

INVOLVE, FEEL, USE, AND NORMALIZE

Have you ever felt unheard? Or tried to say something only for people to misunderstand you? It's a painful feeling as if no one is truly on your side. This may happen occasionally to us, but for our Deaf friends, it could be a daily experience. Very few people on this earth truly understand the language they use: sign language.

This awareness hit me even more deeply after a personal experience that completely changed my perspective on sign language. For the first 19 years of my life, I had never even thought about learning sign language. Even though I often came across content about it on social media, my heart had never truly been moved to explore it. That was until one day when I met a Deaf child for the very first time. The child was asking for help, using expressions and hand gestures, without saying a single word. I tried to ask, "How can I help you?" But she responded with sign language that I couldn't understand. I didn't know what to do. In the end, I left—without being able to help at all.

But even though I walked away, my thoughts remained there. That simple encounter left a deep impression on my heart. I often found myself reflecting in silence, feeling guilty, and wondering what the child must have felt at that moment. That guilt slowly turned into a motivation to take action. I began searching for ways to communicate with the Deaf community, and that became the beginning of my journey in learning sign language.

I started looking for local communities that could teach me, and eventually, I discovered LPQI NTB (Lembaga Pendidikan Quran Isyarat NTB), an institute that is dedicated to helping Deaf children to learn and read the Quran. Despite a busy schedule, I made time to visit the institute, which is located at the Hubbul Wathan Mosque in Mataram. There, I met Ustaz Eko Hamnur, the head of LPQI NTB. With a bit of hesitation, I expressed my intention. However, he welcomed me warmly and one thing he said, which has stayed in my memory to this day, was:

"You are someone chosen by Allah."

I was stunned for a moment and asked, "Why do you say that, Ustaz?"

He replied, "Not many people feel moved to learn sign language. Your presence here is part of Allah's will so that His religion may also reach our Deaf brothers and sisters, through you."

That sentence made me realize that every religion, especially Islam is vast, with much to be understood and learned. So if not us, then who will convey the teachings of Islam to our Deaf friends? Even when it comes to something as essential as the procedures of prayer—if we are the ones who understand the recitations and the correct way to perform them, then who else carries the responsibility to share this knowledge with them?

Since then, I've been learning sign language step by step. I began communicating with Deaf friends, sharing stories with them. I felt the warmth of sincere affection, witnessed their enthusiasm in understanding the Qur'an, and saw the joy on their faces when they met someone eager to learn sign language. They were so enthusiastic in introducing the language to me. One of the most memorable moments was when I introduced my name in sign language, and they gave me a "sign name." It was such a simple moment—yet incredibly touching—a unique sense of fulfillment and happiness that I could truly feel.

Unfortunately, the enthusiasm I felt was not always met with the same response from those around me. Some of my close friends would joke about sign language whenever they saw me using it. Some even asked mockingly, “Why are you learning sign language? You can speak just fine, can't you?” These kinds of reactions show that society has not yet normalized the presence of sign language. In fact, some people still see it as something strange or unfamiliar, as if it is a language meant only for the Deaf community.

But in reality, sign language is an officially recognized language, just like spoken languages. In Indonesia alone, there are two officially recognized sign systems: BISINDO (Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia) and SIBI (Sistem Isyarat Bahasa Indonesia). In countries like Canada, South Korea, and Mexico, sign language has even been recognized as part of the national language. This shows that sign language holds equal importance to other languages used for communication.

If we are willing to embrace and eagerly learn foreign languages like English, Korean, or Chinese, then why can't we give the same attention and respect to sign language? Imagine what it feels like to be in their position to live in a world designed for those who can hear, where nearly every aspect of life relies on sound. And even more heartbreaking—when the people around you don't understand the only language you use to communicate.

But perhaps imagining is not enough. True understanding comes when we step into their world—when we make the effort to be present in their environment. It is only then that empathy begins to grow, followed by a genuine interest to learn, and eventually, the desire to use sign language in real life.

Because real inclusion is not just about being aware—it's about being involved. When we choose to walk alongside our Deaf friends, to communicate in their language, we are not just learning a skill—we are building bridges of compassion, respect, and equality. And maybe, just maybe, that's the kind of world we all want to live in.