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## THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THAILAND STUDENTS AT ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAM IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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### Abstrak

Peran bahasa Inggris yang tersebar dapat dimanfaatkan oleh siswa EFL di negara-negara yang bukan penutur asli dalam proses pembelajaran bahasa. Konsekuensi dari situasi ini adalah memungkinkan siswa ASEAN untuk belajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Banyak mahasiswa EFL yang belajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia berasal dari negara-negara ASEAN, salah satunya adalah mahasiswa Thailand yang terdaftar sebagai pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Universitas Muhammadiyah Muara Bungo. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana tantangan mengenai kesulitan dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris khususnya Mendengarkan dan Berbicara yang dialami oleh mahasiswa asing yang berasal dari Thailand. Dalam melakukan penelitian ini, peneliti menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi untuk merancang metode yang dapat memberikan sumber data yang kaya tentang pengalaman individu. Ada 2 peserta yang berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini dan mereka memenuhi kriteria inklusi untuk penelitian. Dalam pengumpulan data, peneliti menggunakan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Data tersebut kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat dua subtopik dalam tantangan berbicara, yaitu linguistik (kekurangan kosakata, kekurangan tata bahasa, dan pelafalan) serta non-linguistik (ketakutan membuat kesalahan, kecemasan, kurangnya kepercayaan diri, kurangnya motivasi, dan penggunaan bahasa ibu). Dan terdapat dua subtopik dalam tantangan mendengarkan, yaitu linguistik (aksen dan kecepatan bicara, keterbatasan kosakata, tata bahasa, dan struktur kalimat) dan non-linguistik (gangguan lingkungan dan perbedaan budaya).

**Kata Kunci:** Tantangan; Fenomenologi; Kualitatif

### Abstract

*The spread role of english can be utilized by EFL students in nonnative speaking countries in the language learning process. The consequence of this situation is that allows ASEAN students to study english in Indonesia. Many EFL students who study English in Indonesia come from ASEAN countries, one of which is Thailand student who registered as English learners at Muhammadiyah University of Muara Bungo. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by foreign students from Thailand in learning English, particularly in listening and speaking. In conducting this study, the researcher used a phenomenological approach to design a method that could provide rich data sources about*

*individual experiences. There were two participants in this study, and they met the inclusion criteria for the research. In data collection, the researcher used semi-structured interviews. The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the study indicate that there are two subtheme in the challenges of speaking, namely linguistic (limited vocabulary, limited grammar, and pronunciation) and non-linguistic (fear of making mistakes, anxiety, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and use of the mother tongue). There were also two subtheme in listening challenges, namely linguistic (accent and speaking speed, limited vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure) and non-linguistic (environmental disturbances and Cultural Differences).*

**Keywords:** *Challenges; Phenomenology; Qualitative Thesis*

## INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, English has evolved into the world's most influential language, functioning as a global medium of communication across education, technology, and international relations. Its expansion in the ASEAN region has been strongly influenced by the forces of globalization, creating both opportunities and challenges for non-native speakers (Low & Ran, 2018). English is not only employed as an academic requirement but also serves as a lingua franca among countries with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In the ASEAN context, the increasing mobility of students across borders highlights the role of English as a unifying tool, yet at the same time, it amplifies the struggle for learners who must acquire it as a foreign language while adapting to new sociocultural environments.

Indonesia, as one of the largest countries in ASEAN, has positioned itself as a destination for international students, particularly those from neighboring Thailand. Through various scholarship and cooperation programs, Thai students have enrolled in English Education Study Programs at Indonesian universities, including Muhammadiyah University of Muara Bungo (UMMUBA). Such initiatives reflect the broader effort of Indonesian institutions to internationalize education and foster cross-cultural

exchange (Ningsih & Shasrini, 2024). However, while these programs provide access to higher education, the actual experiences of Thai students often reveal that adaptation to a new learning environment is fraught with linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges that are rarely anticipated in institutional policies.

The context of Thai students in Indonesia is particularly complex because they must simultaneously manage two foreign languages: English as the medium of their academic studies and Indonesian as the language of daily communication. Unlike students who study English in native-speaking countries, Thai learners in Indonesia do not receive consistent exposure to authentic English use outside the classroom. Instead, they find themselves negotiating meaning in both Indonesian and English, which creates an additional cognitive burden (Khilqi, 2022). This "dual burden" can obstruct their learning progress, especially in productive and receptive skills such as speaking and listening, where constant practice and supportive environments are crucial for improvement.

Speaking, as a productive skill, is frequently identified as the most anxiety-provoking component of language learning for EFL students. It requires not only linguistic knowledge but also psychological readiness, including

confidence, motivation, and willingness to communicate. Previous studies reveal that learners often avoid speaking in class due to fear of negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation difficulties (Wiratri & Suharyanto, 2024). For Thai students, these barriers are intensified by the fact that their local peers in Indonesia also tend to use Bahasa Indonesia or regional dialects rather than English in daily interactions, which reduces opportunities to practice oral communication in the target language.

