

Barriers in Learning English among First-Year University Students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk-bentuk hambatan yang dialami oleh mahasiswa tahun pertama program studi Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar (PGSD) dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, serta faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhinya. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap tujuh mahasiswa dari latar belakang non-English-speaking. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa terdapat empat hambatan utama: hambatan linguistik (keterbatasan kosakata, grammar, dan pengucapan), hambatan psikologis (kecemasan, rendahnya kepercayaan diri), hambatan sosiokultural (stigma "sok Inggris", penilaian teman sebaya), dan hambatan instruksional (metode pengajaran yang terlalu berpusat pada guru, minimnya praktik berbicara). Hambatan-hambatan ini saling berkaitan dan berkontribusi terhadap rendahnya keterlibatan aktif mahasiswa dalam proses belajar Bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan perlunya strategi pembelajaran yang lebih komunikatif, suportif, dan berbasis praktik. Penelitian selanjutnya disarankan untuk memperluas cakupan partisipan atau mengeksplorasi intervensi khusus untuk mengatasi hambatan tertentu.

Kata Kunci: hambatan belajar, Bahasa Inggris, mahasiswa PGSD, non-English-speaking, pendekatan IPA

Abstract

This study aims to identify the types of barriers experienced by first-year students in a Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program when learning English, along with the contributing factors. Using a qualitative approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The analysis revealed four main barriers: linguistic challenges (limited vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), psychological obstacles (anxiety, low self-confidence), sociocultural pressures (peer judgment, stigma of “showing off”), and instructional limitations (teacher-centered methods, lack of speaking practice). These barriers are interconnected and contribute to low student engagement in English learning. The study recommends implementing more communicative, supportive, and practice-based teaching strategies. Future research is encouraged to expand participant diversity or explore targeted interventions to reduce specific learning barriers.

Key Words: learning barriers, English language, PGSD students, non-English-speaking, IPA approach

A. Introduction

First-year university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds often encounter multifaceted barriers in their journey to master English. These obstacles such as linguistic, psychological, and environmental can hinder not only language acquisition but also academic integration. In the context of non-English-speaking students entering teacher education programs, particularly those preparing to teach at the primary level, the ability to communicate effectively in English is fundamental for both academic success and future professional competence.

Linguistic barriers stand out as the most common form of difficulty. Linguistic obstacles such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and pronunciation issues are frequently identified as core challenges, undermining their fluency and comprehension in academic settings (Alazeer & Ahmed, 2023). Similarly, EFL students in Indonesia cite limited vocabulary, low fluency, and pronunciation challenges as major hurdles to speaking English (Tawali, 2024). These limitations not only reduce students' fluency and comprehension but also hinder their overall academic performance by creating a barrier to understanding complex concepts, following lectures, and expressing ideas confidently in both oral and written formats.

Beyond linguistic challenges, students from non-English-speaking environments are prone to psychological barriers. Foreign language anxiety, especially in speaking tasks, arises from fear of making mistakes, shyness, and low self-confidence (Rusli et al., 2024). Anxiety and motivational issues are deeply intertwined, exacerbated by limited exposure to English and social pressures (Amiruddin, 2022). Additionally, studies indicate that the classroom environment including large class sizes, teacher-centered approaches, and lack of interactive practice can amplify students' reluctance to engage.

Related with psychological factors, sociocultural pressures, including peer judgment and the stigma of being perceived as “showing off” when speaking English, further discourage active language use, especially outside the classroom (Jamshed et al., 2024). Alhamami's research explains how beliefs held by family, friends, and classmates—shaped by community attitudes—can instill feelings of embarrassment and reticence when attempting to speak a foreign language. It underscores how peer beliefs about competence can inhibit speaking behavior (Alhamami, 2020). Sociocultural pressures refer to the influence of social norms, peer expectations, and cultural beliefs on students' behavior and attitudes. In many non-English-speaking environments, students who attempt to speak English especially in informal settings may be perceived as arrogant, overconfident, or “pretending to be superior.” This perception often leads to teasing or negative remarks from peers, which creates a psychological barrier for learners. As a result, students may feel embarrassed or fear being socially excluded if they practice speaking English openly.

