

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: THEIR ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECOND LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menelaah pengaruh aspek sosial dan budaya terhadap peningkatan kemampuan berbahasa Inggris mahasiswa di Indonesia. Studi terdahulu telah menekankan pentingnya faktor kognitif dan instruksional dalam mempelajari bahasa kedua, namun penelitian mengenai konteks sosiobudaya yang lebih luas dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di Indonesia masih terbatas. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode gabungan, penelitian ini melibatkan 33 mahasiswa semester enam program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, yang terdiri dari 8 mahasiswa laki-laki dan 25 mahasiswa perempuan dengan latar belakang etnis Batak Toba dan Nias. Data diperoleh melalui tes berbicara, wawancara semi-terstruktur, kuesioner, dan observasi kelas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa faktor sosial, seperti status ekonomi, akses ke les bahasa Inggris, dan lingkungan keluarga, berdampak pada kemampuan berbicara mahasiswa. Lebih lanjut, interaksi dengan budaya, misalnya melalui media berbahasa Inggris dan pengalaman berinteraksi dengan budaya lain, berkontribusi signifikan terhadap kelancaran, kepercayaan diri, dan kompetensi komunikatif mereka. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembelajaran bahasa sangat terkait dengan konteks sosial budaya, sehingga penting untuk menerapkan pendekatan pembelajaran yang peka terhadap budaya dalam pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Acquisition, Cultural, EFL, Second-Language, Social, Speaking.*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of social and cultural factors on the acquisition of English-speaking skills among university students in Indonesia. While previous research has highlighted the importance of cognitive and instructional factors in second language acquisition, relatively few studies have examined the broader sociocultural context of English learning in the Indonesian EFL setting. Using a mixed-methods design, this research involved 33 sixth-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, comprising 8 males and 25 females from Batak Toba and Nias ethnic backgrounds. Data were collected through speaking tests, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. The findings reveal that social background factors—including socioeconomic status, access to English courses, and family environment—affect students' speaking proficiency. Additionally, cultural exposure, including engagement with English media and intercultural experiences, plays a crucial role in enhancing fluency, confidence, and communicative competence. The study concludes that language learning is inseparable from its sociocultural context, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in Indonesian higher education.

Keywords: *Acquisition, Cultural, EFL, Second-Language, Social, Speaking.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English as a second language (L2) has become increasingly important for participation in global communication, academic mobility, and professional opportunities. As the world's current lingua franca, English is not only a means of communication but also a cultural bridge that facilitates interaction across nations and disciplines (Crystal, 2003). In many countries, including Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Despite decades of instruction, many Indonesian learners continue to face difficulties in achieving communicative competence, particularly in speaking skills, which remain a major challenge for students entering the global academic and professional arena (Giri et al, 2025).

Previous studies have shown that second language acquisition is shaped not only by instructional strategies but also by broader sociocultural contexts. Factors such as socioeconomic status, access to extracurricular English courses, and family support strongly influence learners' opportunities to practice and use English (Kramsch, 1998). Likewise, cultural exposure—including engagement with English media, intercultural communication, and attitudes toward Western cultural values—significantly affects learners' confidence, fluency, and communicative competence (Norton, 2000). Some scholars argue that linguistic development depends primarily on formal instruction, while others emphasize the inseparability of language and culture, suggesting that exposure to authentic cultural practices is equally crucial (Darvis & Norton, 2013). These diverging perspectives highlight the need for further research that integrates social and cultural dimensions into the study of second language learning.

In the Indonesian EFL context, the issue is particularly pressing. Many

students rely heavily on formal classroom learning with limited opportunities for authentic communication. However, others extend their learning through exposure to media, extracurricular courses, and intercultural activities. These variations in learning environments often result in significant disparities in speaking outcomes, raising questions about how social background and cultural exposure interact to shape language proficiency. Understanding these dynamics is important not only for theoretical discussions of language learning but also for designing effective, culturally responsive pedagogies in higher education.