Listening, as a receptive skill, also emerges as a significant challenge for Thai students in Indonesian universities. Academic lectures, classroom discussions, and peer conversations demand a level of listening proficiency that often exceeds the learners' current abilities. Rahimirad and Moini (2015) demonstrated that EFL learners face difficulties in following lectures delivered at natural speed, especially when complex terminology and culturally specific references are used. For Thai students, the combination of accent unfamiliarity, fast speech, and limited vocabulary leads to frequent misunderstanding. These difficulties not only affect academic comprehension but also limit participation in classroom activities, thereby reducing the overall quality of learning.

The psychological dimension of language learning further complicates the adaptation process. Shahzad, Nono, and Duta (2020) found that language barriers are directly linked to heightened stress among international students in Indonesia, often resulting in feelings of isolation, low motivation, and decreased academic performance. Anxiety, shyness, and lack of confidence are repeatedly cited as major obstacles that prevent students from actively engaging in classroom interactions. For Thai students, such psychological challenges are compounded by the awareness of being "foreigners" in an academic and cultural environment

where expectations and norms differ significantly from their home country.

Cultural differences also play a decisive role in shaping students' learning experiences. As highlighted by Francis and Elvis (2023), international students frequently struggle to decode not only the language of instruction but also the implicit cultural norms that influence communication in academic settings. For Thai students at UMMUBA, the gap extends beyond academic discourse to include understanding of Indonesian social norms, classroom interaction styles, and expectations regarding student participation. These cultural adjustments demand high levels of flexibility and resilience, and when left unsupported, they may hinder students' academic progress and personal well-being.

The process of adaptation for international students has been conceptualized as involving both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions. Ningsih and Shasrini (2024) argue that success in international education depends not only on language skills but also on the ability to develop intercultural communication competencies. This requires students to cultivate tolerance for ambiguity, respect for different cultural practices, and effective strategies for managing cross-cultural misunderstandings. In this regard, Thai students' adaptation in Indonesia is not merely about learning English but also about negotiating multiple identities as Thai nationals, EFL learners, and temporary residents in a foreign academic community.

Despite the growing literature on international students in Indonesia, research focusing specifically on Thai students remains limited. Much of the existing work has examined broader populations of international students from diverse countries (Wiratri & Suharyanto, 2024; Shahzad et al., 2020). Consequently, the unique linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges of Thai students

in regional universities like UMMUBA have not been adequately documented. This lack of context-specific research leaves a gap in understanding how smaller academic institutions can design effective interventions to support their international learners.

The urgency of this study lies in its potential contribution to addressing that gap. By investigating the specific challenges faced by Thai students in speaking and listening, this research seeks to generate insights into how linguistic and cultural barriers intersect in the learning process. Khilqi (2022) found that Thai students encounter consistent problems with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension, but less is known about how these difficulties manifest in smaller universities outside major Indonesian cities.

Exploring this context not only enriches the academic discussion but also informs the development of localized strategies that are tailored to the realities of regional higher education institutions. Moreover, documenting the experiences of Thai students offers practical benefits for multiple stakeholders. For students themselves, the findings can help raise awareness of common challenges and encourage the adoption of coping strategies. For lecturers, the research provides evidence to design classroom practices that are more inclusive, such as adjusting speech pace, incorporating multimodal teaching materials, and offering targeted feedback. For institutions, the study can guide the establishment of orientation programs, counseling services, and peer mentoring schemes aimed at facilitating smoother adaptation for international students.

The study is also relevant at the policy level. Indonesia's ambition to internationalize higher education requires a nuanced understanding of how international students experience local academic environments. Without such

understanding, initiatives risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. As Francis and Elvis (2023) noted, language and cultural barriers can reduce students' engagement and academic success, ultimately undermining the reputation of host institutions. By addressing the real challenges faced by Thai students, universities like UMMUBA can strengthen their capacity to attract and retain international learners, thereby enhancing their global standing.

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of Thai students. Creswell (2012) emphasizes that phenomenology is well-suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences, particularly in educational contexts where subjective realities play a critical role. By conducting in-depth interviews and applying thematic analysis, this study aims to uncover the nuanced dimensions of speaking and listening challenges, as well as the coping strategies employed by students. Such an approach ensures that the findings are not only descriptive but also explanatory, providing insights into the processes underlying students' adaptation.

