



The Intersection of Culture and Speaking Ability: Examining Cultural Barriers to Speaking Proficiency in Students

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of cultural awareness, language learning environment, and cultural barriers on students' foreign language speaking ability. Involving 80 English language students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Muara Bungo, this study used a quantitative method by purposively selecting a sample of 56 students based on specific criteria, including English comprehension and cultural awareness. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used as the research instrument, distributed through Google Forms, and the results were analysed using descriptive statistics (SPSS). The results showed that cultural awareness is important in improving speaking ability, and students who better understand cultural values and norms communicate more effectively. A conducive learning environment, supported by social interaction and experiential teaching methods, strengthens students' speaking skills. However, cultural barriers such as anxiety about cultural mistakes and misunderstanding of communication norms remain challenges that must be overcome through cultural sensitivity training and inclusive learning. The uniqueness of this study lies in its multidisciplinary approach, which combines aspects of psychology, education, and cultural anthropology to understand the complex interactions between culture and students' speaking ability in the context of foreign language learning. Therefore, this research can potentially contribute to developing more effective and sustainable language learning strategies in the era of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: *Cultural awareness, cultural barriers, learning environment, students' speaking ability*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural barriers that impact students' speaking proficiency involve social, linguistic and cultural factors that can significantly hinder students' ability to communicate fluently and effectively in the target language. Differences in norms, values, social ethics and communication practices between the student's home society and the target society of the language being studied are some of the critical aspects that complicate this challenge (Fandrejewska & Wasilik, 2018; Kakita & Palukuri, 2020; Xu & Tian, 2019). Social factors, such as social structures and interpersonal norms, shape student communication patterns. Meanwhile, linguistic differences such as

sentence structure, vocabulary, and intonation between students' mother tongue and target language also contribute significantly to speaking difficulties. Additionally, cultural barriers may also be reflected in cultural differences in rhetoric, where understanding how to structure an argument or convey an idea may vary substantially between two societies.

However, differences in the interpretation of word meanings have become one of the main challenges students face in overcoming these cultural barriers. These challenges involve complex aspects such as different communication styles, diverse emotional expressions, and nonverbal norms that apply in the student's home social environment. Diverse communication styles between cultures can create difficulties in conveying and understanding messages (Al Farabi, 2015). For example, an emotional expression considered acceptable or polite in one culture may only sometimes be correctly understood or well-received in another culture. In this case, differences in nonverbal norms also play a significant role (Aravind & Dwivedi, 2015; Hareli et al., 2015). Gestures, facial expressions, and body language have meanings that vary across cultures (Puppel & Rozpendowska, 2021). What is considered a polite gesture or sign of respect in one culture may be interpreted differently in another culture (Zhang, 2021). Therefore, students need to understand the differences in language structure and be sensitive to nuances and nonverbal contexts that can influence the interpretation of the meaning of communication.

Cultural barriers not only impact understanding but can also harm students' self-confidence and comfort when speaking the target language. The consequence, sometimes, is less effective communication or even conflict between cultures. In this context, a deep understanding of cultural barriers becomes essential in improving students' speaking proficiency, especially in second or foreign language learning. One of the direct impacts of cultural barriers on students is a decrease in communication self-confidence. Differences in norms, values, and communication practices can create uncertainty and worry, preventing students from speaking fluently and assertively. In addition, discomfort arising from cultural differences can also make students reluctant to participate in speaking activities actively, hindering the development of their communication skills.

In language learning and intercultural communication, the role played by cultural barriers is very central and significantly impacts students' ability to speak. One form of cultural barrier that can arise is differences in social norms, ethics and communication norms that form the basis of a culture (Sahadevan & Sumangala, 2021; Sovacool & Griffiths, 2020). In detail, these cultural barriers are not just a theoretical concept; on the contrary, they are closely related to language's pragmatic aspects. In other words, students are not only required to understand structure and vocabulary in language learning. However, they are also expected to be able to master language use in situational contexts that may not be in line with the language norms that have been studied previously.

Instead, the pragmatic aspect of language plays a critical role, which requires students to not only master the literal meaning of words but also recognize and utilize nuances, situational aspects and communicative context (Abba et al., 2021; Alinezhad Amin, 2015). In this case, students face complex tasks involving more than just mastering structures and vocabulary. Students' ability to communicate effectively depends on their ability to string together words and phrases and their deep understanding of the culture surrounding the language being studied (Beatty, 2013). For example, students need to grasp the cultural implications of language use in certain

situations, such as conveying messages that are considered polite or appropriate in a particular community.

