

COPING WITH LANGUAGE BARRIERS: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT A THAI SCHOOL

Vioni Putri Ismida¹
Atin Kurniawati²

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta, Indonesia.

atin.kurniawan@staff.uinsaid.ac.id

Abstract

Language barriers are significant issues that can hinder clear communication between individuals. They are major sources of many problems or challenges in the fields of business, education, aviation, maritime, and healthcare. In education, language barriers pose a challenge for a pre-service English teacher involved in cross-cultural teaching activities. This study aims to analyze the different types of language barriers that may occur and explore strategies that can be used to overcome these language barriers. This study used a narrative inquiry research strategy to explore the pre-service English teacher's experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon under study. The data in this study were obtained from a pre-service English teacher by conducting open-ended questionnaires and interviews. The data analysis used the theory of Miles and Huberman which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display or data presentation, and drawing a conclusion or verification. The data findings revealed that a pre-service English teacher faced significant language barriers, such as mispronunciation, grammar errors, and vocabulary limitations. Despite these language barriers, the pre-service English teacher also found some strategies such as effective communication strategies, automatic translation technology, and translator assistance. It implies that a pre-service English teacher needs to equip themselves with strategies to cope with communication barriers for any situation during their teaching context.

Keywords: Language barriers; A pre-service teacher; Cross-cultural teaching

Abstrak

Hambatan bahasa adalah masalah signifikan yang dapat menghambat komunikasi antar individu. Mereka adalah sumber dari masalah atau tantangan di bidang bisnis, pendidikan, penerbangan, maritim, dan kesehatan. Dalam pendidikan, hambatan bahasa menimbulkan tantangan bagi guru maupun calon guru, khususnya yang terlibat dalam kegiatan pengajaran lintas bahasa maupun budaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis berbagai jenis hambatan bahasa yang terjadi dan mengeksplorasi strategi yang dapat digunakan untuk mengatasi hambatan bahasa tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian naratif untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman dan perspektif mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris tentang hambatan bahasa dan strategi yang digunakannya ketika mengajar di salah satu sekolah menengah di Thailand. Data dalam penelitian ini diperoleh dari mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris melalui kuesioner terbuka dan wawancara. Analisis data mencakup tiga tahapan utama: reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan atau verifikasi. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa seorang mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris menghadapi hambatan bahasa yang signifikan, seperti kesalahan pengucapan, kesalahan tata bahasa, dan keterbatasan kosakata yang dimiliki oleh para siswa. Terlepas dari hambatan bahasa ini, mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris menerapkan beberapa strategi seperti strategi komunikasi yang efektif, teknologi penerjemahan otomatis, dan bantuan penerjemah. Ini menyiratkan bahwa seorang mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris perlu membekali diri mereka dengan strategi untuk mengatasi hambatan komunikasi untuk situasi apa pun dalam berbagai konteks pengajaran.

Keywords: Hambatan Bahasa; Mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris; Pengajaran Lintas Budaya

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of English by both native and non-native speakers has motivated education institutions to include English as a school subject. As education becomes more globalized, cross-cultural teaching emerges as a critical approach. Human capital now reflects the world's diversity, necessitating an understanding of teaching in a cross-cultural context (Bennett, 2013). According to Banks (2015), creating inclusive environments that value cultural differences help students meet evolving global needs.

Engaging in international community service allows them to apply their knowledge in diverse educational settings, enhancing their understanding of cross-cultural dynamics. This reflective practice is crucial as they encounter unfamiliar cultures and social issues. According to Megawati et al. (2023) pre-service teachers gain contextual insights through direct teaching experiences, discussions with mentors, and observations of seasoned educators. Brown (2000), emphasizes that they can plan, act, and reflect on their teaching by integrating subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills, and personal competencies. Reflective practice is vital for improving learning quality and has become a key element in teacher education and professional development. It involves critical problem-solving, task analysis, and anticipatory planning, empowering pre-service teachers to analyze their experiences and enhance their teaching methods (Sabgini & Khoiriyyah, 2020).

