



Intercultural Barriers in EFL Speaking: A Case Study of Virtual Interaction

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Abstract

Keywords:
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This study investigates intercultural barriers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking, particularly in the context of virtual communication. Nowadays, communication requires not only language proficiency but also intercultural communicative competence. Nevertheless, learners can experience difficulties when they try to communicate with people coming from different cultures. The study aims to find out the types of intercultural barriers Indonesian EFL learners encounter and the ways in which such barriers occur during live interactions.

This research employed a qualitative case study design involving ten Indonesian EFL learners who participated in virtual communication sessions with native English speakers through a language exchange platform. Data were collected through recorded interactions and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using thematic analysis and interactional analysis.

The results show the following main types of intercultural barriers: linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural, and psychological barriers. These barriers were interactionally discovered through processes with signs like hesitations, self-repair, misinterpretations, and the negotiation of meaning. The study shows that communication problems do not arise merely from the lack of competence but are interactionally produced during real-time communication.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
Intercultural barriers;
EFL speaking; virtual
communication;
intercultural
communicative
competence

Penelitian ini mengkaji hambatan interkultural dalam keterampilan berbicara Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL), khususnya dalam konteks komunikasi virtual. Saat ini, komunikasi tidak hanya memerlukan kemahiran berbahasa, tetapi juga kompetensi komunikatif antarbudaya. Namun demikian, pembelajar sering mengalami kesulitan ketika berusaha berkomunikasi dengan individu yang berasal dari latar budaya yang berbeda. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis hambatan interkultural yang dihadapi oleh pembelajar EFL Indonesia serta cara bagaimana hambatan tersebut muncul dalam interaksi secara langsung.

Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan sepuluh pembelajar EFL Indonesia yang berpartisipasi dalam sesi komunikasi virtual dengan penutur asli melalui platform pertukaran bahasa. Data dikumpulkan melalui rekaman interaksi dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik dan analisis interaksional.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya empat jenis utama hambatan interkultural, yaitu hambatan linguistik, pragmatik, sosiokultural, dan psikologis. Hambatan-hambatan ini teridentifikasi secara interaksional melalui proses-proses yang ditandai dengan jeda (*hesitation*), perbaikan diri (*self-repair*), kesalahan interpretasi (*misinterpretation*), dan negosiasi makna.

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Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa permasalahan komunikasi tidak semata-mata disebabkan oleh keterbatasan kompetensi, tetapi juga dihasilkan secara interaksional selama komunikasi berlangsung secara *real-time*.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking, among various English language skills, is viewed as the most important and at the same time one of the challenging skills to acquire by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. It is due to speaking entails constantly using language in real time while simultaneously processing the intended message, reacting to interlocutors and managing the interaction (Mingyan et al., 2025). An effective speaker should be well-versed in language skills like grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation which together form the foundation of effective speaking performance. Nevertheless, knowing only the language is not enough. Speakers must also adjust how they use language according to different social and cultural environments. Actually, communication is not only about being good in the language but also having cultural knowledge, because learners have to be able to conduct themselves properly in terms of communication with people who are culturally and linguistically different from them. Nowadays, communication no longer occurs within a single cultural setting but across diverse cultural backgrounds. The increasing interaction among people from different cultures has made intercultural communicative competence a necessary skill for the global environment (Yanping & Burhanudeen, 2023). Thus, learners should equally pursue the development of intercultural communicative competence which comprises cultural sensitivity, awareness, and adaptability (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Xu et al., 2025).