When students recognize and appropriately overcome cultural barriers, this opens the door to a deep understanding of the nuances of language and social norms inherent in intercultural communication. These achievements create significant opportunities for students to improve their speaking skills, which are not only limited to word choice and grammar but also involve using language consistent with prevailing social norms. Thus, understanding and handling cultural barriers in language learning is crucial. This action impacts improving students' speaking skills and creates a learning environment that is more inclusive and responsive to cultural diversity. As a result, students can respond to communication situations carefully and effectively, enriching their speaking skills in intercultural contexts. Navigating cultural barriers not only helps students become more skilled speakers but also supports the development of their understanding of the complexities of intercultural relationships, creating learning that centres on diversity and a deep understanding of sociocultural contexts.

Therefore, understanding the cultural barriers that influence students' speaking abilities in language learning and intercultural communication cannot be ignored. In an era of increasingly widespread globalization, students are involved in cross-cultural interactions in the educational environment (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012; Mikhaylov, 2014). This condition requires a deep understanding of different communication norms, giving rise to the need to develop skills in overcoming cultural barriers. Cultural barriers affect students' ability to speak and have profound implications for developing their communicative competence (Arifin & Abuisaac, 2018; Jenifer & Raman, 2015). Students must understand that to successfully communicate effectively in a multicultural environment; they must be able to navigate and respond to diverse communication norms. Therefore, research on cultural barriers in the context of language learning and intercultural communication is becoming increasingly relevant and essential.

Several recent studies exploring cultural barriers regarding students' speaking abilities have provided significant insight into this issue. One study that has attracted attention is research conducted by Cheng (2021). This research focuses on the consequences of cultural mismatch between teachers and students on the effectiveness of speaking teaching in a multicultural educational environment. The findings from this research show that cultural mismatch is a barrier to student's learning process, both in developing speaking skills and in understanding the cultural diversity of other people. Meanwhile, similar research results can also be found in a study by Luo et al. (2021). Luo et al. specifically identified that a lack of cultural understanding in language learning contexts could be a significant obstacle to students' progress in achieving high speaking skills.

In addition, the implications of cultural barriers are not limited to aspects of speaking skills alone, but also cover broader dimensions of student abilities. It includes students' ability to express themselves effectively, understand the meaning of messages conveyed, and interpret responses from classmates (Mbato, 2020). However, more than that, this problem not only impacts the individual level but also has more profound consequences. Overcoming cultural barriers can create conflict or tension between individuals in intercultural interactions (Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan, 2019). Thus, cultural barriers not only challenge students' personal development but can also influence the dynamics of relationships between individuals in the learning environment, indicating the need for a holistic approach to overcoming these problems in the context of multicultural education.

Several previous studies, such as those conducted by Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan (2019), Cheng (2021), Luo et al. (2021), and Mbato (2020), have provided valuable insights into the role of cultural barriers in students' language learning and communication processes. However, a knowledge gap exists due to a limited understanding of how cultural variations and specific social contexts influence students' speaking abilities. Previous research may need to fully describe the complexity of cultural factors influencing students' speaking abilities. In addition, this gap also shows the need to place more emphasis on practical efforts to overcome cultural barriers in learning contexts. A more holistic and practical approach is needed to explore concrete strategies that can be used to overcome these cultural barriers. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out further research that combines a multidisciplinary approach and a more inclusive framework to explain more comprehensively and theoretically how cultural barriers influence students' speaking proficiency in language learning and intercultural communication.

Based on the background above, the formulation of the problem in this research is as follows:

1. How does cultural awareness affect students' ability to speak a foreign language?
2. How does the language learning environment affect students' speaking ability?
3. What do students face the cultural barriers in improving their ability to speak a foreign language?

Thus, this study can provide deeper insight into how cultural understanding and awareness contribute to students' understanding of a foreign language and their ability to speak in an intercultural context. The practical implication is to improve the language teaching approach to be more sensitive to cultural aspects to increase the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Academically, this study can significantly contribute to the literature in this field by developing new, more in-depth theories and frameworks.

In addition, the uniqueness of this study lies in its multidisciplinary approach, which combines aspects of psychology, education, and cultural anthropology to understand the interaction between culture and students' speaking ability in the context of foreign language learning. This study also focuses on environmental factors that influence students' speaking practices, distinguishing it from previous studies, which tend to be more theoretical. Therefore, this research can provide valuable contributions to developing more effective and sustainable language learning strategies in the era of intercultural communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Awareness

As a critical element in the educational context, cultural awareness plays a vital role in shaping students' speaking abilities. Cultural awareness involves a basic understanding of a cultural group's norms, values, and social practices and includes a deep understanding of intercultural interactions (Ilie, 2019; Kaihlanen et al., 2019; Nindya et al., 2022; Osobajo et al., 2023). In the language learning process, cultural sensitivity becomes a catalyst for students to develop speaking skills more effectively. The importance of integrating cultural aspects in language learning was also emphasized by Byram (2021), who highlighted that this can significantly enrich students' verbal expressions and improve intercultural understanding. Thus, the emphasis on cultural awareness is not just a compliment but the primary foundation for advancing students' ability to speak with greater depth and context.

