

Barriers to Effective Communication in English among EFL University Students

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, effective communication in English is vital for fostering collaboration and understanding. However, numerous barriers impede this process, particularly for non-native speakers. This study employed a qualitative literature review design to investigate the primary obstacles to effective English communication. Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and documented case studies on English language communication published in academic and professional contexts. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring patterns related to communication barriers. This study explores the primary obstacles to effective English communication, categorizing them into linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges. Linguistic barriers arise from varying levels of proficiency, unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions, and the influence of regional accents. Culturally, differences in communication styles such as direct versus indirect approaches can create misunderstandings and affect interpersonal dynamics. Moreover, psychological factors like language anxiety and a lack of confidence further hinder individuals from expressing their thoughts clearly. This article examines these barriers in academic, professional, and social contexts. Drawing on linguistic research and real-life cases, it highlights the impact of these challenges and proposes strategies such as fostering cultural sensitivity, promoting active listening, simplifying language, and creating supportive environments. These approaches aim to bridge linguistic divides and enhance inclusivity in communication.



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INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as a global lingua franca, serving as a crucial tool for international collaboration across academic, professional, and social domains. Despite its widespread use, effective communication in English remains a significant challenge for non-native speakers. These challenges are compounded by linguistic limitations, cultural differences, and psychological barriers that affect the clarity and efficiency of message delivery.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of mastering both language proficiency and intercultural communication skills (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulfaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulfaidah, et al., 2025). While these studies have provided valuable insights into linguistic competence and cross-cultural interaction, they have largely examined these factors separately, with limited attention to how linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural barriers interact to influence English communication effectiveness in diverse contexts. Furthermore, existing research tends to focus on identifying communication challenges rather than proposing integrated and practical strategies that can be applied across academic, professional, and social settings.

This gap highlights the need for a more holistic understanding of English communication barriers that considers the complex interplay among language proficiency, psychological factors, and sociocultural influences. Addressing this need, the present study offers a comprehensive synthesis of these interconnected barriers and develops practical, inclusive strategies for overcoming them. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated framework that combines linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives into a single analytical approach, providing a broader and more applicable

understanding of effective English communication than previous studies (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). This study seeks to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive overview of the barriers and offering practical, inclusive strategies to overcome them. The objective is to support individuals and organizations in fostering more effective and empathetic English communication across diverse settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. The data were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study focus, namely communication barriers experienced by non-native English speakers in academic, professional, and social contexts. The inclusion criteria were: (1) scholarly articles, interview reports, and observational studies published in peer-reviewed or credible academic sources; (2) sources that specifically discussed linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural, or intercultural communication challenges; and (3) cases involving non-native English speakers in real-life communication settings. Sources that focused only on native English speakers, lacked sufficient methodological clarity, or were unrelated to intercultural communication barriers were excluded.

Data were collected through literature review and case analysis, focusing on real-life communication scenarios involving non-native English speakers in academic, professional, and social environments. Sources include scholarly articles, interviews, and observational studies related to linguistic and intercultural communication. The case analysis was conducted by identifying communication incidents, examining the contextual background of each case, classifying the type of barrier encountered, and comparing patterns across different settings. Each case was reviewed in relation to participants, communication context, source of misunderstanding, and coping or resolution strategies.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key categories of barriers and derive strategic recommendations. The analysis followed several stages: familiarization with the selected data, initial coding, grouping of codes into broader categories, theme development, and refinement of themes based on recurring patterns across the cases and literature. To enhance the validity of the thematic analysis, the coding results were repeatedly reviewed, compared across sources, and checked for consistency between emerging themes and the original data. This validation process helped ensure that the identified themes were grounded in the selected evidence rather than based solely on researcher interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study identifies three primary categories of barriers based on recurrent patterns observed across participant accounts, classroom or workplace interaction cases, and thematic coding of communication difficulties:

Navigating the Challenges of Non-Native English



1. Linguistic Barriers

Non-native speakers often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and idiomatic expressions. Misunderstandings commonly arise due to misinterpretation of tone or regional accents. Participant data indicate that linguistic barriers appeared most frequently in situations requiring spontaneous responses, clarification of instructions, and participation in academic discussion. For example, some participants were able to understand the general topic of an assignment but failed to interpret specific task verbs accurately, which resulted in incomplete or inaccurate responses. This finding shows that linguistic barriers are not only related to grammar and vocabulary but also to pragmatic comprehension, academic register, and the ability to negotiate meaning in real-time interaction.

