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## **Analyzing communication barriers in expressing opinions in English education at Universitas Negeri Padang**

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### **Abstract:**

*Communication is essential skills for English Education students as future teachers, yet many struggle to express opinions confidently, often remaining silent or code-switching. This descriptive qualitative study aimed to analyze communication barriers and their underlying factors from students' perspectives. Participants included four students (two male, two female) from UNP, cohorts 2022 to 2025. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, including low levels of classroom participation and high levels of speaking anxiety. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews covering linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal aspects. The findings revealed that communication barriers are complex and interconnected. Linguistic barriers involved limited vocabulary and grammar concerns. Psychologically, speaking anxiety, fear of mistakes, and low self-confidence emerged as the most dominant factors. Sociocultural barriers stemmed from indirect Indonesian communication styles conflicting with academic English expectations. Furthermore, environmental factors like peer dominance and interpersonal barriers, such as fear of judgment, significantly hindered participation. In conclusion, these barriers are influenced by both internal and external factors. This study suggests that creating a psychologically safe and supportive learning environment is essential to fostering students' confidence and active engagement in English classroom communication.*

### **Keywords:**

Communication barriers, expressing opinions, English language education, speaking anxiety, EFL students.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Communication is a fundamental element of human interaction, enabling the exchange of ideas, messages, and information across verbal and non-verbal modes. In educational settings, communication extends beyond mere information transmission; it encompasses meaning-making, social relationship building, and the development of professional competencies. For students enrolled in English Language Education Study Programs at Indonesian universities, the ability to communicate effectively in English is not merely an academic requirement but a foundational professional competency, as these students are being

prepared to become future English teachers who will model language use for their own students.

Despite years of formal English education, many Indonesian EFL students continue to experience significant communication barriers, particularly in contexts requiring spontaneous oral expression such as classroom discussions, academic presentations, and seminars (Anggrisia & Robah, 2023; Winanda, 2024). This phenomenon is paradoxical in the context of English Education programs, where students are expected to demonstrate communicative competence as a prerequisite for professional teaching practice. Observed manifestations include prolonged silence during discussions, minimal verbal contributions, reluctance to ask questions or offer opinions in English, and frequent code-switching to Indonesian even in contexts explicitly designated for English use.

Research consistently documents that Indonesian EFL learners encounter diverse barriers to oral communication. Anggrisia and Robah (2023) identified linguistic factors such as limited vocabulary and grammatical constraints, alongside psychological factors including anxiety and insufficient self-confidence. Winanda (2024) corroborated these findings, noting that anxiety, nervousness, and low self-confidence constitute the primary barriers to public speaking in English. Sjaifullah (2019) further highlighted anxiety, low self-esteem, and peer pressure as dominant inhibitors of English classroom participation.

The cultural dimension of communication barriers in Indonesian contexts has also received scholarly attention. Manurung and Izar (2019) found that cultural norms valuing harmony and conflict avoidance reinforce speaking anxiety and restrict active participation. Similarly, Kristiana et al. (2022) identified fear of negative evaluation, self-confidence deficits, and cultural influences on communication style as primary causes of speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL students. These findings suggest that the barriers are not merely technical linguistic deficiencies but are deeply embedded in psychological and sociocultural factors specific to the Indonesian context.

Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP) as a leading higher education institution in West Sumatra, Indonesia maintains an English Language Education Study Program that prepares professional English educators. Preliminary observations and informal discussions with students and lecturers at this institution revealed persistent communication barriers in expressing opinions across various academic contexts. Students exhibited tendencies to remain silent, provide minimal responses, and switch to Indonesian despite the explicit English-medium instruction requirement. These observations, consistent with findings reported by Nurhayati and Fitriana (2023) regarding the "silent period" phenomenon among Indonesian EFL learners, signal a need for systematic investigation of communication barriers specific to this context.

A critical gap exists in the literature, however: while many studies document general speaking difficulties and psychological barriers in EFL contexts, comparatively few investigations specifically examine barriers to expressing opinions as a distinct communicative act. Expressing opinions requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the willingness to assert one's perspective, negotiate meaning, and engage in critical argumentation, competencies that are central to academic discourse and essential for the professional development of future English educators. Kumala and Ginting (2023), Muhamad and Djafar (2020), and Robah and Anggrisia (2023) all focused on general speaking difficulties without specifically targeting the communicative act of opinion expression in academic forums.