The influence of cultural awareness on students' speaking abilities comes from understanding a cultural group's norms, values and social practices. According to Yurtsever & Özel (2021), cultural understanding can potentially enrich students' speaking competence by increasing awareness of cultural differences and implementing appropriate communication strategies. In the context of language learning, in-depth knowledge of culture allows students to adapt their speaking styles. It equips them with the skills to manage cultural differences in speaking situations. Furthermore, cultural understanding is vital in forming students' practical speaking skills. With extensive cultural knowledge, students can be more careful and skilled in adapting their speaking style to suit different contexts and audiences. Therefore, cultural awareness involves passive acceptance of cultural norms and the active development of skills in managing cultural differences in the speaking process.

Language learning environment

The influence of the language learning environment on students' speaking skills reflects the extent to which this environment can support the development of their communication skills (Livan & Md, 2021; Lobanova et al., 2022). The language learning environment includes various aspects, such as the teaching methods used, the availability of resources, social interactions in the classroom, and teacher support. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that social interactions in the learning environment play an important role in helping students develop their communication skills (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). A conducive language learning environment provides positive stimulation through active and interactive learning, allowing students to practice speaking skills more effectively in a supportive atmosphere.

According to Lier (2004), the language learning environment is seen as a system consisting of various interacting factors, including teaching methods, the availability of resources, social interactions in the classroom, and teacher support. A conducive learning environment, which encourages active social interactions and in-depth learning, can provide positive stimulation for developing students' speaking skills, reinforcing learning through direct experience in a supportive context.

In addition, cultural diversity can be a rich source of learning, providing students with first-hand experience of cross-cultural communication, thus broadening their horizons in using the target language effectively (Lyu, 2024). In this regard, teaching methods encouraging active participation, such as group discussions and role-plays, are important in improving students' speaking skills (Henisah et al., 2023; Razi et al., 2021). This method encourages students to listen and speak actively, providing opportunities for direct practice in a supportive context. Social interaction in the classroom is also a key element in creating a language learning environment that supports the development of speaking skills, as it allows students to interact with each other in the language being studied.

Furthermore, the availability of resources, whether in textbooks, audio-visual materials, or learning technology, also contributes to forming a language learning environment that facilitates students' speaking skills (Amalia Solikhah, 2023; Hikmah, 2019; Kathirvel & Hashim, 2020). Support provided by teachers, such as constructive feedback and personal guidance, is another factor that influences the learning-speaking process (Ahmad, 2021; de Jong et al., 2022; Sallang & Ling, 2019). Thus, to achieve optimal progress in students' speaking skills, language learning approaches should focus on formal classroom teaching and consider elements of the social environment that can enrich and support the learning process. Integrating these non-academic

aspects can create a holistic and engaging learning environment, motivating students to develop their speaking skills in a broader context.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers refer to barriers that arise due to cultural differences, norms, and values in communication situations, including aspects such as not understanding body language expressions, differences in speaking styles, and norms of togetherness across cultures (Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2020). These barriers can significantly impact students' ability to effectively convey their ideas, given that each culture has its unique and often implicit way of communicating. One of the main impacts of cultural barriers is a lack of understanding of body language expressions (Arifin & Abuisaac, 2018). Gestures, facial expressions, and body movements have different meanings in each culture, and misunderstandings of these expressions can hinder practical understanding and communication across cultures. In addition, differences in speaking styles and social norms can create gaps in the interpretation and understanding of the message.

Deardorff (2006) emphasized that cultural barriers include psychological, cognitive, or emotional barriers that arise when individuals interact with people from different cultures. Deardorff also identified that cross-culturally competent individuals understand cultural differences and can adjust their behaviour and communication to suit cross-cultural situations. These obstacles can be in the form of misunderstanding the intention or meaning of the message conveyed by the foreign speaker and discomfort in adjusting to different communication norms. Indarti (2024), also emphasized the importance of understanding the cultural context in conversation so that students can interpret the implied meaning and respond appropriately in cross-cultural interactions.