The present study focuses on 33 sixth-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen in Medan. The participants, comprising 8 males and 25 females from Batak Toba and Nias ethnic groups, represent diverse sociocultural backgrounds. This context provides a valuable lens for exploring the relationship between students' social and cultural dimensions and their speaking proficiency. Specifically, the study aims to (1) examine the influence of social background factors—such as socioeconomic status, access to English courses, and family environment—on speaking performance, and (2) investigate how cultural exposure contributes to the development of fluency, communicative confidence, and intercultural competence.

By addressing these objectives, this study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends the application of Sociocultural Theory of Norton (2000) and Investment Theory British Council (2013) within the Indonesian EFL setting. Practically, the findings provide insights for teachers and institutions to design instructional approaches that acknowledge the critical role of sociocultural contexts in language

development. The results indicate that students with higher social resources and greater cultural exposure achieve stronger speaking performance, while those with limited resources remain at the lower end of proficiency. This suggests that addressing social and cultural dimensions is essential for bridging performance gaps and enhancing communicative competence in English learning.

Norton's (2013) provides an important framework for understanding how learners' social identities shape their engagement in language learning. Unlike traditional motivational theories that treat motivation as static, investment highlights the dynamic relationship between identity, power, and opportunities to use language. Learners invest in learning a language when they see it as expanding their cultural capital and access to valued communities. For Indonesian EFL students, social background and cultural exposure influence not only their opportunities to practice but also their willingness to invest in language learning activities. This framework is particularly relevant to this study, as it underscores how differences in access to resources and cultural attitudes directly affect speaking proficiency.

Learning a second language plays a crucial role in improving communication skills. In today's interconnected world, being able to speak more than one language is a valuable asset that opens up new opportunities. A report by Selvi (2024) stated that around 1.5 billion people worldwide are learning English, showing just how important language is as a tool for global communication. Research by Dewaele (2012) also suggests that bilingual individuals tend to be better communicators with more assertive listening and speaking abilities. This highlights how learning another language not only helps in understanding different cultures but also enhances overall communication skills.

In a social context, the ability to communicate in a second language can also strengthen intercultural relationships. For example, student exchange programs that involve learning a second language often lead to a deeper understanding of cultures and help reduce prejudice. A study by Dwyer (2004) found that students who participated in exchange programs showed increased empathy and tolerance toward other cultures. Therefore, learning a second language is not just about mastering the language itself but also about expanding communication skills that contribute to both personal and professional growth.

Learning a second language helps people expand their social networks and connect with others more easily. In today's globalized world, being able to communicate with people from different backgrounds is more important than ever. A Eurobarometer (2012) report found that 56% of Europeans believe that knowing a foreign language helps them build stronger social relationships. This shows how language can act as a bridge, bringing people closer together. A great example of this can be seen in immigrant communities, where learning the local language is often key to feeling at home. Many immigrants take the time to learn the language of their new country so they can integrate better and form meaningful connections. Research by Portes and Rumbaut (2004) and Rumbaut found that those who speak the local language have better access to education, social services, and job opportunities. This highlights how language is not just about communication but also about belonging. When people can express themselves and understand others, they become more engaged in their communities and build stronger relationships.

Research indicates that learning a second language can significantly enhance cognitive skills in numerous ways. Bialystok (2001) stated that bilingual individuals tend to be better at

critical thinking and problem-solving than those who speak only one language. This happens because switching between languages and processing different linguistic structures exercises the brain, improving overall cognitive function. One of the most significant mental benefits of learning a second language is improved memory. Kröll (2013) Bilingual people have stronger short-term and long-term memory. When learning a new language, individuals constantly recall vocabulary, grammar rules, and usage contexts, which naturally strengthens their memory skills. These benefits go beyond just language learning—they can also enhance academic performance, decision-making, and even the ability to multitask. In short, picking up a second language is not just about communication; it is also a great workout for the brain.