The recent technology has introduced new ways for communication. It has transformed language learning by enabling learners to engage in virtual communication with speakers from different cultural backgrounds. Digital tools like Zoom, Skype, and language exchange applications break down barriers and provide learners with exposure to cross-cultural communication. The discussions can be quite engaging as they offer opportunities for learners to express their points, have meaningful discussions, and contact each other for feedback (Canals, 2022; Tran et al., 2024). Conversational exchanges are essential in acquiring language as they give learners access to the language, enable them to have language production, and through feedback, enhance their skills in language use (Tran et al., 2024). Besides, local learning contexts are significant in improving speaking skills as they provide learners with the chance to use the language in authentic contexts and become able to use and adapt the language to various contexts. Yet the conventional teaching methods most often do not cater to such real-life experiences which leads to the limitation of learners' communicative competence development. Similar to real life, technologies such as virtual reality (VR) can provide immersive experiences for learners where they not only enhance engagement but also get involved, where their confidence is boosted, and where they can improve their communicative competence (Yan et al., 2024). Supported by authentic global interaction, learners' intercultural awareness and confidence in global communication are also enhanced to which virtual exchange programs and

technology-enhanced learning environments also importantly contribute (Dwi Hatmanto et al., 2026). Yet this exposure does not, by itself, guarantee successful communication. Learners can still face problems in interpreting messages and responding appropriately because communication with different cultures entails expectations of different behavior and so on. This also implies that for speech to be successful, one not only needs good knowledge of the language but also the ability to manage interaction, recognize cultural differences, and establish mutual understanding (Feng, 2024).

Use of digital tools has been a double-edged sword for the EFL learners. On the one hand, they have reduced the distance in communication between different cultures significantly; on the other hand, they have unveiled the lack of intercultural communication skills amongst EFL learners. The shortage of interactions with target language speakers or lack of opportunities to communicate in a meaningful way is one of the challenges or problems of speaking in EFL that can limit learners' capability to produce/polish their oral performance/speaking skills (Mingyan et al., 2025). Also, learners inevitably experience problems or difficulties such as loss of confidence and fear of making mistakes, lack of sufficient practice time, etc., which are some of the factors that deter the progress of their speaking skills development (Yan et al., 2024). Besides, the cultural communicative problems that learners encounter stem from their limited intercultural experience and the lack of intercultural contact opportunities that challenge their intercultural communicate competence (Yanping & Burhanudeen, 2023) (Yanping & Burhanudeen, 2023). Apart from this, learners' first language can also influence their target language production through, for example, artifacting in pronunciation or deviation from the standard form (Astuty, 2022). Thus, these barriers can cause a communication breakdown and discourage learners from communicating or interacting with others.

The last decade's research on EFL speaking and intercultural communication has seen meaningful progress. Traditionally, the major concern was making-speaking better through interaction and feedback. Current research, however, has shifted from this point and focused more on intercultural competence and technology-enhanced learning, giving prominence to the awareness of culture and global communication skills (Guo & Xu, 2023; Hasyim et al., 2026; Li et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). At the same time, the use of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) has been introduced to provide adaptive and personalized learning experiences that enhance both linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding (Xia et al., 2024). The fact remains, however, that the use of AI to help facilitate cross-cultural communication is still quite a new area and there is little understanding of its role in real-time interactions. Besides, intercultural competence is not something one is born with or away with; it is a lifelong learning, a continuous process that is accompanied by interaction, reflection, and adjustment.

Importantly, it is necessary to recognize that communication is not a single event but a continuous and never-ending process. Individuals engaged in communication do not just pass messages to one another; they actually work out the meanings, make language changes, and try to understand each other's mistakes when they happen (Canals, 2022; Xu et al., 2025). So from this perspective, it also means that the intercultural barriers are not something that have been determined before but rather they are the result of communication and they change as going on

with communication. Hence, taking an interactional approach to the study of intercultural communication challenges is necessary in order to highlight the ways in which these difficulties are revealed during actual conversations.

Addressing this issue, the present research aims to identify the intercultural communication barriers faced by Indonesian EFL students communicating virtually with native English speakers and to discover how those barriers occur in real-time conversation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine intercultural barriers in EFL speaking within a real communication context. This study took place in an informal learning environment with ten Indonesian EFL learners who were taking an English course. The participants were chosen on the basis of their readiness to have live communication and their ability to access a language exchange platform. Via this platform, they communicated with native speakers through various modalities like text, audio, and video. Interaction was not bounded by any kind of restrictions and therefore, participants could speak more freely and talk about daily life, cultural differences, and personal experiences. Such a setting is considered to be very effective in reflecting the way communication is actually done, as opposed to the way it is conducted via classroom-based tasks.