In addition, Gudykunst (1995) highlighted that anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication can hinder students' speaking abilities (Stephan et al., 1999). This anxiety makes it difficult for students to understand messages correctly and feel less confident in speaking a foreign language, especially when dealing with different cultures. Therefore, managing anxiety, increasing cultural awareness, and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment are important. This environment pays attention to academic aspects and cultural diversity, thereby helping students reduce misunderstandings, increase self-confidence, and communicate more effectively in cross-cultural contexts.

METHODS

Research design

The researchers chose a quantitative approach with a case study method to explore the impact of cultural awareness, language learning environment, and cultural barriers on students' speaking ability. The quantitative method was chosen because of its ability to measure and analyze data numerically, thus providing a clear framework for investigating the relationship between certain variables. Collecting data in numbers and statistics presented the research findings with high objectivity, thus facilitating more accurate interpretation. In addition, the quantitative method allows the generalization of the results of this study at a broader level, thus contributing to a general understanding of the influence of cultural factors in educational contexts. Thus, using quantitative methods for this case study can provide more profound and more detailed insights into the impact of cultural barriers on students' speaking abilities.

Population and sample

The population in this research was 80 English students at the University of Muhammadiyah Muara Bungo. The sampling process was carried out using a purposive sampling method, which considers the characteristics of a particular population, there by ensuring a more relevant representation of the variables studied. From this population, 56 students were selected who met predetermined criteria, such as the level of understanding of English and the level of cultural awareness (see Figure 1).

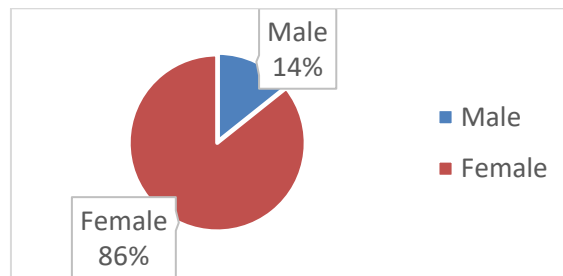


Figure 1. Distribution of research samples

Thus, the selected sample was expected to provide more focused results and represent most of the characteristics of the English student population at Muara Bungo Muhammadiyah University. The purposive sampling process aims to obtain more in-depth and relevant information regarding the variables that are the focus of the research.

Data collection

In this research, researchers used a questionnaire to measure three leading indicators: cultural awareness, language learning environment, and cultural barriers. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, divided into three sections. There were 10 items related to cultural awareness, which examined respondents' perceptions and knowledge of cultural differences. Six items focused on the language learning environment, evaluating how the environment facilitated or hindered language acquisition and intercultural understanding. The remaining four items were related to cultural barriers, which aimed to identify the challenges and barriers faced by respondents in cross-cultural interaction and communication.

The questionnaire was designed based on relevant theories, with the cultural awareness indicator referring to Byram's (2021) theory to assess respondents' understanding and attitudes towards cultural differences in cross-cultural communication that support foreign language learning. The language learning environment indicator focused on the role of the learning environment in supporting cultural diversity and language acquisition (Lier, 2004). In contrast, cultural barrier indicators based on the theories of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006) and Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) (Gudykunst, 1995) identify barriers perceived by respondents in cross-cultural interactions, such as difficulty understanding the cultural context and concerns about violating cultural norms.

This questionnaire used a Likert scale to measure responses to research questions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Likert Scale Rating

Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Data collection was carried out by distributing questionnaires through WhatsApp groups. In the group, the researcher shared a Google Forms questionnaire link, which allowed respondents to fill out the questionnaire online quickly and efficiently. This method allows respondents to complete the questionnaire anytime and anywhere, facilitating fast data collection without geographical constraints.

Data analysis

In this research, descriptive statistical analysis is the primary method used to detail and describe the data collected through the questionnaire, the main instrument used to collect information. This quantitative approach allows the application of descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS. The first step in data analysis is to input the data obtained from the questionnaire into SPSS, where each item on the questionnaire is input as a variable for further analysis. After the data is collected, a descriptive analysis is carried out to describe the essential characteristics of the data, focusing on the percentage distribution of each respondent to each questionnaire item. Furthermore, the percentage of each response category can be calculated and presented in tabular form to facilitate the interpretation of the results. This analysis identifies student perception patterns, providing further insight into how cultural awareness, language environment and cultural barriers play a role in students' foreign language speaking abilities.