Based on the background foundations and previous research, this study conceptualizes English-speaking proficiency as an outcome of the interplay between social background and cultural exposure. (1) Social Background: Learners from higher socioeconomic status, with access to English courses and supportive home environments, are expected to demonstrate stronger speaking proficiency. (2) Cultural Exposure: Engagement with English media, intercultural activities, and positive attitudes toward Western culture enhances fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative confidence.

These dimensions are mediated through learners' identities and investments (Norton, 2013) and scaffolded by sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Comprehensible input, Krashen (1982), meaningful interaction (Long, 1983), and intercultural competence, Byram (1997); Kramsch (1998) serve as mechanisms linking background and exposure to speaking proficiency.

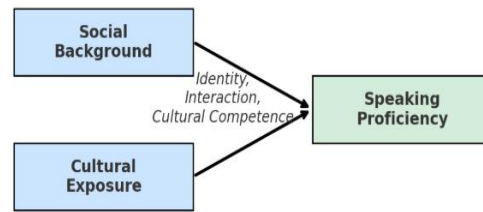


Figure 1. Framework of Social and Cultural Dimensions to Speaking Skills

This framework illustrates that speaking development is not a product of isolated classroom learning but emerges from learners' participation in broader sociocultural environments

2. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative methods approach was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. The study involved 33 sixth-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, consisting of 8 males and 25 females. The participants represented Batak Toba and Nias ethnic backgrounds. Instruments obtain comprehensive and relevant data aligned with the objectives of this study. Multiple instruments were employed. These instruments were carefully selected to capture not only the learners' language proficiency but also the social and cultural factors influencing their learning process. The instruments included a speaking test, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations:

- a. Speaking Test: Adopted from Weigle (2002), assessing content, organization, language use, and pronunciation.
- b. Semi-Structured Interviews: Explored students' perceptions of social background and cultural exposure.
- c. Questionnaires: Gathered data on family support, access to resources, and media habits.

d. Classroom Observations: Documented participation, confidence, and use of cultural expressions.

Quantitative speaking test results were categorized into high, medium, and low proficiency levels. Qualitative data were transcribed and thematically analyzed. Findings from different sources were triangulated to strengthen validity. Quantitative data from the speaking test were categorized into three levels: high proficiency (≥ 80), medium proficiency (70–79), and low proficiency (< 70). Descriptive statistics were used to present frequencies and percentages, while cross-tabulations mapped proficiency categories against social background and cultural exposure. Qualitative data (interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, and observation notes) were analyzed using thematic analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 33 sixth-semester students from the English Education Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen. The respondents consisted of 8 males and 25 females, predominantly from Batak Toba and Nias ethnic backgrounds. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a speaking proficiency test using an assessment rubric adapted from Weigle (2002). Each participant was categorized according to their social background (socioeconomic status, access to English courses, home environment) and cultural exposure (media engagement, intercultural experiences, and attitudes toward foreign culture).

The analysis revealed several social and cultural dimensions influencing students' English language learning. These were grouped into three major categories:

- Social Background: Family socioeconomic status; Access to English learning facilities; Residential environment

(urban/rural); Social interactions in English outside the classroom.

- Cultural Exposure: Consumption of English media (films, music, internet); Participation in international activities (exchange programs, online seminars, etc.); Personal interest in foreign culture.
- Perceptions of Native-Speaker Culture: Attitudes toward Western cultural values; Degree of comfort or discomfort in adopting foreign cultural expressions; Adaptation to communicative styles and cultural contexts.

Data were analyzed thematically, allowing for the classification of findings into patterns that reflect the influence of social and cultural dimensions on students' English-speaking proficiency. The speaking proficiency test produced scores ranging from 50 to 95. Each student was assessed across four categories—content, organization, language use, and pronunciation—with a maximum possible score of 20, multiplied by five to produce a final score, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below:

Table 1.
 Speaking Scores of Participants

Category	Score Range	Number of Students	Percentage
High	≥ 80	13	39%
Medium	70–79	14	42%
Low	< 70	6	18%

As shown in Table 1, the majority of students (42%) were classified in the medium category with scores ranging from 70 to 79. A smaller proportion (39%) achieved high proficiency with scores above 80, while 18% remained in the low category with scores below 70. This distribution suggests that although many students demonstrate adequate speaking competence, only a limited number have reached advanced proficiency, and a notable minority still struggle with basic speaking performance.

