Sociocultural Dynamics And Their Impact On Speaking Proficiency Among Higher Education Students

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Abstract. This study investigates the sociocultural factors influencing the speaking proficiency of third,semester students at the English Education Department, Mulawarman University. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, twelve participants were purposively selected based on their speaking proficiency levels. Data were collected through semi,structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings identify five key sociocultural factors: gender, family background, socio,economic status, exposure to English outside the classroom, social interaction in language learning (interaction with peers, native speakers, and language instructors). Students with early English exposure, supportive family environments, strong peer networks, and access to technology tend to demonstrate higher fluency and confidence. Despite receiving the same classroom instruction, differences in sociocultural experiences contribute to varied speaking outcomes. This study highlights the need for inclusive teaching strategies that consider students' backgrounds and individual characteristics. The findings offer insights for educators to design more responsive and equitable language learning environments in EFL contexts.

Keywords: sociocultural dynamics; speaking proficiency; EFL learners; higher education

INTRODUCTION

English, as a global lingua franca, plays a central role in diverse fields such as politics, diplomacy, science, technology, business, international trade, education, and popular culture, making its mastery essential for global communication (Kawakibi & Indrawan, 2024). As a result, English language learning has become a critical component in developing communicative competence, particularly in academic and governmental contexts, where proficiency in English is key to transformative progress (Shaik, 2024). Achieving such competence requires a strong understanding of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural elements to use language appropriately across contexts. However, this remains a major challenge for foreign language learners, especially in speaking, which is a crucial indicator of mutual understanding in communication Therefore, mastering English speaking skills is vital for individuals aiming to compete on a global scale and participate meaningfully in educational and societal development (Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023).

The introduction of English as a core subject in schools signifies its role as a foreign language taught to all learners, regardless of cultural or ethnic background (Masunungure & Maguvhe,

2024). In Indonesia, English Language Teaching (ELT) primarily aims to develop students' discourse competence, encompassing speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, supported by the acquisition of communicative, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences (Ali et al., 2023). These foundational competences are essential to achieving effective discourse competence. English is also expected to equip learners with the communicative and literacy skills necessary for pursuing higher education abroad (Starovoyt et al., 2020). However, English proficiency remains a challenge in Indonesia, where the language is not used officially and is largely confined to classroom instruction, limiting students' exposure and opportunities to practice (Ramanayaka, 2023). Mastery of English is crucial not only for accessing academic resources, most of which are in English, but also for advancing in education, qualifying for international study opportunities, and meeting employment standards in global contexts (Nesaratnam et al., 2020; Vy, 2024).

Achieving English speaking proficiency is particularly challenging in countries like Indonesia, where English is not the first language and holds no official or societal communicative function, such as in courts or the education system (Zein et al., 2020). Unlike inner circle countries, such as the USA, UK, or Australia, where English

is used in all domains of life, in Indonesia its presence results more from deliberate language planning than natural linguistic development (Zentz, 2020). Although Government Regulation No. 28 of 1990 allows English instruction to begin as early as Primary Four and mandates it from the first year of junior high school, its implementation often remains limited to receptive and basic productive skills (Faridatuunnisa, 2020). While English has long been a compulsory subject at the secondary level, students still face substantial difficulty in speaking the language due to minimal exposure and limited use outside the classroom (Jaelani & Zabidi, 2020).

At the English Department of Mulawarman University, Speaking is taught from the first to the fourth semester. Despite receiving the same materials, instructions, and teaching strategies in the same classroom, students show varying levels of speaking proficiency. This raises the question of why such differences occur under identical conditions. While previous studies highlight the influence of pedagogical, cognitive, affective, and linguistic factors on EFL speaking skills (Elsayed, 2022). T   this study focuses on sociocultural factors, as they are considered crucial in shaping students' speaking experiences and outcomes, both positively and negatively (Kakita & Palukuri, 2021).