In addition, insufficient practice opportunities and teacher-centered instruction limit students' engagement in productive language use (Abrar et al., 2024). This means that when students are not given enough chances to actively use English such as through speaking, role-playing, discussions, or group activities their ability to develop communicative competence

becomes restricted. A classroom environment that relies heavily on teacher-centered methods, such as lecturing, translation, and grammar explanation without interaction, tends to place students in passive roles. As a result, they do not have the opportunity to practice producing language in meaningful, real-life contexts.

The significance of exploring these barriers is particularly relevant in the context of students from non-English-speaking environments who are enrolled in Primary School Teacher Education Programs. These students are expected to use English not only for their academic progression but also to teach English effectively to future pupils. However, they often lack authentic exposure and practice opportunities, both inside and outside the classroom, which compounds their linguistic and affective difficulties. For instance, limited daily use of English both due to their environment and instructional approaches reinforces their grammar and pronunciation issues, while anxiety further undermines fluency. This research seeks to identify and analyze the forms of barriers and underlying factors affecting English acquisition among these first-year teacher-education students.

B. Metodology

This section describes the research methodology employed to explore the barriers faced by first-year university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in learning English.

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the barriers encountered by first-year university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in learning English. IPA was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' personal experiences and the meanings they assign to the challenges they face in language learning.

2. Participants

The participants consisted of seven students from first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Primary School Teacher Education program in University of Muhammadiyah Buton. All participants came from non-English-speaking backgrounds and were undertaking English language courses as part of their curriculum. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the following criteria: (1) first-year university students, (2) non-English-speaking backgrounds, and (3) enrollment in at least one English course. This approach ensured that participants' experiences aligned closely with the research focus.

3. Technique of Data Collection

The primary technique of data collection employed in this study was semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted to explore the lived experiences of first-year university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in learning English. This technique was chosen to align with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, which emphasizes participants' subjective meanings and personal interpretations of their experiences.

Each participant was interviewed individually in a quiet and private setting to ensure comfort and confidentiality, and to encourage openness in sharing personal experiences. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with a set of guiding questions, but flexibility was maintained to allow probing and follow-up questions depending on participants' responses. This approach facilitated rich, detailed narratives around linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and instructional barriers encountered in English language learning.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The average duration of each interview was approximately 30–45 minutes. The interview process was conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express themselves more freely and to reduce language-related anxiety, with careful attention to retaining the original meaning during transcription and interpretation.

4. Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews designed to allow participants to reflect deeply on their experiences of learning English. The interviews included open-ended questions focusing on specific challenges (e.g., linguistic, psychological, environmental) and the factors that contributed to these challenges. Interviews were conducted in a flexible manner to accommodate individual expression and encourage detailed narratives.

5. *Technique of Data Analysis*

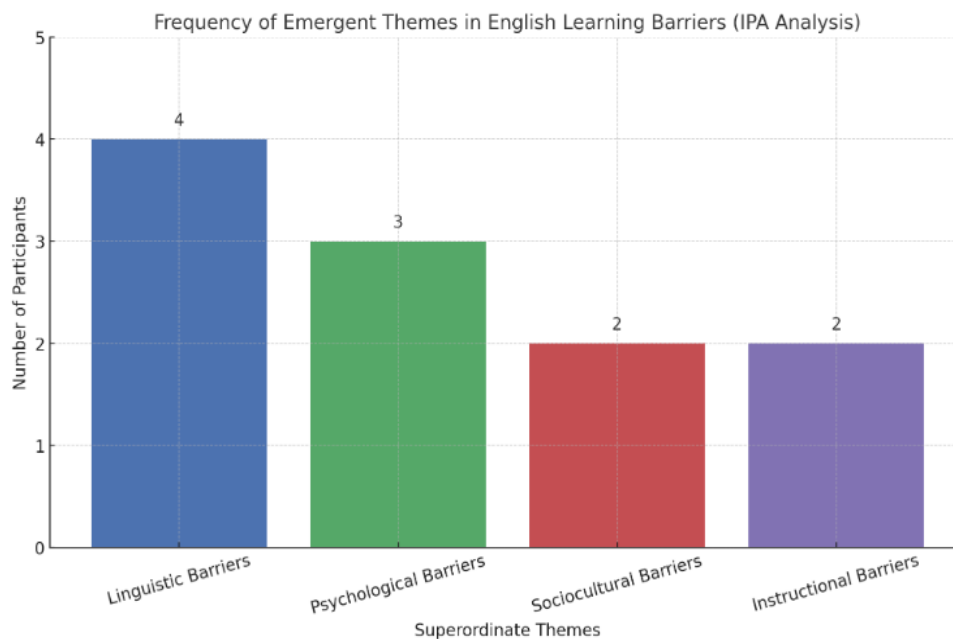
The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was selected because it emphasizes participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations, aligning well with the study's aim to explore personal and contextual factors affecting English language learning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. Significant statements and phrases were identified and coded into emergent themes, focusing on how participants made sense of their experiences. Connections between themes were then explored to develop a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by first-year university students in learning English and the factors influencing these barriers.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Result