Before conducting the descriptive analysis, the questionnaire used in this research was tested first to ensure its validity and reliability. The validity test was carried out using Pearson correlation analysis, which showed that all items on the questionnaire had a significant correlation with the total score, indicating that this questionnaire was valid for measuring the intended construct. In addition, the reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced a value of 0.824. This value shows perfect internal consistency, so this questionnaire can be trusted to measure the variables studied consistently.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The researchers explored the relationship between cultural awareness, language learning environment, and cultural barriers that affect students' foreign language speaking ability, focusing on 56 English education students at Muara Bungo University. To achieve this goal, this study focuses on three research questions that will provide deeper insight into the influence of these factors on foreign language speaking ability.

Research question 1: How does cultural awareness affect students' ability to speak a foreign language?

Researchers identified seven statement items that were considered relevant for use in research related to aspects of cultural awareness that can influence students' speaking skills. To provide a deeper understanding, details regarding the indicators to be measured and the statements proposed in the questionnaire can be seen in the following Table 2.

Table 2. The results of Questionnaire on the influence of aspects of cultural awareness on students' speaking abilities (N=56)

No	Statements	Responses (%)				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The extent to which student's understanding of culture influences their communication style in a foreign language.		5.36	17.86	64.29	12.5
2.	The perceived contribution of cultural awareness to a better understanding of contextual nuances in conversations held in a foreign language.		1.79	14.29	69.64	14.29
3.	Confidence level in speaking a foreign language, influenced by concerns about potentially offending individuals from different cultures.	3.57	30.36	33.93	28.57	3.57
4.	Tendency to avoid specific topics when conversing with individuals from different cultures to prevent potential conflicts.		10.71	17.86	51.79	19.64
5.	The role of understanding cultural differences in improving the effectiveness of communication in a foreign language		1.79	14.29	39.29	44.64
6.	Inclination to avoid phrases or expressions considered inappropriate or impolite in other cultures when communicating in a foreign language.		3.57	10.71	41.07	44.64
7.	Difficulty in understanding the intentions or contextual meanings of conversations in a foreign language due to cultural disparities.		1.79	28.57	60.71	8.93
8.	The contribution of cultural awareness in overcoming communication barriers when interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.		3.57	23.21	62.5	10.71
9.	Active efforts to seek information about the cultures of countries where the target language is spoken to enhance cross-cultural communication.		3.57	23.21	41.07	32.14
10.	Proactive efforts to seek opportunities for interaction with people from diverse cultures to deepen understanding of cultural differences.		1.79	30.36	41.07	26.79

Table 2 shows that cultural awareness significantly influences students' ability to speak a foreign language. Regarding cultural understanding and communication style, most respondents stated that their understanding of culture significantly influences their communication style when using a foreign language. As many as 64.29% of

respondents agreed, and 12.5% strongly agreed that cultural understanding contributes positively to their communication. It shows that the better students understand the culture, the better their communication style.

Cultural awareness also helps students understand contextual nuances in foreign language conversations. As many as 69.64% of students agreed, and 14.29% strongly agreed that cultural understanding helps them capture hidden meanings or context in conversations. However, some students showed lower confidence when speaking a foreign language because they were worried about offending people from other cultures. As many as 28.57% of students agreed, and 33.93% were neutral to this statement, indicating that although cultural awareness helps, concerns about cultural mistakes can hinder their smooth communication.

In addition, many students avoid specific topics in conversations with individuals from different cultures to avoid conflict. As many as 51.79% of students agreed, and 19.64% strongly agreed that they were more careful in choosing topics of conversation. Awareness of cultural differences was also crucial to improving communication effectiveness, with 44.64% of students strongly agreeing and 39.29% agreeing that understanding other cultures makes conversations more effective. It was also reflected in students' tendency to avoid expressions considered inappropriate or impolite in other cultures, as acknowledged by 41.07% of students who agreed and 44.64% who strongly agreed.

On the other hand, some students admitted to having difficulty understanding the intent or context of a conversation due to cultural differences. As many as 60.71% of students agreed that cultural differences sometimes hinder understanding foreign language conversations. As many as 62.5% of students agreed, and 10.71% strongly agreed that cultural understanding helps them communicate more effectively and reduces the possibility of misunderstandings or conflicts in cross-cultural conversations. It shows that cultural awareness improves contextual understanding and allows for more inclusive and harmonious communication.

However, many students proactively try to improve their cultural awareness by seeking information about the culture of the country where the target language is used (41.07% agree and 32.14% strongly agree) and interacting with people from different cultures (41.07% agree and 26.79% strongly agree). Thus, these findings indicate that cultural awareness benefits students when speaking a foreign language, especially when understanding the context, avoiding cultural conflicts, and increasing communication effectiveness. However, challenges regarding self-confidence and obstacles to understanding cultural differences remain aspects that need to be considered to improve students' communication skills.

Research question 2: How does the language learning environment affect students' speaking ability?