Investigating sociocultural factors is essential to understanding how elements such as social distance, cultural confrontation, sociolinguistic background, and socio,economic status influence EFL students' speaking skills (Kakita & Palukuri, 2021). Rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning is seen as a social process where language emerges from cultural and social activities before becoming an individual cognitive function (Tzuriel, 2021). In second language learning, this perspective shifts the focus from merely mastering linguistic structures to actively engaging in social interactions—such as conversations with peers and teachers—as a key to language development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Sociocultural theory highlights that language is not only a communication tool but also a medium that shapes cognition and understanding within specific cultural contexts.

A range of previous studies underscores the crucial role of sociocultural factors in shaping EFL learners' speaking proficiency. (Hamdi, 2023) highlights the role of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) in fostering learners' critical thinking by linking language instruction to real,life social contexts. Kafipour & Khoshnood

(2023) reveal that Dynamic Assessment (DA), tailored to learners' cognitive styles, significantly enhances speaking skills, especially for field,dependent students. Sabbah (2023) and Susanti et al. (2023) show how online learning interventions during the COVID,19 pandemic, such as peer collaboration and scaffolding, helped address speaking difficulties and promoted learner autonomy. Sun (2023) explores project,based inquiry to nurture intercultural empathy and critical global awareness. Meanwhile, Quoc & Van (2023) and García (2023) demonstrate how constructivist approaches and authentic materials like music improve learner engagement, vocabulary, and cultural competence. Tian et al. (2023) identify sociocultural constraints affecting assessment practices in Vietnam, while Dunifa (2024) reveals how ethnocentric attitudes and rural isolation in Indonesia reduce learners' motivation to speak English. Li (2023) shows that sociocultural context in EMI universities boosts EAP motivation.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on uncovering sociocultural factors that influence speaking proficiency among third,semester EFL students within a uniform classroom setting—an area rarely explored in prior studies. Unlike earlier research that emphasized interventions or teaching models (Hamdi, 2023; Kafipour & Khoshnood, 2023; Sun, 2023). This study offers a novel contribution by specifically examining the sociocultural factors that influence the speaking proficiency of third,semester EFL students in an Indonesian tertiary context, a focus that remains underexplored in existing literature. While previous studies have addressed general factors affecting speaking skills, this research uniquely integrates sociocultural theory with real classroom observations and student experiences within a uniform instructional environment. By highlighting variables such as social background, cultural attitudes, linguistic exposure, and classroom interaction patterns, the study seeks to uncover how shared learning settings can still produce divergent speaking outcomes. Furthermore, the research provides context,specific insights that can inform more culturally responsive pedagogical strategies in Indonesian higher education.

METHODS

To achieve the research objective of identifying the main sociocultural factors affecting the speaking proficiency of

third,semester English Department students, this study employed a descriptive qualitative design. The approach was chosen to allow an in,depth exploration of students' lived experiences, perceptions, and social contexts. Twelve participants were purposively selected based on their speaking proficiency test results, ensuring representation of both high and low achievers to reveal a broad spectrum of influencing factors.

Data were gathered through three primary techniques: (1) face,to,face semi,structured interviews aimed at uncovering participants' sociocultural backgrounds, language exposure, and attitudes toward speaking English; (2) classroom observations over three meetings per class, using checklists and field notes to capture peer interaction, participation patterns, and teacher,student communication; and (3) document analysis, including speaking scores and course syllabi, to contextualize students' performance within the curriculum. These triangulated methods ensured validity and depth in data collection.

All research instruments were reviewed and validated by experts to ensure relevance and clarity. The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques, including transcription, coding, theme categorization, and pattern interpretation. Speaking proficiency scores were used to support and cross,validate findings from interviews and observations. The study was conducted over a 15,month period, covering the stages of proposal defense, data collection, data analysis, and final reporting, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sociocultural Dynamics and Their Impact on Speaking Proficiency Among Higher Education Students

This study identifies five main sociocultural factors influencing the speaking proficiency of third,semester students at the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mulawarman University, Samarinda: gender, family background, socio,economic background, exposure to English outside the classroom, social interaction in language learning (interaction with peers, native speakers, and language instructors). These factors interact with formal classroom instruction across Speaking 1, 2, and 3 courses, shaping the speaking proficiency of 98 student participants.