The main instruments for data collection were the recorded conversations along with the semi-structured interviews. Using recordings gave the research the opportunity to see communication evolve interactionally, while interviews were done to get an understanding of the learners' experiences/difficulties and perceptions. Participants had to be informed of the research objectives, and each of them had to give consent before the researcher proceeded with the study.

Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 10 Indonesian EFL learners enrolled in an English language course. They were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: 1) active use of a language exchange platform for virtual interaction and 2) willingness to participate in multiple recorded sessions.

Data Collection

Data collection instruments consisted of Recorded Virtual Interactions and Semi-structured Interviews. Participants were involved in a virtual communication session, one per person, lasting about 20, 30 minutes which produced 10 recording of interaction in total. The conversation exchanges were done via language exchange platform and recorded with the permission of the participants. After the interaction sessions, interviews were done to the participants to learn about their experiences and perceptions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through thematic and interactional analyses. Firstly, the dialogue of all the interaction were transcribed, including pauses, hesitation, and repair

features. A simplified transcription convention was used, where (.) indicates a short pause, (...) represents hesitation, and timed pauses (e.g., (2.5), (3.0)) indicate the duration of silence in seconds. Secondly, a thematic analysis was performed through open coding of the interaction in order to find instances of difficulty in communication. The codes were grouped into larger categories, and four themes evolved from this grouping: linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural, and psychological barriers. Additionally, the last phase of the data analysis was the interactional analysis which aimed at investigating how the mentioned barriers surface and are handled during the communication. To a great extent, this analysis was based on the principles of conversation analysis whereby the interaction is viewed as a systematic organization of turns, each constructed in the moment (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff et al., 1977). More specifically, the elements of turn-taking, hesitation, repair and meaning negotiation were given due consideration as they reflect the participants' responses to communication difficulties and their efforts to maintain conversation. Among these phenomena were hesitation and lexical search, considered with reference to learners' linguistic resource availability during speech production (Singleton, 2011). The frequency of each type of barrier was also computed to reveal the distribution pattern. An occurrence was counted when a definite instance of communication difficulty was present in the interaction. To guarantee trustworthiness, the data were analysed multiple times to retain coding consistency, and representative quotes were chosen to substantiate each category.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The collected data were examined through thematic analysis that uncovered main patterns of intercultural barriers in online virtual interaction. The process of coding and categorizing finally brought to light four significant types of barriers: (1) linguistics barriers, (2) pragmatic barriers, (3) sociocultural barriers, and (4) psychological barriers. Besides being separate disorders of communication, these barriers happened in a sequence of exchanging views and were linked to each other most of the time. Even more importantly, the findings also reveal that the interactional challenges experienced by the participants are mediating the occurrence of these barriers.

Table 1

Overall Distribution of Intercultural Barriers in Virtual Interaction

Type of Barrier	Number of Occurrences	Percentage (%)	Typical Interactional Features
Linguistic Barriers	18	30%	Lexical search, self-repair, grammatical errors
Pragmatic Barriers	16	27%	Literal interpretation, minimal response, topic mismatch
Sociocultural Barriers	14	23%	Indirectness, over-apologizing, formality
Psychological Barriers	12	20%	Hesitation, anxiety, avoidance
Total	60	100%	

The overall distribution of intercultural barriers presented in Table 1 showed that linguistic barriers were the type that appeared most often, making up the biggest share of the

data. This means that learners' main difficulties were with vocabulary retrieval, grammatical construction and real-time language production during interaction.

However, the gap in the number of occurrences of the four categories was quite small, which means that intercultural barriers are not due to one single dominant factor only.