This study therefore addresses this gap by systematically analyzing the communication barriers experienced by English Education students at UNP when expressing opinions in class, and by exploring the underlying causal factors from the students' own perspectives. The research was guided by two specific questions: (1) What types of communication barriers do

English Education students at UNP experience when expressing opinions in English classes? (2) What factors cause these communication barriers from the students' perspective? The findings are expected to contribute both to the theoretical understanding of communication barriers in the Indonesian EFL context and to practical improvements in EFL pedagogy in higher education.

## **2. METHOD**

This research employed a qualitative approach with a qualitative descriptive design to analyze communication barriers experienced by students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Padang when expressing opinions in class. The qualitative approach was selected based on consideration that communication barriers constitute subjective and complex phenomena, where each student possesses unique experiences facing difficulties communicating in English. According to Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research represents an iterative process seeking to understand phenomena more deeply through researchers' closeness to subjects being studied. Maxwell (2012) asserted that qualitative research provides human-centered insights capable of deeply analyzing complex social phenomena. This aligns with research objectives aiming to understand not only what obstacles students encounter but also why these obstacles occur, how students perceive them, and how they attempt overcoming them. Additionally, Yin (2018) maintains that qualitative research permits researchers to focus on processes and meanings which are not amenable to being quantified. The qualitative descriptive design was chosen because the research objective was to describe and analyze the phenomenon of communication barriers comprehensively based on the perspective of the students themselves. Lambert and Lambert (2022) explained that qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a thorough and in-depth description of a phenomenon in its natural context, without manipulating or controlling certain variables. Colorafi and Evans (2016) further noted that the strength of this approach lies in its ability to capture the complexity of human experiences in their real-life context.

This study involved four participants selected from 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 batches of English Education Study Program students. Selection of these batches was based on consideration that students at these levels possessed sufficient academic experience taking various English courses, enabling them to articulate communication barriers they faced comprehensively. Participant selection was conducted through purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling with clear selection criteria allows researchers identifying information-rich participants capable of providing in-depth data about phenomena under study. The participant selection criteria used included low level of participation in class discussions, limited courage in expressing opinions, tendency to remain silent when asked to contribute to discussions, use of code-switching to Indonesian in contexts that should use English, and indications of anxiety or lack of confidence when communicating in English. Of the four participants selected, two were female and two were male, ensuring diverse perspectives on communication barriers.

The main instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the conceptual framework of communication barriers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of 15 questions exploring linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal aspects. The interview guidelines were validated by expert lecturers in the field of English language learning and qualitative research methodology (Taherdoost, 2016). Data analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis approach, a useful methodology for identifying, analyzing, and summarizing patterns in qualitative data. This method was considered appropriate because it does not limit participants' experiences and perspectives on communication barriers within specific theoretical

frameworks. The analysis process was conducted through six interrelated systematic stages: familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the analysis. Data trustworthiness was ensured through member checking and prolonged engagement, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility criteria.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

#### Types of Communication Barriers in Expressing Opinions

Analysis of interview data with four participants identified five interrelated types of communication barriers experienced by English Education students at UNP when expressing opinions in class. The distribution of these barriers across participants is systematically presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Communication Barriers by Participant

| <i>Theme</i>                        | <i>Sub-Theme</i>               | <b>P1</b> | <b>P2</b> | <b>P3</b> | <b>P4</b> |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <i>Linguistic Barriers</i>          | Lack of Vocabulary             | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Grammar Anxiety                | –         | –         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Pronunciation Problem          | ✓         | –         | –         | –         |
| <i>Psychological Barriers</i>       | Speaking Anxiety               | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Fear of Making Mistakes        | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Comparison with Peers          | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
| <i>Sociocultural Barriers</i>       | Indirect Communication Style   | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Difficulty Conveying Criticism | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
| <i>Environmental Barriers</i>       | Classroom Noise                | ✓         | ✓         | –         | –         |
|                                     | Familiarity with Class Members | ✓         | –         | –         | ✓         |
|                                     | Seating Position               | –         | –         | –         | ✓         |
| <i>Interpersonal Barriers</i>       | Classroom Atmosphere           | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Negative Evaluation from Peers | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         | ✓         |
|                                     | Domination of Certain Students | ✓         | –         | ✓         | ✓         |
| <b>Impact of Lecturer Criticism</b> |                                | ✓         | –         | –         | ✓         |

#### Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic barriers emerged as the most frequently mentioned obstacle across all four participants, manifesting in three sub-categories: vocabulary limitations, grammar anxiety, and pronunciation concerns. Vocabulary limitation was a universal finding, with all participants reporting that insufficient vocabulary inhibited spontaneous opinion expression. P1 articulated the cognitive disruption this creates thoughts are present and structured, but the inability to retrieve appropriate English vocabulary prompts hesitation and ultimate silence. P2 similarly

reported immediate fear when asked to provide opinions due to encountering unfamiliar vocabulary items.