2. Cultural Barriers

Different cultural backgrounds influence communication styles (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While Western cultures may prioritize direct communication, many Asian or Middle Eastern cultures may prefer a more indirect or context-dependent style (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Such differences can lead to miscommunication and conflict, especially in multinational work environments. The analysis shows that cultural barriers often emerged when speakers interpreted politeness, disagreement, silence, or hesitation differently. For instance, indirect responses were sometimes perceived as uncertainty or lack of preparation, whereas participants from high-context cultural backgrounds viewed them as respectful and socially appropriate. This finding supports intercultural communication theory, which argues that meaning is shaped not only by linguistic form but also by culturally embedded expectations, including hierarchy, face-saving, and conversational norms.

3. Psychological Barriers

Language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence significantly hinder communication. In classrooms or meetings, this can lead to silence or avoidance, reducing participation and engagement. These barriers are often internal but shaped by external pressures, such as fear of judgment. The findings further reveal that psychological barriers became more visible when participants anticipated negative evaluation from teachers, peers, or colleagues. In several cases, participants reported that they knew what they wanted to say but chose not to speak because they were afraid of grammatical mistakes, pronunciation problems, or social embarrassment. This indicates that communication failure is not always caused by insufficient linguistic knowledge; rather, it may also result from affective constraints that reduce speakers' willingness to communicate.

Discussion and Implications

Compared with prior studies, the findings confirm that communication barriers among non-native English speakers are multidimensional, involving linguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and affective readiness. Consistent with Mukhlis, (2025a) and Mukhlis & Saidah, (2025), this study shows that intercultural misunderstanding occurs when speakers apply different communicative norms to the same interaction. The findings also extend previous studies by demonstrating that these barriers are interrelated. Linguistic limitations may increase anxiety, while cultural uncertainty may reduce participation even when speakers possess adequate vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

Theoretically, this study contributes to intercultural communication and second-language communication research by emphasizing that communication challenges should be understood as relational and contextual rather than merely as individual language deficiencies. Practically, the findings suggest that institutions should not rely only on language training. Effective intervention should integrate linguistic support, intercultural competence development, and psychological safety. Therefore, the following strategies are recommended:

- Promoting cultural sensitivity through structured intercultural training, role-play, and reflective dialogue.
- Simplifying language, avoiding unnecessary jargon, and providing written clarification for complex instructions.

- Encouraging active listening, paraphrasing, and confirmation checks to reduce misunderstanding.
- Creating a supportive environment for language learners through mentorship, peer support groups, and non-punitive feedback practices.

These strategies have been shown to reduce communication breakdowns and foster inclusivity (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). In practical terms, their implementation may improve participation, reduce anxiety, and strengthen communication equity in academic and professional multilingual environments.

CONCLUSION

Effective communication in English is hindered by linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers, particularly for non-native speakers. These challenges are pervasive across educational, professional, and social contexts. Addressing them requires a holistic approach that integrates language support, cultural awareness, and emotional encouragement. By implementing inclusive strategies, individuals and institutions can bridge communication gaps and build stronger, more empathetic relationships. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an integrated understanding of how linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors interact to influence English communication effectiveness among non-native speakers. However, the study is limited by its focus on specific contexts and the reliance on available literature, which may not fully capture the diversity of communication experiences across different regions and populations. Future research is recommended to employ empirical and comparative approaches involving broader participant groups and diverse settings to further examine the effectiveness of targeted interventions in overcoming these communication barriers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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