Pragmatic barriers also featured prominently, illustrating learners' struggles in interpreting meaning in situations and behaving accordingly. This result points out that mastering the language alone cannot ensure smooth communication, as learners have to grasp also how meaning is transmitted in different contexts. Besides, learners' cultural norms influencing their communication behavior were most clearly visible through indirectness, formality, and over-apologizing, which appropriately characterize sociocultural barriers both at a general level and in specific instances.

Psychological barriers, despite being slightly less frequent, still substantially influenced the shaping of interaction. Anxiety, hesitation and lack of confidence, in general, were the factors that most corresponded to limiting learners' participation and fluency, especially at the early stages of interaction.

Linguistics Barriers

The main linguistic barriers involved students struggling with word retrieval, sentence construction with correct grammar, and fluent expression of ideas. These barriers mostly came up during the turn construction, i.e. at the very moment when learners tried to convey their thoughts while being under real-time pressure. For example, learners explicitly indicated their difficulty in word retrieval as shown in numerous lexical search instances.

Excerpt L1

- L1 : We have (.) how to say (.) celebration for married people (.)
NS1 : Pre-wedding party?
L1 : Yes (.) that one

A similar pattern appears in another interaction, which can be seen through these excerpts:

Excerpt L2

- L1 : Umm (.) I (.) usually (.) go (.) with friends
L1 : go (.) went (.) go out with friends

Excerpt L3

- L2 : I will very tired... too noise...
NS2 : Too noisy?
L2 : Yes (.) too noisy (.)

In both situations, the learners use pauses, repetitions, and self-repair as tools to build the meaning. The learner hesitates several times and even says "how to say" that is a very effective sign for the vocabulary difficulty. The speech is not finished and needs help from the interlocutor who comes up with the right word. The learner then agrees the suggested word and carries on the conversation.

Another cause of the language problems is the conceptual difficulty, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

Excerpt L4

- L2 : What is urban planner?
NS2 : Someone who plans cities
L2 : (.) still a bit confused

In this situation, the student shows partial understanding of the topic still after the explanation, which means that obstacles to understanding also happen at the stage of deep knowledge formation. The interview data also support this finding as multiple participants shared that it was often difficult for them to come up with appropriate vocabulary while interacting. One participant revealed that they often had to stop themselves in the middle of speech as they were not confident about expressing their ideas in English.

Pragmatic Barriers

Pragmatic barriers became evident when students struggled to produce appropriate responses and derive meaning from context. The manifestations of these barriers were most obvious when students gave literal interpretations, minimal responses, or topic misalignment. One of the repeating tendencies of learners was interpreting the expressions by their literal meaning:

Excerpt L5

- NS1 : That's kind of crazy
L1 : Crazy? (.) bad?
NS1 : No (.) surprising
L1 : Ahh okay

Excerpt L6

- NS4 : That's pretty cool
L4 : Cool? (.) cold?
NS4 : No (.) I mean good

Excerpt L7

- NS9 : Hello. How should I address you?
L9 : Umm... my address is in Makassar, Indonesia.
(2.0)
NS9 : No, no, I mean, what should I call you? What's your name?
L9 : Ah sorry, you can call me Putra.

These excerpts illustrate how the learner reacts by seeking clarification and mistakenly interpreting the word "crazy" as "bad" and "cool" as "cold". Besides that, another learner takes the phrase "address you" literally to mean a physical address instead of understanding it as a

form of greeting or naming. So, the learner gives their location without recognizing the meaning of the question. This demonstrates that the learner concentrates on the literal meaning of the word, resulting in the misunderstanding. The interlocutor then rephrases the meaning to make it clear.

Pragmatic difficulties can also lead to the formulation of a response that is minimal or delayed. In these cases, learners provide limited or repetitive responses. The interlocutor continues the interaction by asking follow-up questions. It can be seen in these conversations:

Excerpt L8

NS1 : What do you think about working abroad?

(4.0)

L1 : Yes.