In summary, the challenges faced by Thai students in Indonesian universities illustrate the broader complexities of international education in non-native English contexts. By examining their difficulties in speaking and listening, this research contributes to the theoretical understanding of language learning barriers while offering practical recommendations for educators and policymakers. The study ultimately seeks to answer two central questions: What challenges do Thai students face in speaking and What challenges do they face in listening. The answers to these questions are expected to enhance teaching practices, inform institutional support mechanisms, and enrich the discourse on

international student adaptation in ASEAN higher education.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. A qualitative method was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore and understand in depth the lived experiences of students in facing language learning challenges. The phenomenological approach was considered appropriate since it emphasizes participants' subjective perspectives and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Creswell, 2012). Through this approach, the study was able to capture not only the linguistic barriers encountered by Thai students in speaking and listening but also the psychological and cultural dimensions influencing their learning process.

The research was conducted at the English Education Study Program of Muhammadiyah University of Muara Bungo (UMMUBA), located in Bungo Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia. Data collection was carried out during the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, when Thai students had already spent approximately one year adapting to the new academic environment. The population of this study was international students enrolled at UMMUBA, while the sample was narrowed to two Thai students who were purposively selected. The participants were in their fourth semester of study and had been living in Indonesia for twelve months. Purposive sampling was applied because these students were directly relevant to the research focus, representing the challenges of international

learners in a regional Indonesian university.

The primary data collection technique was semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while still guided by predetermined questions. The interview questions were developed based on the theoretical framework of speaking and listening challenges in EFL contexts. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, via online platforms, and through recorded voice notes to accommodate participants' availability. Each interview session lasted between 30–45 minutes and was transcribed verbatim for analysis. Documentation, such as students' learning reflections and institutional reports, was also utilized to complement the interview data and ensure triangulation.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This systematic process allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns in the students' experiences and to categorize them into meaningful themes such as vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulties, listening comprehension barriers, and cultural adaptation issues. By employing thematic analysis, the study ensured that the findings reflected the authentic voices of the participants while maintaining analytical accuracy.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### A. Finding

The findings of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews

with two Thai students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Muara Bungo. Both participants had been living in Indonesia for approximately one year and were in their fourth semester of study. The data revealed that the participants faced significant challenges in speaking and listening skills, which were influenced by both linguistic and nonlinguistic factors.

In terms of speaking, both students reported experiencing difficulty in vocabulary mastery. They often found themselves unable to express their ideas fluently due to limited knowledge of appropriate words. One participant admitted to frequently preparing vocabulary lists before presentations but still becoming confused when speaking in class, while the other expressed frustration at being unable to recall the correct words during conversations.

Grammatical challenges were also identified as a major obstacle in speaking. The students stated that even when they had clear ideas in mind, they often struggled to construct sentences according to correct grammatical structures. This uncertainty led to hesitation in communication, as they doubted the accuracy of their sentences when translating ideas from Thai or Indonesian into English.

Pronunciation difficulties were another recurring theme. Both participants expressed fear of being ridiculed for mispronouncing words, which reduced their confidence in speaking English. They reported that understanding different English accents, especially from lecturers or peers, was particularly challenging.

This caused them to remain silent during group discussions and limited their active involvement in classroom activities.

Non-linguistic factors were also found to significantly affect speaking performance. The students described feeling anxious when asked to speak in front of the class, particularly during presentations and group discussions. This anxiety often caused them to lose focus, forget their prepared ideas, or speak in a low voice. Shyness and fear of negative judgment were also reported as reasons for their reluctance to participate actively.

The findings further showed that lack of confidence was a barrier to effective speaking. One participant mentioned feeling inferior when comparing their English ability to more active classmates, while the other expressed insecurity about being judged by peers. These feelings made them reluctant to engage in classroom discussions, even when they had prepared ideas in advance.

In addition to confidence issues, motivation was also a determining factor. One participant stated that being laughed at during mistakes made them lose the desire to try speaking again. Another reported feeling unmotivated when classroom activities involved rigid memorization tasks, as they believed such methods did not help them develop natural communication skills.

The use of mother tongue also emerged as a common habit that hindered speaking improvement. The participants admitted to frequently using Thai when communicating with

fellow Thai peers and relying on Indonesian when interacting with local students. English was rarely used outside the classroom, which limited their exposure and opportunities for practice.

In terms of listening, both participants indicated difficulties in understanding lectures delivered at a fast pace and with unfamiliar accents. They reported that they often caught only a few keywords while missing the overall meaning of conversations. Limited vocabulary and complex grammar structures were identified as factors that caused misunderstanding and loss of concentration during listening tasks.

Finally, environmental and cultural factors also affected listening comprehension. The students mentioned being distracted by classroom noise and external disturbances, which reduced their ability to focus. Cultural differences, such as the use of proverbs or indirect expressions in Indonesian classrooms, further complicated their understanding. These challenges combined to create significant barriers to both academic performance and social interaction during their studies.

## **B. Discussion**

The findings of this study confirm that Thai students encounter multifaceted challenges in learning English, particularly in speaking and listening. These difficulties demonstrate the interconnection between linguistic barriers, psychological factors, and socio-cultural influences. The research

objectives, namely to identify the speaking and listening challenges of Thai students, were achieved by uncovering how these dimensions intersect in the students' academic experiences.