Many institutions now offer international teaching practicums, providing pre-service teachers with global learning experiences. These practicums encourage interns to engage in short-term placements in diverse cultural and educational settings, fostering cross-cultural understanding (Jin et al., 2020). Allen et al. (2013), highlight that successful partnerships in these programs combine resources and knowledge to provide meaningful professional experiences for pre-service teachers.

Pre-service English language teachers in cross-cultural teaching will encounter language barriers in their communication. According to Tenzer & Schuster (2017), cross-culture teaching poses significant challenges due to language barriers, leading to misunderstandings and miscommunications that affect social interactions, academic performance, and professional relationships. Managing these barriers requires strategies

like hiring multilingual staff and using translation services. Understanding these limitations is crucial for inclusive communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds (Da Costa, 2021).

The background of this study is to identify the challenges faced by a pre-service English teacher at a Thai school in Thailand during a community service program from June to July 2024. As part of the pre-research, the researcher conducted initial interviews with the informant on 20 November 2024 to gain deeper insights into the language barriers informants face. First, the language barrier between a pre-service English teacher and students often led to misunderstandings, resulting in less effective learning. This phenomenon affected not only verbal communication but also the harmonious learning climate. In addition, cultural differences between a pre-service English teacher and Thai students created classroom management challenges, impacting classroom interactions' dynamics.

Teachers who were unfamiliar with Thai social norms and cultural values found it difficult to adapt relevant and environmentally friendly teaching methods. On the other hand, a pre-service English teacher who still had limited teaching experience often struggled to deliver material effectively, which hindered student understanding. Minimal teaching experience led to a lack of alternative strategies for students who required additional support, such as children who had academic problems or lacked intrinsic motivation. Therefore, it was important to consider how mentorship and professional supervision could help improve the pedagogical competence of new teachers. In addition, the lack of adequate classroom facilities and learning resources was also an inhibiting factor in the teaching and learning process.

The term language barrier describes a communication difficulty brought on by speaking a foreign language. In multicultural teams, misunderstandings can impede innovation and cooperation. By fostering open discussions and creating mutual comprehension, these gaps can be closed. Cultural differences, poor language skills, and disparate linguistic backgrounds are some of the elements that contribute to language barriers. Language barriers in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) are brought on by various factors, including teacher-student bilingualism, differences in

language proficiency, and differences in language backgrounds (Ashifaa, 2021). Harzing & Feely (2008) identifies several types of language barriers that can arise. Here are some relevant types of language barriers, such as miss pronunciation, grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, cultural nuances, accents variations, language proficiency levels, and aspects of non-verbal communication differences. Furthermore, Harzing et al.(2011) identified eleven possible techniques for overcoming language barriers in multinational corporations, but some of these techniques can increase the effectiveness of communication and are suitable for overcoming language barriers in educational settings. Those strategies are: effective communication, automatic translation technology, translator assistance, customizing the communication style, active listening, open-feedback, using visual aids, clarification and confirmation, language training, recruitment of multicultural employee, and promotion of a inclusive work environment.

There are several studies related to the challenges of pre-service teachers in different settings in this section, such as International Service Learning: Benefits, Challenges, and Experiences of Preservice Teachers by Chambers & Lavery (2022), Narratives of Experiences in International Teaching Practicum: Lessons from an EFL Pre-Service Teacher by Megawati et al., (2023), and International Teaching Practicum: Challenges Faced by Pre- service EFL Teachers in ESL Settings by (Kabilan et al., 2020). The previous studies identified gaps in existing research on teachers preparation for international settings, focusing on aspects such as the limited understanding of international service-learning programs' effects on post- return teaching practices, unexplored challenges pre-service teachers face in adapting to diverse cultural and educational environments during international teaching preparations, and lack of integration of the concepts of internationalization and globalization in teacher education. This research innovatively integrates these concepts into teacher training programs and explore how challenging learning situations during teaching practice contribute to a pre-service teacher's professional growth. Thus, the research questions in this study are formulated as follows:

- 1) What are the types of language barriers possessed by the students at a

Thai school in joining English classes?