NS1 : Yes? Do you mean you like it?

Excerpt L9

NS2 : Do you enjoy watching movies?

L2 : Yes (.) I enjoy (.) watching movies (.) yes

Another form of pragmatic difficulty is topic misalignment:

Excerpt L10

NS2 : Do you travel often?

L2 : Umm (.) I like travelling food

NS2 : Oh (.) okay (.) what kind of food?

Here the learner's answer is not related to the question, so the interlocutor needs to change the subject. These samples show that pragmatic barriers arise when learners fail to draw the communicative intent or keep the dialogue coherent between utterances. Interview responses also indicated that learners were often confused by expressions used by native speakers, especially when the meaning was not literal.

Sociocultural Barriers

Sociocultural barriers arise primarily from differences in cultural norms, especially politeness and communication styles. The main sociocultural barrier was caused by differences in communication norms, especially in politeness strategies, indirectness, and the use of apology. These behaviors determined the learners' stance in the interaction and influenced the interpretation of their utterances. The learners frequently transferred formal politeness norms:

Excerpt L11

L2 : Thank you (.) Ms. Emma

NS2 : Just Emma is fine

Excerpt L12

- NS2 : Do you disagree?
L2 : Maybe (.) a little different
NS2 : So you don't agree?
L2 : Yes (.) not really

Indirectness is a typical feature of politeness strategies in English and here the learners follow the pattern of making their disagreement ambiguous (changing the politeness function of the utterance) and the interlocutor has to reinterpret the meaning.

Throughout all interactions, over-apologizing was a strong feature:

Excerpt L13

- L1 : Sorry (.) my grammar not good
NS1 : It's okay

Excerpt L13

- L1 : Sorry (.) sorry (.) I forget the title

Excerpt L14

- L1 : Sorry (.) I cannot remember

In this context, apologies are not only made as a reaction towards errors but also as a monitoring mechanism for politeness. The learners carry out the same strategies here with the use of indirect responses, formal address and repeated apologies during interaction.

Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers were revealed in learners' emotional reactions when they interacted. Psychological barriers showed up as anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes that learners experienced. These were visible through their hesitation, pauses, and their non-engagement or avoidance of participation. For instance:

Excerpt L15

- NS10 : Can you explain more?

(3.5)

- L10 : Umm (.)

(2.0)

- L10 : No (.) it's okay

Excerpt L16

- NS1 : Can you tell me about your hobby?

(3.5)

- L1 : Umm (.) I like (.) music (.) and (.) sometimes (.) relax

Through these extracts, it is evident that learners have trouble in keeping their speaking turns and as a result, they produce incomplete utterances or even give up their answers. So psychological barriers appear as not only inner states but their manifestation through

interactional behaviors runs the risk of affecting the level of participation. Some participants reported that they were feeling nervous and afraid of making mistakes, which affected their confidence during interaction.

How Intercultural Barriers Occur in Interaction

The research indicates that intercultural barriers do not just randomly happen but are part of an ongoing interactional process. These barriers come to light through specific sequential patterns marked with hesitation, misunderstanding, repair, and negotiation of meaning. An instance of the interruption in the interaction flow might be hesitation, it delays the production of a response and therefore disturbs the natural flow of turn-taking:

Excerpt L17

NS2 : Do you speak in class?

(2.5)

L2 : Umm (.) not really

Excerpt L18

NS1 : What about you?

(2.5)

NS1 : Okay (.) I think also it depends

In these examples, late reactions result in non-usage of situations for giving the speech which results in the, 'interactional' flow being affected. Usually, misunderstanding is the reason for the repair attempts:

Excerpt L19

L1 : Sorry (.) your voice just now

NS1 : I asked if it's crowded

L1 : Ahh okay

Excerpt L20

NS1 : I work remotely

L1 : Remote? (.) like far?

NS1 : Yes (.) working from home

These two sequences depict how understanding barriers emerge and how people use strategies of clarifying and repetition in order to overcome them.