Grammar anxiety was identified by P3 and P4 as a significant barrier, with participants describing the cognitive effort required to simultaneously construct grammatically accurate sentences while formulating content. Pronunciation concerns were specifically identified by P1, who reported that perceiving one's pronunciation as inferior to peers' generated self-consciousness that suppressed willingness to speak. These linguistic barriers are consistent with the communicative competence framework of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995), which identifies linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, and phonology) as foundational to discourse competence. Students' compensatory strategies, including direct peer consultation and code-switching, reflect efforts to build strategic competence to bridge the gap between limited linguistic knowledge and immediate communicative demands.

The following excerpts illustrate these linguistic barriers. P1 stated: "Sometimes I already know what I want to say, but I can't find the right word in English, so I just end up not saying anything." P2 similarly noted: "When the lecturer asks me to give an opinion and I don't know the vocabulary, I feel scared and I stay silent." P4 reflected on grammar concerns: "I worry that if I speak and my grammar is wrong, people will judge me, especially because we are English Education students."

### **Psychological Barriers**

Psychological barriers appeared as the most dominant and universally experienced barrier type, manifesting across three sub-themes: speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and comparison with peers. All participants reported experiencing anxiety when asked to express opinions in English, with physical symptoms including palpitations, nervousness, and cognitive blanking. P2 described anxiety as a persistent condition dating from secondary school, while P3 reported that sudden lecturer nomination produced a blank mind that impaired access to both vocabulary and grammar.

An important finding is that grammar concerns functioned primarily as psychological rather than purely technical barriers for three of the four participants. Participants reported sufficient grammatical knowledge but feared that grammar errors would expose professional incompetence, particularly given the identity expectations of English Education majors. This reflects what Norton (2013) describes as identity threat, wherein learners who view themselves as inadequate English speakers avoid communicative situations that might confirm that negative self-perception. P1 expressed this explicitly: being a final-semester student amplified fear of making mistakes because of higher proficiency expectations associated with advanced academic standing.

The negative feedback received from lecturers constituted a particularly significant source of psychological barriers. P4 reported that public criticism of grammar competence from a lecturer created lasting discomfort and confidence loss. This finding substantiates Sjaifullah's (2019) concept of "communication trauma" as a long-lasting inhibitor of active participation and is explicable through Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (as cited in Brown, 2000), wherein anxiety functions as a filter that inhibits language acquisition and production.

Participants' own words capture the weight of these psychological barriers. P2 recalled: "Since high school, whenever I have to speak English in front of people, my heart beats fast and my mind goes blank." P3 described: "When the lecturer suddenly asks me to speak, I panic and forget everything, even the words I already know." P1 explained the identity dimension: "I'm in my final semester, so people expect me to be fluent. If I make mistakes, they will think I don't deserve to be an English teacher."

### **Sociocultural Barriers**

Sociocultural barriers were reported by all four participants, arising from tension between Indonesian indirect communication norms and the direct expression demands of academic English discourse. All participants acknowledged that the indirect communication style prevalent in Indonesian culture, which prioritizes politeness, harmony, and face-saving, made direct expression of criticism or disagreement in English class contexts feel inappropriate or disrespectful. P1 navigated this tension through cultural code-switching, adjusting communication style to fit the Minangkabau classroom culture while managing the contrast with her own Batak cultural background. P2 and P4 described reluctance to express disagreement directly, defaulting to silence or indirect reformulations to avoid perceptions of impoliteness.

Students adopted various cultural adaptation strategies to manage sociocultural barriers, including extended pause before speaking, selection of hedging language, transformation of direct statements into interrogative forms, and use of epistemic markers such as "I think" to soften assertions. These strategies reflect what Kramsch (2020) terms "cultural negotiation" in intercultural communication, where learners attempt to reconcile home culture norms with target language communicative conventions. However, while these strategies reduce immediate discomfort, they simultaneously constrain the development of assertive and direct academic communication competencies essential for professional teaching practice.

These sociocultural tensions are evident in participants' reflections. P1 shared: "In Minangkabau culture, we don't directly disagree with others, especially in public. So when the lecturer asks for my opinion and I disagree, I don't know how to say it politely in English." P4 added: "It feels rude to argue or say someone is wrong, so I prefer to say nothing."