- 2) How does a pre-service English teacher cope with language barriers in teaching English at a Thai School during community service program?

RESEARCH METHOD

Narrative inquiry was utilized in this study. It emphasizes using storytelling to examine people's life experiences. According to Creswell & Poth (2023), narrative inquiry is gathering and reviewing personal narratives to comprehend how people interpret their experiences across time. Because it enables researchers to explore and analyse the intricacies of human experiences and offers deep insights into social and personal circumstances (Clandinin et al., 2007), this approach is very useful in educational research. With a focus on participant narratives and stories, narrative inquiry offers theoretical and philosophically diverse concepts and methods. This study was intended to describe and identify the language barriers faced by a pre-service English teacher in teaching English during community service program at a Thai school in Thailand as well as the strategies to cope with the barriers. The informant of this study was a pre-service English teacher, MSAP, who participated in the program.

The data were collected through open-ended questionnaire and several semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire and interviews were delivered in Bahasa Indonesia, then it was translated by the two researchers to ensure the equivalence of the translated texts. Then, the data were analyzed using Miles et al., (2014) data analysis techniques, including data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusion and verification. To convey the trustworthiness of the data, this study used methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation is a powerful strategy for ensuring the validity of research data. By combining two data collection methods, such as interviews and open-ended questionnaires, the researcher can gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. If the results of the two methods confirm each other or produce consistent patterns, then the validity of the data is getting stronger. Conversely, if there are inconsistencies, the researcher is encouraged to conduct further checks, identify potential biases, or refine data interpretation, thereby increasing the accuracy and validity of research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of language barriers possessed by students of a Thai school in joining English classes

Based on the results of the open-ended questionnaires and interviews with the informant, the types of language possessed by students of a Thai school in joining English classes are as follows.

Mispronunciation

Mispronunciation is the act or practice of pronouncing words incorrectly or in a way that is not considered standard. In teaching activities as a pre-service teacher during the community service program at a Thai school in Thailand, MSAP experienced several language barriers, including mispronunciation. As he said:

"Language barriers are very challenging. Even though we are English Education students, their mother tongue is very unfriendly in my ear. That was my homework as a pre-service teacher for approximately 1 month in Thailand. Sometimes I have to spell out the words that come out of the students' mouths to understand what they are saying." (Open-Ended Questionnaire, 12 November 2024)

This statement provided an overview of MSAP's experience as a pre-service teacher in Thailand. He described how significant the language barrier was when interacting with his students at school. In addition, MSAP also mentioned that although he is an English Education student, local students had a mother tongue that was difficult to understand. Further, MSAP shared some examples of how he struggled with mispronunciation, as reflected in the statement below.

"For example, there was a mispronunciation that I thought was fatal but I can't blame the student. Because the spelling of book is B-O-O-K. Well, then the Thai student pronounced it as the spelling [bvk]. I was a little surprised. Then I asked, can you repeat or can you show what this means. Then he lifted up his book" (Interview, November 20, 2024)

"There is one example...this is English in daily life and is basic English, namely

eating, eating. We pronounce eat with /i:t/. But, students in Thailand, there are some who pronounce it [æt], mostly with [æt] in Thai dialect" (Open-Ended Questionnaire, 6 December 2024)

MSAP reported that many Thai students he taught were having trouble internalizing the proper vowel sounds and this is resulted in the mispronunciation. The effect of the student's mother tongue was the source for these mispronounced words due to the possibility that Thai and English had different phonetic structures.

Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors are mistakes made when using grammar rules in writing or communication. MSAP also faced grammatical errors as one of the language barriers he had faced while teaching English in Thailand. The grammatical errors can be identified by the missed verb or subject that can result in confusing in the sentence meaning as reflected in the following statements.

"Grammatical errors are often. When somebody wanted to go to the toilet, he only said 'I to toilet'. Well, these things make me a bit confused, he wants to go to the toilet and what?" (Interview, November 20, 2024)

"At noon, before lunch, there was a student who took the initiative to me using English and I appreciated it. But the grammatical error made me confused. He said "want eat". Well, the subject is who? who eats? The teacher or friends? But it turned out to be him" (Open-Ended Questionnaire, 6 December 2024)

These mistakes suggested that the learner might not have fully comprehended English sentence structure. MSAP also noted that they were unclear about the intended subject. MSAP emphasized how difficult it was for students to use English, particularly in conversational contexts. Students had to combine several language aspects, such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation when they spoke. For students who lacked sufficient confidence or experience in actively using English, this might have been a significant obstacle.

Vocabulary Limitations

The term "vocabulary limitations" describes limitations in an individual's vocabulary that may affect their ability for effective communication. In this type of language barrier, MSAP had some challenges with students' limited vocabulary. According to MSAP, students in Thailand had very limited English vocabulary. This was why almost all the students in the school where MSAP taught did not understand what MSAP was trying to say.

"Because if we talk about vocabulary limitation, not all students there understand what I mean when I speak, that's it" (Interview, November 20, 2024)

On the other hand, when they had been asked to express their opinions, MSAP said that students still tried to express their opinions, even though most of the opinions were spoken in Thai due to their limited English vocabulary.

"Yes, they are trying to express their opinions. However, most of them are expressed in Thai" (Interview, November 20, 2024)

The students found it challenging to understand and integrate a new language as an outcome. Only simple language, such as that connected with animals, numbers, letters, and daily activities, was mastered by students there. This implied that students could not have been exposed to a wider variety of more advanced terms enough.

"...they almost have a hard time understanding vocabulary, as I can see, which is a lot. But they understand some simple vocabulary. It's just basic related to animals, then numbers, letters, then vocab vocab basic daily activity, that's it" (Open-Ended Questionnaire, 6 December 2024)

These findings are in line with several types of language barriers proposed by Harzing (2008), including mispronunciation, grammatical errors, and vocabulary limitations. These three aspects provided serious difficulties for the pre-service English teacher when he taught in the classroom. It shows that despite his knowledge of English, MSAP still faced difficulties in delivering the material effectively due to the barriers. The researcher noted that MSAP did not experience these barriers during his teaching at the school during the community service program, nor did the students show any evidence to

support the existence of the other five types of barriers. This suggests that the educational context in which MSAP teaches may have unique characteristics that distinguish it from other situations where these barriers may be more common. In other words, the learning environment may have influenced the types of language barriers that emerged.

It confirms the previous study which revealed that students' lack of understanding of English as a foreign language, such as students having difficulty in understanding vocab is because they have too little vocab and students' limited understanding of English affects students' engagement in the classroom during the teaching and learning process. It is also due to limited resources, time allotment, students characteristics, and inadequate materials (Dewi et al., 2024; Pakpahan, 2023). Furthermore, Auliya et al., (2020) reported that lack of language proficiency becomes obstacles in carrying out learning activities. In fact, language barriers also happen in any education level when the students have limitations in understanding English even though they knew simple English (Tique, 2023).

