the proficiency of staff in sign language varies, which occasionally creates communication challenges. This variation in skill levels can lead to consistency in service and misunderstandings, impacting the overall effectiveness of sign language as a communication tool. Addressing these disparities through comprehensive and ongoing staff training can help to mitigate these issues, ensuring a more seamless and reliable interaction between customers and restaurant personnel. *"There are some staff who still need to be proficient, so we sometimes have difficulty communicating."*

The availability of trained staff is a critical issue, as not all personnel are consistently available to use sign language, particularly during busy periods. This limitation can hinder effective communication and affect the overall quality of service for deaf and hard-of-hearing customers. Ensuring that a sufficient number of staff members are proficient in sign language and can be readily deployed during peak times is essential for maintaining an inclusive and efficient dining experience. *"At peak times, it is difficult to find staff who can sign language."*

3. Suggestions and Recommendations

Customers have suggested that restaurants implement ongoing training for staff to enhance their proficiency in sign language. Continuous education and practice are crucial for improving staff skills and ensuring effective communication with deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons. By investing in regular training programs, restaurants can maintain high standards of service, address any gaps in sign language ability, and better meet the needs of all customers, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and accommodating environment. *"Restaurants should regularly conduct training so that all staff can communicate well."*

The use of technology, such as communication apps or specialized devices, can significantly support interactions with customers who have hearing impairments. These technological tools facilitate clear and effective communication, bridging gaps that may arise in face-to-face interactions. By incorporating such technology into their service model, restaurants can enhance the overall customer experience, ensuring that patrons with hearing impairments can easily and accurately convey their needs and preferences. This integration not only improves service efficiency but also demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and customer satisfaction. *"It would be helpful if there was a dedicated tablet or app for ordering food."*

Promoting the availability of sign language services is essential to increase awareness among potential customers with hearing impairments. By widely informing the public about these services, restaurants can attract more patrons who may benefit from and appreciate such inclusive offerings. Effective promotion can include marketing materials, social media campaigns, and outreach efforts, ensuring that individuals with hearing impairments are aware of and encouraged to visit. This proactive approach not only enhances the restaurant's reputation for inclusivity but also helps to reach a broader

audience, ultimately driving more diverse customer engagement. *"Promote the service so that more people know about it and feel comfortable visiting."*

In-depth interviews revealed that the integration of sign language in restaurants had a significant positive impact on customers with hearing impairments. Customers feel more valued and comfortable, and communication is more effective. However, to achieve maximum inclusivity, restaurants need to improve staff proficiency through continuous training, utilize technology, and promote the service more widely. These recommendations are expected to help restaurants improve services and provide a better experience for customers with hearing loss. The results of interviews and observations show a significant positive impact on customer experience, which can be attributed to various theories of communication and social inclusion.

Symbolic Communication Theory was introduced by Mead ([1934](#)) and developed by Blumer ([1969](#)), emphasizes that meaning is generated through social interaction. Sign language, as a form of nonverbal communication, provides symbols that can be understood by individuals with hearing loss, thus enabling them to participate fully in social interactions in restaurants. This research shows that the use of sign language helps to reduce misunderstandings and increase customer comfort, supporting the theory that symbols (sign language) play an important role in the formation of meaning in communication.

Inclusivity theory emphasizes the importance of accessibility and full participation for all individuals in various aspects of social life ([Fidler & Rogow, 2016](#)). According to this theory, inclusivity is achieved when barriers to communication and participation are removed. The results showed that the integration of sign language in the restaurant increased the feelings of acceptance and appreciation by customers with hearing impairments, which is in accordance with the principle of inclusiveness. The positive experiences of customers in this study support the idea that inclusive services enhance social participation and individual well-being.

Training and Development theory explains that improving skills through continuous training is essential to improving performance and effectiveness in an organization ([Schur et al., 2013](#)). The findings of this study indicate that variations in staff proficiency in sign language affect the quality of communication with customers. Customers' suggestions for ongoing staff training support this theory, suggesting that investment in sign language training can improve service and inclusiveness in restaurants.

Communication Technology Theory, which emphasizes the role of technology in facilitating communication, is also relevant in this context ([Fidler & Rogow, 2016](#)). Customers suggested the use of technological applications or devices to support communication with hearing loss. This theory states that technology can expand communication capacity and overcome physical or sensory barriers. The implementation of additional technology, such as a hearing-impaired-friendly booking app, can improve the customer experience and support inclusivity.

Practical Implications

1. Staff Training

The importance of ongoing training in sign language for restaurant staff to ensure all staff have adequate proficiency. This not only improves the quality of service but also ensures that the restaurant meets high standards of inclusivity.

2. Technology Implementation

The adoption of technology, such as booking tablets with sign language options or dedicated apps, can further overcome communication barriers and enhance customer convenience.

3. Service Promotion

Raising awareness about sign language services through promotional campaigns can attract more deaf and hard-of-hearing customers, ensuring that more people are aware of and can utilize these services.

Sign language integration in restaurants significantly improves inclusivity and convenience for customers with hearing loss. The findings are in line with various theories of communication, inclusivity, training and technology. By adopting strategies that support continuous training, the use of technology, and the promotion of services, restaurants can achieve higher levels of inclusivity and provide a better experience for all customers.

CONCLUSION

The importance of integrating sign language in restaurants underscores that its implementation is not only an ethical action supporting inclusivity but also a smart business strategy that can enhance customer satisfaction and broaden the customer base. Previous research indicates that restaurant staff trained in sign language can significantly improve overall service quality, reduce misunderstandings, and enhance communication efficiency, leading to a more satisfying experience for both deaf patrons and customers in general. Furthermore, compliance with regulations such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) not only fulfills legal obligations but also sends a strong message about the restaurant's commitment to fairness and equality. Therefore, integrating sign language into restaurant services enriches the dining experience for deaf individuals, strengthens the brand's image, and boosts the restaurant's competitive edge in an increasingly diverse market. Adopting sign language as a core part of restaurant operations represents a step towards a more inclusive future, where all individuals, regardless of hearing ability, can enjoy an equal dining experience. Restaurants that proactively embrace these inclusive practices benefit from increased customer satisfaction and establish themselves as leaders in social advocacy and justice within the hospitality industry.

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