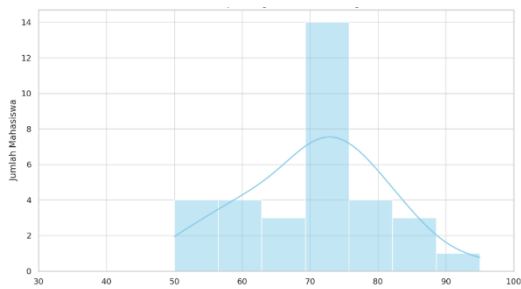


Figure 2. Distribution of Students' Speaking Scores (Weigle Rubric)

The distribution shows that most students performed within the medium range (70–79). Only a minority achieved high proficiency (≥ 80), while a smaller group remained in the low category (< 70). As shown in Figure 2, the majority of students are concentrated in the medium category (70–79), confirming that most learners possess an adequate but improvable level of speaking competence. A comparable proportion is visible in the high category (≥ 80), while only a small group of students fall into the low category (< 70). The visual distribution makes it evident that although high-performing students exist, the dominant trend is that of developing proficiency, underscoring the need for pedagogical interventions that support learners in progressing beyond the medium range.

a. Categories of Social Background and Cultural Exposure

In order to analyze the role of social and cultural dimensions in students' language learning, it was necessary to establish clear criteria for categorization. The following table presents the criteria for identifying students' levels of social background and cultural exposure. This categorization is important as it provides a systematic framework for classifying students' experiences, resources, and interactions with culture, thereby offering deeper insights into how these dimensions influence the development of their second language skills.

Table 2.
 Criteria for Identification of Social and Cultural Dimensions

Dimension	Level	Criteria
Social Background	High	Attended English courses outside
	Medium	school (e.g., in the city), with access to additional facilities.
	Low	Learned only from regular school without extra courses, but shows interest and independent effort. Never attended courses, learned only from village/rural schools with limited facilities.
Cultural Exposure	High	Actively consumes foreign media without subtitles, confident in discussing foreign cultures.
	Medium	Aware of the importance of foreign cultures, but still hesitant to make mistakes in cultural use.
	Low	Avoids or feels uncomfortable with foreign cultures, does not imitate or access foreign media.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically and then classified into three categories: Social Background, Cultural Exposure, and Social Background. The results of the classification revealed that the majority of students fell into the medium social background category (45%) and the high cultural exposure category (40%).

b. Performance Categories

Of the 33 students assessed, most fell into the medium proficiency range (70–84), indicating adequate but improvable speaking competence. Only five students achieved high proficiency (≥ 85), while eight fell into the low category (< 70), requiring targeted support.

Table 3.
 Students' Socio-Cultural Dimensions and Speaking Scores

No.	Student Initials	Social Background	Cultural Exposure	Speaking Score
1	M.Y.W.J.	High	High	88
2	G.L.P.	Medium	High	80
3	C.R.H.	Low	Low	65
4	R.S.S.	Medium	Medium	72
5	R.A.T.	High	High	90
6	S.C.T.	High	High	89
7	T.U.S.	Medium	High	78
8	C.A.K.P.	Low	Low	66
9	M.J.A.R.	Medium	Medium	73
10	A.M.P.	High	High	87