Strategies used by a pre-service English teacher to cope with language barriers in teaching English at a Thai School

Effective Communication Strategies

An effective communication strategy is a set of planned actions designed to help an individual or organization better communicate with their target audience. In effective communication strategies to overcome language barriers, MSAP recounted and mentioned some of the strategies he used in the class, as he said:

“Use simple and clear language: avoid technical terms that may not be familiar to students. Use short and simple sentences, as well as many concrete examples”
(Open-Ended Questionnaire, November 12, 2024)

MSAP highlighted that the use of simple and clear language not only improved student understanding but also contributed to a positive learning atmosphere. By avoiding complex technical terms, teachers provided opportunities for students to be more actively involved in learning. It also showed that effective teaching required attention to the way material was presented to match students' abilities and experiences. This suggested that

effective communication strategies in teaching were essential to achieving educational goals, where student understanding and engagement were top priorities. MSAP also emphasized the importance of adaptation in teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse students in the classroom.

“The communication strategy is simple. When I am a communicator and they as communicators, they understand what I mean, they understand what I am talking about” (Interview, November 20, 2024)

Automatic Translation Technology

Automatic translation technology is the technique of translating text across languages automatically so that users can obtain translations instantly without requiring human assistance. In this strategy, MSAP used translation technology when communicating with students due to language differences, as he said:

“I use this when speaking on a daily basis because they have a hard time understanding English.” (Open-Ended Questionnaire, November 12, 2024)

MSAP shared that he used translator technology to help him translate into the target language instantaneously. Due to their limited understanding of English, this technology helped MSAP communicate to the target language to be more understandable.

“Yes, I use Google Translate a lot. It is very helpful.” (Interview, November 20, 2024)

In his story during the interview, MSAP claimed that he often used translator technology, especially Google Translate. Google Translate helped him translate what he meant into Thai so that the students can easily understand. MSAP stated that assistive technology was an effective way to help him communicate with Thai students because of the language difference.

Translator Assistance

Translator Assistance refers to any form of support or assistance provided by humans to be a translator during the translation process. In this strategy, MSAP was

assisted one student who was more proficient in English than his classmates to help him when teaching in class, as he told us:

"There was one student who was fluent in English and masters a lot of vocabulary. Usually I always involved him every time I did activities in class." (Open-ended Questionnaire, November 12, 2024)

MSAP emphasized that teaching strategies involving high-ability students could improve classroom dynamics and support more effective learning. By utilizing the ability of fluent students, he was able to create a collaborative learning atmosphere where students helped each other. In addition, the use of Thai as a communication translator also showed that MSAP valued the local cultural context and strove to make learning more relevant to students. This approach not only enhanced the understanding of the material but also strengthened the relationships between students in the learning environment. MSAP also pointed out that effective teaching required adaptation to students' needs as well as utilization of existing resources in the classroom to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

"My translator was a student named Mubin. Mubin. I was also surprised when I entered there that he understood English. His understood daily conversation until the story of what his family did. He told the story fluently" (Interview, November 20, 2024)

In his story, MSAP introduced one of his students whom he always asked for help to translate messages to his classmates. In the interview, MSAP explained that he often asked for help from this student to help him explain the material in class so that it was easily accepted by his classmates. Especially when MSAP wanted to coordinate students in class, he immediately asked for help from this student to tell his classmates in Thai and it helped MSAP in doing class management.

"In another class... Well, I think that's even better. A students could understand Indonesian, Malay, and English. So, if I have trouble using English, I just use Indonesian, they use Thai. Sounds weird, but yah it worked." (Interview, November 20, 2024)

Customizing Communication Style

Communication style customization is the process of adapting one's communication style to the requirements, interests, and traits of various audiences. In this case, MSAP told us about his communication style, as he said:

"Of course, I try to customize my language to be more easily understood and to sound more friendly to them." (Interview, November 20, 2024)

"I adjust it in the form of intonation or dialect, yes" (Open-Ended Questionnaire, 6 December 2024)

MSAP shared during the interview, that he had to adjust his language style to communicate with students in Thailand. He did this because not all students understood English, so he needed to explain the material. MSAP mentioned that he adapted his communication style to the locals in Thailand such as intonation or accent to make it easier for both parties to understand each other when communicating.