Speaking challenges were found to be primarily rooted in vocabulary limitations, grammatical uncertainty, and pronunciation difficulties. This supports Nation's (2001) assertion, cited in the file, that vocabulary is a basic component of oral communication. Limited vocabulary prevented the students from producing fluent speech and led to hesitation. This finding aligns with Alqahtani's (2015) claim that inadequate vocabulary obstructs the success of communication in EFL learning.

Beyond vocabulary, grammar-related hesitation indicates the importance of balancing explicit grammar learning with communicative practice. Ellis (2006) emphasizes that an overemphasis on grammar without sufficient communicative exposure leads to students' fear of making mistakes. This was evident in participants' reluctance to construct sentences due to doubts about accuracy, suggesting that teaching strategies should provide more meaningful contexts for grammatical application.

Pronunciation problems, particularly the fear of ridicule, reveal the role of phonological differences between Thai and English. This resonates with Field (2008), who noted that unfamiliar sound systems can slow down processing and comprehension. The

students' fear of mispronunciation, therefore, reflects not only a linguistic issue but also a psychological one, where negative self-perceptions limit their willingness to participate.

Psychological barriers such as anxiety, shyness, and lack of confidence further restrict students' speaking opportunities. These findings align with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) concept of foreign language anxiety, which remains relevant in recent studies. For instance, Liu and Jackson (2008) reported that fear of ridicule is a major cause of speaking anxiety among EFL learners. The current study adds to this discourse by showing that the anxiety of Thai students is amplified in a non-native environment where English is not widely used outside the classroom.

Another significant factor is motivation, or the lack thereof. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis explains how negative emotions such as embarrassment raise the filter and block language acquisition. The participants' demotivation after being laughed at illustrates this phenomenon clearly. Recent studies also confirm the importance of a supportive learning environment, as negative peer reactions reduce learners' persistence in practicing English (Wiratri & Suharyanto, 2024).

The reliance on mother tongue, observed among Thai students, underscores the influence of the immediate social environment. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated

learning suggests that community practices shape language use. Since peers often preferred Indonesian or regional languages, English use was minimized. This finding contributes a new perspective by highlighting how the linguistic ecology of Indonesian classrooms affects international students' opportunity to use English.

Listening challenges were equally complex, with accent unfamiliarity and speech speed emerging as central issues. Goh (2000) and Vandergrift (2007) argue that unfamiliar accents and fast delivery cause cognitive overload, preventing learners from capturing meaning. The Thai students' experiences confirm these theories and show that lecture delivery styles significantly impact comprehension. This suggests the need for lecturers to adopt strategies such as slower pacing and the use of visual media.

Grammar and vocabulary also hindered listening comprehension. As noted by Nation and Newton (2009), listening requires both lexical recognition and syntactic processing. The participants' struggle with complex structures such as passive voice and perfect tenses reflects this difficulty. This study reinforces the idea that explicit training in listening strategies, including recognizing discourse markers and practicing with varied accents, is crucial for EFL learners.

Non-linguistic factors, such as environmental distractions and cultural differences, also shaped listening experiences. Yildiz et al. (2014) found that poor audio quality and unfamiliar

cultural references affect comprehension. Similarly, the Thai students in this study struggled with Indonesian proverbs and indirect expressions, showing that cultural knowledge is integral to effective listening. This highlights the importance of integrating cultural orientation into academic support programs for international students.

In conclusion, this study contributes new insights by situating Thai students' challenges within the specific context of a regional Indonesian university. Unlike research in larger urban institutions, the findings demonstrate that the dual burden of learning English and adapting to Indonesian culture creates a unique learning environment. The results underline the urgency of designing localized support systems, including tailored teaching strategies, peer mentoring, and intercultural training. By doing so, institutions can lower the affective barriers of international students and foster more inclusive academic environments.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Thai students in the English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Muara Bungo face complex challenges in mastering English, particularly in speaking and listening, which are influenced not only by linguistic limitations such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation but also by non-linguistic factors including anxiety, lack of confidence, cultural unfamiliarity, and limited opportunities for authentic practice. Their listening difficulties are compounded by fast-paced speech, unfamiliar accents, and

the use of culturally embedded expressions, while their speaking challenges are heightened by fear of making mistakes and reduced motivation when faced with negative peer reactions.

These findings answer the research objectives by showing that the barriers encountered by Thai students are both internal, arising from personal psychological states, and external, shaped by the learning environment and social context of a regional Indonesian university. The results emphasize the need for educational institutions to design supportive strategies that integrate academic, psychological, and cultural dimensions, thereby enabling international students not only to improve their language skills but also to adapt more effectively and participate confidently in academic and social interactions.

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