The researchers identified five statement items that were considered relevant for use in research related to aspects of the language learning environment that can influence students' speaking skills. To provide a deeper understanding, details regarding the indicators to be measured and the statements proposed in the questionnaire can be seen in the following table.

Table 3. The results of Questionnaire on the influence of aspects of language learning environment on students' speaking abilities (N=56)

No	Statements	Responses (%)				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The degree to which the learning environment encourages active conversation in the language being studied.		3.57	21.43	48.21	26.79
2.	Perception of the learning environment's support for cultural diversity in speaking different languages.		3.57	25	58.93	12.5
3.	Frequency of difficulties encountered when speaking the target language due to cultural differences.	1.79	8.93	28.57	46.43	14.29
4.	Level of confidence in speaking the target language, considering the fear of making cultural mistakes.	3.57	7.14	26.79	48.21	14.29
5.	Availability and utilization of facilities in the learning environment that support the practice of speaking in different languages.		1.79	33.93	51.79	12.5
6.	The degree of comfort students' experiences when using different languages in their learning environment.		10.71	30.36	35.71	23.21

Table 3 illustrates that the learning environment significantly influences students' foreign language speaking ability. Regarding environmental support for active conversation, most respondents stated that their learning environment encourages active participation in foreign language conversation. As many as 48.21% of respondents agreed, and 26.79% strongly agreed that their environment supports active speaking activities. It shows that an environment conducive to active conversation can improve students' speaking skills.

The learning environment is also considered to support cultural diversity, which improves students' speaking ability. As many as 58.93% of respondents agreed, and 12.5% strongly agreed that cultural diversity supported by the learning environment helps them be more confident in speaking a foreign language. However, cultural differences are still a challenge in communication. As many as 46.43% of respondents agreed, and 14.29% strongly agreed that they often face speaking difficulties due to cultural differences, indicating the need for further strategies to overcome this obstacle.

Regarding self-confidence, 48.21% of students agreed, and 14.29% strongly agreed that a supportive learning environment can increase their self-confidence despite concerns about cultural mistakes. The availability of learning facilities was also recognized as an important aspect that helps improve speaking skills. 51.79% of students agreed, and 12.5% strongly agreed that facilities such as language laboratories and interactive tools support their speaking practice.

In addition, comfort in using a foreign language in the learning environment was also recognized as an important factor. 35.71% of students agreed, and 23.21% strongly agreed that this comfort motivated them to be more active in speaking. It shows that a

friendly and comfortable learning environment can encourage students to practice speaking more often. Overall, these findings indicate that a supportive learning environment, whether through active conversation, respect for cultural diversity, or the provision of adequate facilities, significantly improves students' speaking skills. However, cultural barriers and concerns about cultural mistakes still need to be overcome to improve students' speaking skills.

Research question 3: What do students face the cultural barriers in improving their ability to speak a foreign language?

The researchers identified four statement items that were considered relevant for use in research related to aspects of cultural barriers that could influence students' speaking skills. To provide a deeper understanding, details regarding the indicators to be measured and the statements proposed in the questionnaire can be seen in the following table.

Table 4. The results of Questionnaire on the influence of aspects of cultural barriers on students' speaking abilities (N=56)

No	Statements	Responses (%)				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	Difficulty level experienced when speaking the target language due to cultural differences.	1.79	14.29	33.93	41.07	8.93
2.	Confidence level in expressing personal opinions in the target language.	3.57	12.5	26.79	48.21	8.93
3.	Frequency and intensity of difficulties in understanding the cultural context of conversation topics.	1.79	8.93	37.5	44.64	7.14
4.	Perception of how cultural barriers impact the ability to communicate effectively in the target language.	1.79	17.86	35.71	39.29	5.36

Table 4 shows that cultural barriers significantly influence students' ability to improve their foreign language speaking skills. Regarding speaking difficulties due to cultural differences, most respondents indicated that cultural differences are a barrier. As many as 41.07% of students agreed, and 8.93% strongly agreed that cultural barriers often interfere with fluency in speaking, while 33.93% chose neutral. This finding highlights the need for better cross-cultural understanding to overcome these barriers.

Cultural barriers also influence students' level of confidence in expressing opinions. As many as 48.21% of respondents agreed, and 8.93% strongly agreed that concerns about cultural mistakes can reduce their courage in speaking a foreign language. It shows that developing self-confidence and tolerance for cultural mistakes are key to supporting students' speaking skills.

Difficulty in understanding the cultural context in conversation is also a challenge that students quite often face. As many as 44.64% of students agreed, and 7.14% strongly agreed that understanding the cultural context in conversation is still an obstacle, while 37.5% chose neutral. It underlines the importance of integrating cultural learning into the language curriculum to help students understand the context of conversation better.