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of first-year university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in learning English. The findings are presented through the emergent themes derived from participants' narratives, with attention to their individual expressions, linguistic patterns, and personal reflections.

The analysis of in-depth interviews with seven first-year students from a Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program revealed four superordinate themes representing the core barriers experienced in learning English. These themes include Linguistic Barriers, Psychological Barriers, Sociocultural Barriers, and Instructional Barriers.



Imagine 1. Frequency of Emergent in English Learning Barriers (IPA Analysis)

Each theme emerged from participants' reflections on their individual struggles, social pressures, and learning environments. The following sections describe these themes with representative insights from the participants.

1. Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic difficulties were the most frequently reported obstacles among participants. Students commonly expressed struggles with grammar usage, vocabulary limitations, and pronunciation issues. For instance, one participant stated, *"I often get confused when using tenses, especially in spontaneous speaking"* (Participant 1), illustrating a fundamental challenge in forming grammatically correct sentences during verbal communication. Another participant (Participant 5) shared, *"It takes me quite a while to construct correct sentences, and by the time I think of them, the moment has passed."* This delay reflects how linguistic processing difficulties disrupt fluency. Similarly, Participant 3 noted, *"I feel like my vocabulary is still limited, and sometimes I can't understand or respond during group discussions."*

These findings confirm that limited linguistic proficiency—particularly in active use—can significantly hinder confidence and communication in academic and classroom settings.

2. Psychological Barriers

Emotional and psychological struggles were also prominent, especially in relation to anxiety and low self-confidence when speaking English. Several participants reported intense nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and emotional discomfort during speaking tasks. Participant 4 remarked, *“Learning English in my first year is really stressful and confusing. I always feel anxious during class.”* Another participant, Participant 6, vividly described his anxiety, saying, *“Whenever I’m asked to speak, my hands sweat, and I get nervous, even if I already know the answer.”* These expressions reflect symptoms of foreign language anxiety (FLA), where emotional distress limits one’s willingness to engage with the language, especially in oral interaction.

3. Sociocultural Barriers

Some participants experienced sociocultural stigma and peer-related concerns that prevented them from actively using English, particularly outside the classroom. Participant 2 admitted, *“I hesitate to speak English because I’ve been teased before—people say I’m showing off or trying to be smart.”* This fear of negative peer judgment reflects a broader cultural issue that discourages language use and contributes to a climate of silence. Such social perceptions reduce opportunities for informal language practice, further reinforcing students’ reluctance to speak.

4. Instructional Barriers

A number of students cited teaching methods and classroom conditions as contributing factors to their language learning difficulties. Participant 3 expressed dissatisfaction with passive teaching approaches, stating, *“If the lecturer just gives theory and doesn’t make the class interesting, I lose focus and don’t absorb the material.”* Meanwhile, Participant 7 described how more practical, focused instruction enhanced his motivation: *“When the lesson is clear and straight to the point, I feel more encouraged to learn and ask questions.”* These comments indicate that when the classroom environment lacks communicative practice and clarity, students feel disconnected from the learning process, leading to decreased participation and confidence.