Use of Visuals in Learning

The purpose of using visuals in learning is to increase student comprehension and engagement by using visual components to communicate ideas and information. The use of visuals in learning helped MSAP in delivering learning materials. MSAP emphasized that the use of visual media such as pictures was very important in teaching English, especially for basic vocabulary that was often difficult for students to understand. This strategy not only helped students understand the material but also created a more interesting and interactive learning atmosphere. In addition, MSAP's awareness of students' limited vocabulary showed that teaching must be tailored to students' needs and abilities for the learning process to be more effective.

"It's very helpful, especially in basic vocabulary such as fruits and animals. Many students don't know English but understand the pictures I present" (Open-Ended Questionnaire, November 12, 2024)

"It happens that in my class there are no LEDs, LCDs or projectors. I brought the book and...thank God there are visuals there, which finally helps" (Interview, November 20, 2024)

In the interview, MSAP said that it was unfortunate that his class was not provided with facilities that supported the use of visuals like in other classes. However, the book he used helped him provide images that supported learning and made students understand.

“There are no flashcards. Just a book” (Interview, November 20, 2024)

MSAP also shared a situation where he used visual aids to help the learning process in class. He said that his students often did not understand the meaning of English words, but when they saw the pictures provided, they immediately understood the meaning of the words.

The findings on the strategies to cope with language barriers confirm some of the ways to overcome language barriers proposed by Harzing (2008). Harzing identified eleven strategies to overcome language barriers in business relationships and in this study, the researcher identified six strategies used by MSAP to overcome language barriers in an educational setting. If these strategies are not implemented by teachers, language barriers that occur in the classroom can negatively impact the way teachers and students communicate, which can affect the effectiveness of achieving learning objectives. Effective communication is the first mentioned by the informant, such as by using simple and clear language and modifying communication style. It is in line with Megawati et al. (2023) who described teaching in an international environment and mentioned the strategies teachers used to overcome language barriers, such as using basic vocabulary for effective communication strategies, open feedback, clarification, and confirmation when learning in class. The strategies used in the study are apparently in line with this study because in this study, MSAP also mentioned some of the strategies he used to overcome language barriers, and some of these strategies are the same as the strategies used by Megawati in her study. The accuracy of these strategies as workable solutions in a global learning environment is further supported by this alignment.

Furthermore, using visual aids and translator assistance could help the teacher overcome the language barriers as experienced by the informant. It conveys the previous

studies by Auliya et al., (2020) and Tique (2023). Auliya et al. described strategies used to overcome language barriers faced by pre-service teachers by using poster presentations or visual aids as teaching media in the classroom. In addition to the use of learning media, another strategy mentioned by in their research is the use of automatic translator technology which is useful when they find it difficult to understand questions from their students in class, so they ask their students to use a translator technology and this strategy is also used by MSAP in overcoming language barriers in class. Thus, although the specific contexts and media may differ, there are fundamental similarities in the use of visuals and technology as tools to overcome language barriers, by both pre-service and more experienced teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the result of the research findings and discussion in the previous chapter, three language barriers faced by a pre-service teacher in teaching English at a Thai school in Thailand were identified: mispronunciation, grammar errors, and vocabulary limitation. These language barriers faced by an English pre-service teacher can disrupt communication, cause misunderstandings, and limit students' understanding and the teacher's ability to explain learning concepts in class. The research findings and the discussion in chapter four revealed the informant, MSAP, employed several strategies to effectively cope with the language barriers during his experience as a pre-service English teacher. By applying these strategies, MSAP improved his teaching abilities and improved his students' academic experiences. He simplified difficult concepts using effective communication strategies, automatic translation technology, translator assistance, customizing his communication style, and using visual aids to foster an inclusive learning environment and improve student understanding. This study implies the need of pre-service teachers to equip themselves with the strategies to cope with language barriers that might happen in their teaching context. As this study is limited in the number of informant and the background culture or Thailand, further studies may examine broader cultural context with more informants.

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