Gender

Gender emerged as a relevant factor influencing students' confidence and speaking performance. While both male and female students reported varying levels of confidence and anxiety, these differences often intersect with personal background and learning habits. Participants like Najwa and Rif'an, who were exposed to English from a young age, Najwa through family interaction and Rif'an through a boarding school environment, demonstrated higher confidence and fluency. Regular speaking practice was also key; Rif'an and Belva, for example, practiced English consistently with peers and online communities, contributing to improved fluency.

Support from family and peers also played a notable role. Belva benefited from her father's efforts to converse in English, while Ika improved through constructive feedback from friends. Diverse media sources such as movies, music, video games, and digital platforms (YouTube, TikTok) were commonly used for informal learning. Cakra and Fayyaz, in particular, attributed gains in fluency and comprehension to consuming English,language entertainment and educational content.

Despite these supports, many students faced challenges—most notably limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. These anxieties were cited by both male and female participants as barriers to fluency and spontaneous speaking. Students in environments where English is rarely spoken also struggled to find consistent practice opportunities with fluent speakers.

Interestingly, the study noted nuanced gender,based tendencies. Female participants like Belva and Fitriyani more openly discussed their fears of error and public speaking, while male students like Cakra and Rif'an emphasized confidence even when acknowledging room for improvement. Furthermore, female students often prioritized grammatical accuracy and structured expression, while male students leaned toward fluency and idea conveyance, even at the expense of grammatical perfection. These patterns suggest potential gendered approaches to developing speaking proficiency, possibly influenced by social norms and perceptions of language use.

The results reveal above are in line with the studies showing that gender differences shape communication preferences: female students prioritize accuracy, while male students

emphasize fluency (Al,Khresheh & Orak, 2021; Katili, 2023). Family support and early exposure to English, such as in Najwa's and Belva's homes, foster natural fluency and confidence (Szabo et al., 2021).

Family

Family background plays a crucial role in shaping students' speaking proficiency, particularly through early exposure to English, parental support, educational background, and the dominant language spoken at home. Participants who were introduced to English in their family environment, such as Najwa and Belva, exhibit higher fluency and confidence. Najwa grew up with English as part of daily conversations, while Belva's father—an English teacher with a Master's degree—provided a structured and supportive language learning environment. Similarly, Rif'an's parents, both educators, emphasized the value of multilingualism by enrolling him in an Islamic boarding school with English and Arabic instruction.

Parental education and language proficiency further influence children's learning experiences. Participants like Ika and Cahyo, whose parents have limited English skills, report fewer opportunities for home,based English practice, often resulting in lower confidence and fluency.

Additionally, the dominant language used at home affects students' ease of transitioning into English conversations. Those from English,speaking or bilingual households, such as Najwa and Rif'an, show natural fluency, while those like Cahyo and Raihan—whose families primarily use Indonesian or local dialects—limit their English practice to formal education settings. These findings emphasize that family background, in its various dimensions, significantly shapes learners' access to and comfort with spoken English.

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Socio,economic Background

Socio,economic background significantly influences students' access to English learning resources and opportunities, thereby impacting their speaking proficiency. Participants from higher,income families, such as Najwa and Andi, benefit from structured support like private tutoring, formal English courses, and access to technological tools (e.g., laptops, smartphones),

which facilitate personalized learning and consistent practice. In contrast, students from lower,income families, including Fitriyani and Yuri, rely on informal methods such as watching English,language movies or engaging in casual peer interactions, which offer limited structure and slower progress.

Socioeconomic status also contributes to disparities in access to language resources. Najwa received private tutoring from a young age, and Andi was enrolled in multiple English courses during high school, whereas students like Fitriyani and Yuri, from lower,income families, depend on informal learning methods such as watching English,language films or social interactions with friends.