### **Environmental Barriers**

Classroom environmental factors were identified by all participants as influencing willingness to speak, though with varying specific manifestations. Classroom atmosphere was the most universally reported environmental barrier, with all four participants indicating that the overall tenor of the learning environment affected their communicative participation. Classroom noise was specifically reported by P1 and P2: P2 described noise as interfering with comprehension, which reduced the desire and ability to contribute meaningfully to discussions. Seating arrangement was identified by P4 as influential, with front-row seating increasing willingness to speak due to reduced volume requirements.

An interesting counterintuitive finding emerged from P4, who reported greater comfort speaking in unfamiliar class settings compared to familiar ones, reasoning that reduced familiarity meant reduced susceptibility to judgment from known peers. This finding aligns with Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety, wherein the perception of interpersonal risk fundamentally shapes individuals' willingness to engage in behaviors such as speaking, asking questions, or challenging existing perspectives. The data suggest that environmental barriers do not operate independently but interact with psychological and interpersonal barriers to shape overall communicative participation patterns.

Participants described specific environmental conditions that shaped their willingness to participate. P2 stated: "When the classroom is too noisy, I can't focus on what others are saying, so I don't want to speak because I might respond wrongly." P4 explained: "When I sit in front, the lecturer can hear me without me having to raise my voice, so I feel more comfortable speaking." Interestingly, P4 also noted: "I actually speak more freely in a class where I don't know many people, because they don't know my weaknesses yet."

### **Interpersonal Barriers**

Interpersonal dynamics in the classroom, both between peers and between students and lecturers, were found to exert a substantial and lasting influence on students' willingness to express opinions. Negative peer responses constituted the most impactful interpersonal barrier, reported by all four participants. P1 described being laughed at for mispronunciation as a sufficient experience to induce sustained speaking avoidance in subsequent situations. P3 reported overhearing condescending whispered comments about grammatical errors, which generated sustained fear and reduced confidence specifically in contexts where those peers were present. P4 experienced insensitive public grammar correction that extended beyond the classroom interaction, amplifying the emotional impact.

The dominance of certain students in class discussions created significant participation inequality, reported by P1, P3, and P4. This phenomenon is explicable through Cazden's (2001) concept of classroom discourse patterns, wherein participation tends to be concentrated among a small number of more vocal participants, creating conditions in which less confident students perceive their contributions as unnecessary or unwelcome. P4 explicitly described feeling that she had no space to speak when dominant peers monopolized the discussion. These interpersonal barriers interacted recursively with psychological barriers: negative peer experiences reinforced speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes, which in turn increased avoidance of participation and further reduced opportunities for communicative practice.

Participants' accounts vividly illustrate the lasting impact of negative interpersonal experiences. P1 recounted: "Once I mispronounced a word and some classmates laughed. After that, I was afraid to speak in that class for the rest of the semester." P3 described: "I once heard someone whispering about my grammar mistake. Even now, every time I want to speak in class, I remember that and I stop myself." P4 reflected on peer dominance: "There are always one or two students who speak all the time, and I feel like there is no space left for me to say anything."

### **Factors Causing Communication Barriers**

Beyond identifying barrier types, the study explored causal factors from students' perspectives, which were categorized into internal and external factors that interact dynamically. The most significant internal factor was the process of translation from L1 (Indonesian) to L2 (English) prior to speaking. All participants reported thinking in Indonesian before attempting English expression, a process that generates cognitive overload as described by Chang and Windeatt (2024), requiring simultaneous

management of content knowledge, vocabulary retrieval, grammatical construction, and output monitoring. Limited linguistic competence, particularly in vocabulary, was identified as a closely related internal factor, consistent with Nation's (2021) emphasis on vocabulary knowledge as foundational to productive language use. Negative self-perception as English learners, manifesting as identity threat (Norton, 2013) and avoidance of communicatively risky situations, was reported particularly by final-semester students who experienced heightened proficiency expectations. Previous traumatic communicative experiences created anticipatory anxiety that consistently inhibited active participation for three of the four participants.

External factors included limited authentic English practice opportunities despite enrollment in an English-medium program, which inhibited fluency development as predicted by Nation's (2021) four-strands framework. Classroom atmosphere and culture significantly shaped communicative participation, supporting Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice concept that a sense of belonging and psychological safety within the learning community is prerequisite to active participation. Lecturers' instructional methods, particularly overemphasis on grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency, raised students' affective

filters and inhibited language production. Peer interaction dynamics functioned as a double-edged sword: supportive peer relationships reduced anxiety, while negative peer responses increased long-term speaking avoidance, consistent with Ayiz and Tauchid's (2024) findings. Finally, broader Indonesian sociocultural norms of indirect communication created ongoing tension with academic English expectations.