Furthermore, most students also acknowledged the impact of cultural barriers on communication effectiveness. As many as 39.29% of students agreed, and 5.36% strongly agreed that cultural barriers affect their communication ability. Although this figure is not very high, it still shows that cultural barriers are an important challenge that needs to be overcome while learning a foreign language. Thus, the cultural barriers students face include difficulty understanding cultural differences, lack of confidence, and inability to understand the cultural context in conversation fully. These barriers not only affect their speaking ability but also reduce the overall effectiveness of communication. Therefore, foreign language learning emphasising cultural understanding is key to helping students overcome these challenges and improve their speaking ability.

Discussion

The improvement of foreign language speaking ability is determined by mastery of grammar and vocabulary and environmental and cultural factors. This study seeks to explore the influence of cultural awareness, the dynamics of the learning environment, and the challenges of cultural barriers on students' speaking skills, focusing on the various dimensions that influence the development of foreign language speaking skills.

Cultural awareness has long been a key element in developing cross-cultural communication skills. In foreign language learning, cultural awareness not only supports speaking skills but also enriches students' understanding of the dynamics of intercultural communication. The results of this study (see Table 2) confirm the importance of cultural awareness in supporting students' ability to speak a foreign language. This finding aligns with Byram's (2021) view that cultural understanding is key to improving speaking skills, especially in a cross-cultural context. Cultural awareness allows students to understand cultural norms, values, and practices, contributing to successful communication.

Most students in this study admitted that cultural understanding influenced their communication style. As many as 64.29% of students agreed, and 12.5% strongly agreed that cultural awareness enriched how they spoke a foreign language. It is consistent with previous findings by Ilie (2019) and Kaihlanen et al. (2019), who emphasized that language is a cultural bridge, so cultural understanding strengthens students' ability to adjust their communication style in cross-cultural conversations.

However, several challenges were identified. For example, the fear of making cultural mistakes hinders students' fluency in communication, as expressed by 28.57% of students who agreed and 33.93% who were neutral to this statement. This concern supports the view of Abu-Arqoub and Alserhan (2019), who stated that differences in cultural values can create tension in cross-cultural communication. This finding emphasizes the importance of developing students' confidence in speaking a foreign language, which can be improved through targeted communication practices and cultural simulation-based learning.

Furthermore, students with high cultural awareness showed a better ability to understand the context of the conversation. As many as 69.64% of students agreed, and 14.29% strongly agreed that cultural understanding helped them capture hidden meanings in conversations. It is supported by Yurtsever and Özel (2021), who stated that awareness of pragmatic norms in other cultures increases communication effectiveness. In addition, many students proactively seek cultural information or interact with individuals from different cultures (41.07% agree, and 32.14% strongly

agree). This step shows students' desire to improve their cultural competence, as found in Cheng's (2021) study on intercultural competence.

Secondly, a conducive language learning environment shapes students' foreign language speaking skills. In this case, factors such as support for active conversation, respect for cultural diversity, and provision of learning facilities are elements that not only increase students' self-confidence but also facilitate a more effective learning process.

The results of this study (see Table 3) highlight the role of the learning environment as a key factor in improving students' foreign language speaking skills. A learning environment that supports active participation has been shown to contribute to improving students' speaking skills. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social learning, which emphasizes that social interaction in the learning environment helps students develop communication skills. In this context, the finding that 48.21% of students agreed and 26.79% strongly agreed that their environment supported active conversation indicates that intensive social interaction encourages students to be more confident in speaking a foreign language.

Cultural diversity in the learning environment also plays a significant role in increasing students' self-confidence. As Lyu (2024) points out, cultural diversity can be a rich source of learning, providing students with first-hand experience of cross-cultural communication. In this study, 58.93% of students agreed that cultural diversity in their learning environment increased their confidence to speak a foreign language. However, the challenge of cultural barriers, acknowledged by 46.43% of respondents, showed that cultural differences still hinder effective communication. Cultural diversity must be managed strategically so it does not become an obstacle.

In terms of self-confidence, this finding shows that a supportive learning environment can reduce students' fear of cultural mistakes. Lobanova et al. (2022) explained that a friendly and supportive environment can reduce students' psychological stress so that they are more willing to try to speak despite the risk of mistakes. As many as 48.21% of students in this study agreed that their environment increased their confidence to speak, even when worried about cultural mistakes.