Students from higher socio,economic status (SES) backgrounds have better access to tutors and digital resources, while those from lower SES backgrounds rely on informal learning, limiting structured development (Romeo et al., 2022; Salinas, 2021).

Exposure to English Outside the Classroom

Exposure to English beyond the classroom plays a vital role in enhancing students' speaking proficiency by providing practical opportunities for language use, increasing confidence, and familiarizing learners with diverse accents and expressions. Digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram serve as rich sources of authentic English content. Participants like Fayyaz and Raihan use these platforms to access tutorials and imitate native speakers' pronunciation, while Charina joins international K,pop fan communities, using English in casual conversations. Rif'an also benefits from online discussions that help him practice various language registers and communication styles.

Watching English,language films further supports vocabulary development and listening comprehension. Participants including Cakra, Fayyaz, and Andi emphasize how exposure to natural dialogue in movies enhances their understanding of everyday expressions and pronunciation. Charina uses English subtitles in Korean and Japanese series to learn conversational phrases, and Ika focuses on actors' accents to improve her intonation and rhythm.

In addition to media, structured peer activities like English clubs offer valuable speaking practice. Belva engages in regular "English hour" sessions with friends, while Rif'an attends online lessons and communicates in English during online gaming, which enhances his fluency in

real,time interactions. Social engagement also strengthens confidence—Yuri notes the positive influence of her English,speaking peer group, and Cakra shares how singing English songs with friends helps reinforce pronunciation and speaking rhythm.

These findings show that active engagement with English outside formal settings significantly supports speaking development, offering informal yet consistent practice that builds fluency, confidence, and communicative competence.

Further, regular out,of,class exposure, such as social media, games, and peer conversations, enhances speaking fluency and vocabulary (Binos et al., 2023). Rif'an's and Fayyaz's cases show how digital engagement and immersion promote oral proficiency.

Social Interaction in Language Learning

Social interaction plays a crucial role in developing speaking proficiency, as it provides learners with meaningful opportunities to practice language in authentic and supportive settings. Peer interaction, in particular, offers a low,pressure environment that fosters confidence and encourages experimentation with language use. Participants such as Belva and Yuri regularly engage in English conversations with friends, reporting increased comfort and motivation. Belva's "English hour" sessions and Yuri's exposure to a proficient peer group highlight the positive effects of peer,driven practice. Similarly, Ika values her friends' constructive corrections, while Cakra notes the mutual encouragement within his social circle as key to building his speaking skills.

Beyond peer interactions, engaging with native English speakers—though often seen as intimidating—provides learners with exposure to natural language use, pronunciation, and cultural expressions. Rif'an's interaction with an Australian guest at his boarding school and his participation in online gaming with native speakers have helped him develop better pronunciation and fluency. Fayyaz also learns by observing native speakers on social media, noting their distinctive expressions and vocabulary.Positive experiences with native speakers can serve as major confidence boosters. Najwa recalls helping English,speaking tourists, an encounter that enhanced her speaking confidence.

Meanwhile, instructors play a vital role in shaping learners' motivation and competence. Cakra appreciates the interactive format of his speaking classes, which provide structured opportunities for practice and feedback. Rif'an and Belva credit their instructors for their consistent support and inspiration, while Andi is motivated by his instructor's teaching style and aspires to emulate him. Supportive teaching approaches that encourage participation, reduce anxiety, and create inclusive learning environments—like those experienced by Charina—are essential in promoting speaking development.

Teacher,student interactions are vital in shaping motivation and skill development. Supportive teachers who provide feedback, foster participation, and maintain a positive classroom climate—like those described by Belva, Rif'an, and Ika—play a key role in boosting learners' confidence and improving their speaking proficiency. These findings affirm the interconnection between socio,economic status, access to learning tools, family support, and educational environments in shaping EFL students' speaking outcomes.

Reseach indicates that language learning is most effective when students have frequent, meaningful interaction with fluent speakers (Shaddad et al., 2024). Students who interact with native speakers, wthether through online conversation or study exchanges, tend to develop more natural intonation, improved pronunciation, and pragmatic competence (Hossain,2024b).