More complex conversations involve an extended negotiation of meaning:

Excerpt L21

L6 : We are not free to speak

NS6 : Not allowed?

- L6 : No (.) not like that (.) not usual
NS6 : More indirect?
L6 : Yes (.) indirect

It is through reformulation and confirmation that the meaning is gradually clarified in this example which is a proof that the communication breakdowns are solved by both sides together.

Timing of interaction is also important, in particular, case of overlap:

Excerpt L22

- NS3 : I think-
L3 : Yes I think- oh sorry
NS3 : Yeah go ahead

This example demonstrates the way timing mismatch or technical delay may cause overlap and self-repair follows it.

Technical problems continue to be a factor in barrier occurrence:

Excerpt L23

- NS8 : Do you have any plan this weekend?
(*audio lag*)
L8 : Sorry (.) can you repeat?
NS8 : Do you have any plan this weekend?

Finally, the data indicate that barriers change over time. Early interaction is characterized by hesitation:

Excerpt L24

- L5 : Umm (.) maybe (.) I think (.)

Whereas later interaction shows increased fluency:

Excerpt L25

- L2 : I think it is better because we can communicate more directly and practice more

This shift suggests that barriers decrease as participants adapt to the interaction.

Discussion

Intercultural Barriers Encountered by EFL Students

The results of this research indicate that Indonesian EFL learners discussing virtually with native English speakers face several intercultural barriers such as linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural, and psychological barriers. Besides language issues, learners were also found to have pragmatic barriers in the form of literal interpretation and giving wrong answers. In other words, they continue to have enormous difficulty in interpreting conversational utterances, possible implicature or other contextual clues. It proved that effective communication requires

not only linguistic competence but also intercultural communicative competence, as individuals must be able to interpret and respond appropriately across cultural contexts (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Weda et al., 2022). Unable to properly understand how meaning is derived through context, the learners revert to direct or literal interpretations, which often cause misunderstandings.

However, the study reveals that linguistic difficulties should not be considered as mere individual limitations of learners, but as interactional phenomena arising during communication. Educators should note that it is not just that learners do not have the necessary knowledge to produce language; rather, they resort to self-repair, repetition, and pauses, among other strategies, to attempt getting a grip on the situation. This is a different interpretation of linguistic barriers from the mere view of obstacles to communication that points at reluctance and passivity of learners. It is rather an ongoing active involvement of learners to develop their communicative competence through conversational interaction.

Another point to be made is that sociocultural barriers also complicate communication situations, especially when learners are surprised by differences in norms, values, and communication styles. The research shows that learners quite frequently either hesitate or wrongly respond due to lack of knowledge of culturally appropriate expressions. Here, the case of the participants' developing awareness of intercultural communication not only as language use but also as adapting to different cultural expectations and perspectives is made. Correspondingly, intercultural communicative competence is turning out to be one of the essential skills of our era in world communication, where learners are anticipated to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Weda et al., 2022; Yanping & Burhanudeen, 2023). Other reasons include psychological barriers like anxiety and low self-confidence, which affect how learners perform in communication. As the data reveal, learners will often hesitate, pause or tentatively withdraw from the interaction because of their fear of making mistakes.

Interactional Occurrence of Intercultural Barriers

According to the findings, communication is treated as a dynamic process rather than a static one, where barriers can arise, evolve, and be negotiated throughout the interaction. This can be seen in various interaction characteristics, such as hesitation, repair, misunderstanding, and negotiation of meaning.

Hesitation is one of the most common interactional features present in the research data. Leading to pauses, fillers, and delayed responses, hesitation often signifies that learners are deeply engaged in on-the-spot language processing, and their minds are actively working towards this task. More than a sign of something being wrong with their language skills, hesitation can in fact be taken as a gesture of learners' cognitive effort as they try to understand and at the same time generate the right reply during the conversation (Canals, 2022). Not surprisingly then, it does not always work to the learners' advantage, causing their mid-turn silences or no-responses to happen. And yet, that also becomes a gap in which other parties can source for clarification and correction as the whole stretch of turn-taking becomes a bit

disrupted. Based on this, it appears that hesitation can, at the same time, limit and support communication to the point where either aim does not in the end get completely fulfilled.