No.	Student Initials	Social Background	Cultural Exposure	Speaking Score
11	R.F.D.A.S.	High	High	85
12	M.M.P.	Medium	High	76
13	C.D.	Low	Low	64
14	S.A.	Medium	Medium	71
15	D.A.S.	High	High	88
16	R.E.S.	High	High	86
17	P.P.S.	Medium	High	79
18	G.P.	Low	Low	67
19	A.S.S.	Medium	Medium	74
20	A.R.P.	High	High	90
21	H.M.	High	High	85
22	M.A.S.	Medium	High	77
23	Y.S.	Low	Low	62
24	N.A.S.	Medium	Medium	70
25	B.W.S.	High	High	88

These findings suggest that although most students demonstrate basic speaking ability, pedagogical interventions integrating cultural and social dimensions are necessary to move learners beyond the medium proficiency threshold. In addition, developing learner autonomy not only increases students' engagement and motivation but also strengthens their capacity to manage the learning independently (Genti, 2024). This implies that fostering autonomy alongside cultural exposure can provide a more sustainable foundation for improving learners' speaking proficiency. Other individual factors also play a significant role. For instance, Upor (2021) found that age and the length of exposure influence the perception and production of vowel sounds, suggesting that language learning outcomes are shaped not only by social and cultural contexts but also by learners' developmental and experiential backgrounds. Moreover, first language or mother tongue may help or even become a barrier to learn a specific language such as learning English (Setiawan, 2018). This implies that learners' proficiency is influenced not only by sociocultural and motivational aspects but also by the facilitating or hindering role of their L1.

Taken together, these insights highlight the complex interplay of social, cultural, individual, and linguistic factors in shaping students' speaking proficiency. A comprehensive approach

that integrates cultural exposure, autonomy-supportive pedagogy, and sensitivity to learners' first language backgrounds will provide a more sustainable foundation for enhancing communicative competence. Table 3 above functions as a diagnostic mapping of students' speaking scores onto their socio-cultural profiles; it therefore provides an empirical basis for interpreting how social background and cultural exposure relate to speaking proficiency (see Table 3). By presenting each student's social background, level of cultural exposure, and speaking score in parallel, the table does more than summarize raw results: it permits pattern detection (e.g., clusters of high scores among students with both high social resources and extensive cultural exposure) and guides targeted instructional responses.

Two clear patterns emerge from the mapped data. First, students who combine a higher social background (access to additional instruction and resources) with greater cultural exposure (frequent, unscripted engagement with English media and intercultural activities) tend to occupy the upper range of speaking scores (above 80). Second, students from more limited social backgrounds who also report low cultural exposure are disproportionately represented among the lower-scoring group. These empirical associations are consistent with the descriptive distribution previously reported in this study, which showed a plurality of learners in the medium proficiency band with smaller but notable high- and low-performing groups.

The observed relationships can be theoretically accounted for using Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Investment Theory Norton [6]. From a Vygotskian perspective, students with richer social resources and more frequent cultural engagement enjoy more opportunities for mediated interaction—

both formal (tutors, courses) and informal (media, peer conversation)—that scaffold their movement through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Such scaffolding accelerates acquisition of pragmatic routines, fluency, and context-appropriate language use. Simultaneously, Norton (2013) explains the investment framework, which suggests that students with greater access and a positive cultural orientation are more likely to “invest” in communicative practice. They perceive greater social and symbolic returns for doing so, which motivates risk-taking and sustained engagement. These theoretical lenses together explain why social and cultural capital translate into observable gains in speaking performance.

To provide a clearer visualization of this distribution, Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of students across three categories of speaking proficiency: high, medium, and low.