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations across three classes (A, B, C) revealed varying levels of student engagement, speaking ability, psychological readiness, and pedagogical support. In Class A, students participated in open discussions and presentations; Class B applied Socratic seminars for critical analysis; Class C used discussions and a formal debate to build argumentation skills.

In terms of enthusiasm, students with higher speaking proficiency showed confident body language, varied intonation, and active participation. Those with lower proficiency tended to be silent, anxious, and hesitant, even with lecturer encouragement. Speaking performance varied: high scorers demonstrated smooth fluency, accurate pronunciation, and wide vocabulary. This is linked to consistent English exposure and supportive classroom dynamics (Li, 2023; Falcon et al., 2023) while low scorers struggled with hesitation, mispronunciation, and limited vocabulary which aligns with studies on language anxiety and reduced verbal output (R. Li, 2022;

Shao, 2023).

Psychological factors such as confidence, anxiety, and fear of mistakes clearly impacted performance. Confident students engaged more, while anxious students avoided speaking, impacting practice and skill development. This relates to Chand (2021) that says confident students engaged more actively, while anxious students avoided participation and struggled with fluency. In pedagogical aspects, the instructor effectively used varied activities (discussions, seminars, debates) and clear guidance to foster active learning. However, occasional confusion among students and inconsistent peer facilitation suggested a need for clearer instructions and better student preparation for leadership roles. Teachers' strategies such as positive feedback, varied speaking tasks, and small,group work contributed to student engagement and reduced pressure (Zhang et al., 2022). However, challenges such as unequal participation, unclear task expectations, and untrained moderators highlighted the need for improved classroom structure (Anagnostopoulou et al., 2023; Kraatz et al., 2020).

Overall, the observations support the conclusion that student proficiency in speaking is shaped not only by instructional quality but also by psychological readiness and classroom dynamics. Encouraging participation, reducing anxiety, and diversifying speaking opportunities are crucial to improving proficiency.

RPS Content Analysis

The analysis of the Speaking 3 course syllabus called Rencana Pembelajaran Semester (RPS) or Semester Lesson Plan (SLP) at Mulawarman University shows that while the curriculum is structured to improve intermediate,level speaking skills through tasks like product promotion, news reporting, and public speaking, it lacks explicit integration of sociocultural factors..

Although activities such as Socratic seminars and debates promote interactive communication, the RPS does not incorporate intercultural content or structured opportunities to engage with native speakers. Student feedback, such as Najwa's note on overly classroom,based material, and Rif'an's need to seek external practice, reflects a gap between academic content and real,world communication needs. This absence may limit students' exposure to authentic language use and intercultural competence—skills crucial for effective communication in global contexts (Cong,Lem, 2025; Tarawneh, 2023).

The heavy focus on individual performance

tasks may also neglect learners with higher anxiety or introverted traits, limiting inclusive speaking development. While tasks involve expressing opinions and negotiating meaning, there is minimal guidance on cultural norms or diverse communication styles. The focus on individual tasks, such as speeches, may unintentionally increase anxiety and overlook the collaborative nature of real,life conversation (Khamouja et al., 2023). Moreover, limited access to native speaker interaction and culturally diverse materials restricts students' ability to engage with varied accents, norms, and discourse styles (Lee et al., 2023; Zhai & Wibowo, 2023).

To enhance effectiveness, the RPS should integrate real,life contexts, intercultural exposure, and diverse assessment methods that consider students' sociocultural backgrounds. Such improvements would better support students' confidence, adaptability, and fluency in real,world communication settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the students' speaking proficiency is shaped by a complex interplay of sociocultural factors. Five key factors gender, family background, socio-economic background, exposure to English outside the classroom, social interaction in language learning (interaction with peers, native speakers, and language Instructors), emerged as influential in either supporting or hindering students' speaking development. These findings highlight the need for a more responsive and inclusive language instruction approach those accounts for students' diverse sociocultural backgrounds and personal learning needs.

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