5. Discussion

This study revealed that first-year students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in a Primary School Teacher Education program experience a range of interconnected barriers when learning English. These barriers are classified into four superordinate themes: linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and instructional. The discussion below elaborates on these themes by connecting participants’ experiences to relevant literature.

6. Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic challenges were the most prominent across participants, particularly involving grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Several students reported difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences and expressing ideas fluently due to limited lexical resources. This aligns with findings by Rahmaniah and Asbah, who observed that grammatical weaknesses and vocabulary insufficiency hinder student participation in language classrooms (Rahmaniah & Asbah, 2018). Moreover, vocabulary constraints significantly reduce fluency and self-confidence in communication (Ambawani et al., 2025). In the present study, the inability to spontaneously retrieve appropriate words or use grammar correctly often led to communication breakdowns and classroom silence, reinforcing the view that limited linguistic competence creates a fundamental barrier in EFL learning (Yulia & Saukah, 2021).

7. Psychological Barriers

In addition to linguistic issues, psychological barriers such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence emerged as significant inhibitors of oral performance. Students frequently expressed nervousness when speaking English in front of others, even when they knew the content. Supporting this, the high levels of anxiety were common among EFL students and directly correlated with avoidance behavior in speaking tasks (Alazeer & Ahmed, 2023; Erdiana et al., 2020). Further noted that speaking anxiety arises from both internal apprehensions and external

pressures such as classroom dynamics and teacher expectations (Aini & Lubis, 2023). These psychological barriers prevent students from engaging with the language, limit their oral development, and may persist if not adequately addressed.

8. Sociocultural Barriers

Sociocultural pressures were another critical dimension identified in this study. Students revealed reluctance to speak English outside the classroom due to fear of being labeled “sok Inggris” (pretending to be superior). This form of peer judgment reflects a broader cultural stigma against using English in informal settings. Learners’ social environments can impose implicit restrictions on language use through ridicule or exclusion, which significantly impacts motivation and willingness to speak (Alhamami, 2020; Jamshed et al., 2024). Accent-related stigma contributes to self-censorship among students, reinforcing silence and avoidance. These findings show that even when students possess the technical skills to speak, social perceptions can undermine their willingness to use the language.

9. Instructional Barriers

Lastly, this study found that teacher-centered instruction and lack of practice-based learning approaches contributed to disengagement in English learning. Students reported that classroom activities focused mostly on passive tasks—such as reading and translation—without sufficient opportunities to engage in productive use of the language. This is consistent with findings that minimal interaction and over-reliance on lecture-based teaching hinder speaking development in EFL settings (Abrar et al., 2024). The classrooms dominated by teacher talk reduced students’ chances to develop communicative competence. A more student-centered approach, such as task-based learning and communicative activities, is needed to increase engagement and improve oral proficiency.

D. Conclusion

This study explored the barriers in learning English among first-year university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, specifically those enrolled in a Primary School Teacher Education program. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study identified four main categories of obstacles: linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and instructional.

The findings revealed that linguistic barriers—such as difficulties in grammar, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation problems—are the most frequently experienced by students. These linguistic deficiencies not only affect students’ fluency but also contribute to anxiety and a lack of confidence in oral communication. In parallel, psychological factors—including foreign language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence—emerged as critical barriers, often leading to avoidance of speaking opportunities in class. Moreover, sociocultural pressures, such as peer judgment and the stigma of being seen as “showing off” when speaking English, discourage students from using the language outside formal classroom contexts. These social dynamics contribute to a climate of silence and self-censorship. Lastly, instructional barriers, particularly the dominance of teacher-centered approaches and the lack of communicative, student-centered learning activities, were found to limit students’ opportunities to practice English productively.

Future researchers are encouraged to expand this study by involving a larger and more diverse participant group, comparing students across different disciplines, or exploring the effectiveness of targeted interventions in reducing specific learning barriers.

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