The availability of learning facilities, such as language laboratories and interactive tools, was also identified as an important factor in supporting students' speaking skills. It is in line with Hikmah's (2019), which states that using digital learning aids can increase the effectiveness of foreign language learning. As many as 51.79% of students agreed that the learning facilities supported their speaking practice, indicating that adequate facilities allow students to practice in a more structured and interactive way. In addition, the comfort of using a foreign language in the learning environment is also recognized as a motivational factor. The finding that 35.71% of students agreed and 23.21% strongly agreed that this comfort encouraged them to be more active in speaking supports Lier's (Lier, 2004) idea of "language learning ecology." A comfortable and supportive environment can reduce students' affective barriers, making them more motivated to communicate in a foreign language.

Lastly, cultural barriers are often a significant challenge in cross-cultural communication, which impacts students' ability to speak a foreign language. Cultural differences, lack of understanding of the context of conversation, and concerns about cultural errors are some of the barriers students face in learning a foreign language. The results of this study (see Table 4) confirm that cultural barriers play a significant role in affecting students' ability to speak a foreign language. These barriers include difficulty understanding cultural differences, lack of self-confidence, and challenges understanding the cultural context of conversation. This finding aligns with Deardoff's

(2006) view, which states that cultural differences can create barriers that prevent individuals from communicating effectively outside their home culture.

Regarding speaking difficulties due to cultural differences, 41.07% of students agreed, and 8.93% strongly agreed that cultural barriers often interfere with fluency. This high percentage indicates that differences in social norms, values, and communication ethics in different cultures are barriers to conversation. As stated by Sovacool and Griffiths (2020), these differences often lead to confusion or inaccuracy in language use, thus hindering students' ability to speak fluently.

Lack of self-confidence is also a significant obstacle for students speaking a foreign language. As many as 48.21% of students agreed, and 8.93% strongly agreed that concerns about cultural mistakes reduce their courage to speak. This finding aligns with Gudykunst (1995), who stated that affective factors such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and lack of self-confidence can hinder language learning. It indicates the need for a learning approach that provides a safe space for students to make mistakes without fear, such as using simulation or role-play methods in a cultural context.

In addition, the difficulty of understanding the cultural context in conversation was acknowledged by 44.64% of students who agreed, and 7.14% strongly agreed that this obstacle still often occurs. This finding highlights the need for more integrated culture-based learning in the curriculum. Indarti (2024) emphasized that understanding the cultural context in conversation is essential to ensure students can interpret implied meanings and respond appropriately in cross-cultural interactions. Thus, cultural pragmatic learning needs to be strengthened to help students understand the nuances of intercultural communication.

The impact of cultural barriers on communication effectiveness is also clearly seen in this finding. As many as 39.29% of students agreed that cultural barriers affect their communication ability. Although the percentage is not too high, it still indicates that cultural barriers are a significant challenge. As stated by Mbato (2020), practical communication skills require mastery of grammar and vocabulary and an understanding of the cultural values underlying communication.

Thus, the importance of integrating cultural elements in language learning increases cross-cultural awareness and enriches students' understanding of the diversity of global values and norms. Cultural awareness significantly influences students' ability to speak a foreign language by helping them understand cross-cultural values and norms while reducing anxiety about cultural mistakes that often-become communication barriers. On the other hand, a supportive, inclusive, and interactive learning environment also plays an important role in encouraging students' courage to speak. This environment provides opportunities for students to practice through cross-cultural discussions, role-play, and receiving relevant authentic materials.

However, cultural barriers remain challenging, including difficulty understanding cultural contexts, concerns about others' perceptions, and lack of self-confidence. Innovative learning strategies are needed to overcome these barriers, such as cultural sensitivity training, experiential approaches, and an emphasis on adaptive cross-cultural learning. By creating a safe and supportive environment, students can become more confident in speaking a foreign language, overcome cultural barriers, and develop practical cross-cultural communication skills.

CONCLUSION

Deep understanding of the relationship between cultural awareness and students' speaking ability in a foreign language. These findings underscore the need to develop educational strategies that integrate cultural competence as an integral element of

language learning. The main goal is to promote effective communication in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Awareness of the impact of cultural barriers, not only as a linguistic barrier but also as a critical element that influences the overall quality of communication, is the basis for designing holistic and inclusive learning programs. In addition, curriculum integration, special training, and teaching methods that promote cultural understanding along with linguistic skills are implementable steps that can be taken. A supportive, culturally aware and diverse learning environment is an essential catalyst in advancing students' speaking skills in a foreign language, making a positive contribution to building a generation of language learners who are competent and responsive to linguistic and cultural diversity. Thus, these three aspects are expected to overcome the challenges of cultural differences in language learning, providing a solid foundation for the development of students' communicative competence in the target language.

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