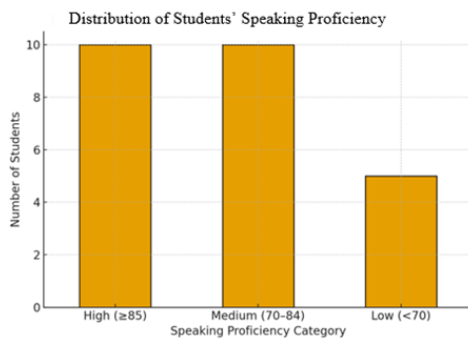


Figure 3. The distribution of Students' Speaking Proficiency

The findings also align with prior empirical work linking cultural exposure to improvements in fluency and pragmatic competence (e.g., Taguchi, 2011; Kinginger, 2013) and with studies showing that access to supplementary instruction correlates with higher oral proficiency (Weigle, 2002; Richards, 2008). In pedagogical terms, the mapping highlights two complementary intervention routes: (1) expand access and scaffolded practice for students from lower social backgrounds (e.g., institutionally provided conversation

clubs, peer tutoring, low-cost multimedia resources), and (2) integrate culturally rich input and opportunities for meaningful interaction into the curriculum for all students (e.g., guided media-analysis tasks, role-plays that simulate intercultural communication, and reflective tasks that make cultural knowledge explicit). Both routes operationalize SCT Vygotsky (1978) and Investment theory of Norton (2000) by increasing mediated interaction and perceived returns on learners' efforts.

In sum, the table and the figure are not merely descriptive: they provide a structured evidential link between students' socio-cultural contexts and their speaking outcomes. This link is theoretically grounded and practically actionable—suggesting that contextually responsive, equity-oriented pedagogies (which combine scaffolded instruction with expanded cultural exposure) are likely to be most effective in helping learners move beyond the medium proficiency threshold identified in this cohort.

c. Social Background and Speaking Performance

Students from middle-to-upper socioeconomic backgrounds with access to English courses generally achieved higher speaking scores, typically ranging from 80 to 90. These learners benefited from both formal and informal learning opportunities, confirming that educational access directly influences speaking development.

In contrast, students from limited social backgrounds, particularly those from rural areas with minimal access to English courses, tended to score below 70. This finding highlights the persistent gap between urban and rural learners, consistent with Norton's (2000) assertion that identity investment and social environment significantly shape language acquisition.

d. Cultural Exposure and Speaking Proficiency

Exposure to foreign culture—through English-language films, music, and online seminars—proved to be a significant factor. Students with high levels of cultural engagement demonstrated stronger confidence, pronunciation accuracy, and fluency. For instance, those who regularly consumed English media without subtitles exhibited greater flexibility in expression and familiarity with idiomatic language. This finding supports Kramsch's (1998) argument that language and culture are inseparable, and learners immersed in cultural practices tend to develop more authentic communicative competence.

e. Perceptions of Native-Speaker Culture

Some students expressed discomfort in adopting Western communicative styles, perceiving them as too liberal or divergent from local norms. Such perceptions often limited their willingness to imitate authentic expressions, leading to moderate speaking performance (70–75).

Conversely, students who embraced foreign cultural elements as part of the learning process performed better, showing higher confidence and participation in discussions. This underscores the importance of cultural openness in shaping speaking proficiency.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social and cultural dimensions in the development of English-speaking proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that students' social backgrounds—particularly socioeconomic status, access to English courses, and home environment—significantly shape their opportunities to practice and develop speaking skills. Likewise, cultural

exposure, including engagement with English media and openness to intercultural experiences, strongly contributes to learners' confidence, fluency, and communicative competence.

The results further reveal that while most students fall into the medium proficiency range, those with richer social resources and higher cultural exposure consistently achieve stronger performance. Conversely, students from more limited backgrounds and with minimal exposure remain in the lower category, underscoring the persistent gap in learning outcomes. These patterns confirm the theoretical claims of Sociocultural Theory Vygotsky (1978) and Investment Theory of Norton (2000), which highlight the importance of mediated interaction, identity, and access to resources in shaping second language acquisition.

In practical terms, the study underscores the need for contextually responsive pedagogy that integrates both linguistic and cultural components. Expanding access to learning opportunities, providing culturally rich materials, and designing activities that promote authentic interaction can help learners move beyond the medium proficiency threshold. Ultimately, the study affirms that language learning is inseparable from its sociocultural context, and that addressing both social and cultural dimensions is essential for fostering communicative competence in English as a foreign language.

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