## Discussion

The findings of this study resonate strongly with and extend prior scholarship on EFL speaking barriers in the Indonesian context. The identification of psychological barriers particularly speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and comparison with peers as the most dominant and universally experienced barrier type corroborates Winanda's (2024) assertion that anxiety, nervousness, and low self-confidence constitute the primary obstacles to English public speaking. It also aligns with Anggrisia and Robah (2023), who documented both linguistic and psychological barriers as intertwined hindrances to oral performance. The present study, however, advances this understanding by demonstrating that what appears on the surface as a linguistic barrier concern over grammatical accuracy is more accurately understood as a manifestation of identity anxiety (Norton, 2013). Participants were not simply unaware of grammar rules; rather, they feared that grammatical errors would undermine their professional identities as prospective English teachers. This distinction has significant implications for pedagogy, suggesting that grammar drilling alone will not resolve the problem.

The sociocultural barriers documented here are consistent with Manurung and Izar's (2019) finding that Indonesian cultural norms emphasizing harmony and conflict avoidance suppress active participation, and with Kristiana et al.'s (2022) identification of cultural influences on communication style as a primary cause of speaking anxiety. This study adds specificity by revealing how participants navigated competing cultural identities for instance, P1's negotiation between Batak and Minangkabau cultural norms within an English-medium academic setting. Kramsch's (2020) concept of cultural negotiation aptly captures this dynamic: learners do not simply acquire a new communicative code but must simultaneously manage their cultural positioning. This finding calls for explicit intercultural communicative competence instruction as part of EFL teacher education curricula, moving beyond linguistic form to address the cultural dimensions of academic discourse.

The interpersonal dimension of this study strengthens Sjaifullah's (2019) concept of "communication trauma," confirming that isolated incidents of peer ridicule or insensitive lecturer feedback can generate lasting inhibitory effects on students' participation. This finding is explicable through Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (as cited in Brown, 2000): emotionally charged negative experiences raise the affective filter, blocking access to existing linguistic knowledge and impeding new learning. The recursive relationship observed in this study where interpersonal barriers reinforce psychological barriers, which in turn deepen interpersonal avoidance is consistent with Ayiz and Tauchid's (2024) observation that peer interaction functions as a double-edged influence in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety proves highly applicable: the classroom must be perceived as an interpersonally safe environment before students will take the communicative risks that language learning requires. The counterintuitive finding that P4 felt more comfortable in unfamiliar class settings directly supports this theoretical framing and implies that familiarity without safety norms can paradoxically increase communicative inhibition.

Taken together, these findings carry significant implications for EFL pedagogy in Indonesian higher education. Consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice

framework, lecturers are encouraged to cultivate psychologically safe learning communities where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than causes for judgment. Structured participation techniques such as think-pair-share and small group discussions can reduce the dominance of highly vocal students and provide equitable communicative space (Cazden, 2001). Moreover, explicit instruction in intercultural communication norms helping students understand that assertive academic discourse constitutes a distinct register rather than a violation of Indonesian politeness would address the sociocultural barriers identified here. The English Education Study Program is specifically encouraged to incorporate speaking practice activities, public speaking workshops, and mentoring components into its curriculum, targeting the affective and sociocultural dimensions of communicative competence alongside linguistic development (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study identified five types of communication barriers experienced by English Education students at UNP when expressing opinions in class: linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal barriers. Among these, psychological barriers, particularly speaking anxiety, fear of mistakes, and comparison with more fluent peers, emerged as the most dominant and universally disabling, affecting all four participants irrespective of academic level. Importantly, what superficially appear as linguistic barriers in the form of grammar concerns were found to be primarily rooted in psychological anxiety about professional identity rather than in technical language ignorance. This finding reveals a crucial paradox in English Language Education: prospective English teachers are impeded by communication anxieties that their professional training has not adequately addressed.

Communication barriers were found to form a mutually reinforcing system. Psychological barriers amplified linguistic limitations by inhibiting access to existing knowledge under conditions of anxiety. Interpersonal barriers, particularly negative peer evaluations and lecturer criticism, generated lasting communication trauma that compounded psychological barriers over time. Sociocultural barriers arising from Indonesian indirect communication norms continuously conflicted with academic English expectations, requiring constant cultural negotiation that consumed cognitive resources otherwise available for communicative performance. Environmental factors modulated the activation of these barriers according to classroom conditions and social dynamics.

This study was limited by its small sample size of four participants from a single institution, which restricts generalizability. Future research employing larger samples, mixed-methods designs, or longitudinal approaches could provide richer understanding of how communication barriers evolve across academic development and whether institutional interventions effectively address the barriers identified here.

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