Besides hesitation, learners' self-repair is also quite pervasive in the speech sample under analysis. It is through self-initiated repair that learners are given a chance to continuously revise their speech to render it more precise, be it elimination of a wrong word or modification of a faulty grammatical structure. This gives rise to repair initiated by others after obtaining clarification or reformulation. Such cases of repair demonstrate that communication is a joint effort, during which participants rivalry strive to reach understanding between each other. Theoretically, this coincides with the notion of negotiating meaning, which entails that the learners' speech is subjected to changes in accordance with feedback and interactional clues (Tran et al., 2024). Therefore, repair or any other form of modification should not be a red flag only, but rather a tool for facilitating communication and meaning-making.

Misunderstanding emerges as a phenomenon that is repeated time and again, especially when learners literally interpret expressions or fail to recognize implied meaning. These breakdowns frequently result in repair behaviors, where each of the participants strives to make their meaning clear or to express the same intention in different words. This further stresses that pragmatic knowledge is an indispensable component of communication, because one's capacity to decode non-literal meanings largely determines success or failure of interactions. A lack of this capacity inevitably results in highly fragmented communication that will most likely require considerable effort to bring back to a state of understanding.

Besides that, the data illustrate how communication is an ongoing process of negotiating meanings. Through striving for mutual understanding, the learners together with their interlocutors accommodate each other's ways of using the language, willingly restate their messages, and stand ready to elucidate them. The essence of this is the progressive creation of meaning, which is a collaborative effort rather than a transmission of messages.

All of these results mean that intercultural barriers really can be conceptualized not as an unmovable obstacle, but a living moment-to-moment process of interaction. On one hand, barriers come into being when learners are facing difficulties, and, on the other hand, they are managed in communication by interactional strategies like hesitation, repair, and negotiation of meaning. What the above implies is a completely new way of interpreting communication problems, changing the notion of outright breakdowns into instructive ones, which learners utilize for their development of intercultural communicative competence.

This study points out that intercultural barriers do not just point at individuals' language skills or cultural knowledge deficiency. Rather, as communication unfolds, they arise and develop in the context as participants are striving for mutual understanding through real-time (co-)constructing and negotiating of meaning. Indeed, while a number of earlier researchers have highlighted the significance of linguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and authentic interaction in language learning, this study shows that communication problems may not always be due to limited competence. Rather, they are reflectively interactionally produced through processes of hesitation, repair, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning that are going on continually in face-to-face as well as virtual communication.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that intercultural barriers in EFL communication are not only limited to linguistic problems, but also to pragmatic, sociocultural, and psychological issues. One of the points made by the study is that these problems are not, in fact, pre-existing in the learners, but they only come out in the course of interaction. When learners are required to understand and respond to the language simultaneously, hesitation, misunderstanding, and breakdowns in communication arise; this is due not only to the lack of knowledge. The study further points out that above all, communication difficulties become evidently when learners are in interaction, particularly with those from different culture.

Regarding the contribution, this study is in line with what has been done by other scholars who underline the need to integrate intercultural communicative competence and authentic interaction in language teaching. On the other hand, the study also goes beyond the current literature by explaining that intercultural barriers should be portrayed as evolving and interactional rather than stable categories.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The data used in this study are only from a few participants and targeted only a few types of interaction contexts, so it may not be a reflection of all EFL learners. Besides, the study focuses on virtual communication; thus, the findings could be different in a face-to-face interaction environment. It is suggested that future researches include a bigger sample size, more diverse interaction contexts, and different levels of language proficiency for better results. Other studies might also look at how learners can be better motivated by teaching strategies not only to develop linguistic competence but also intercultural and interactional competence for effective communication in real-world situations.

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