

**The Role of Cultural Background in Shaping the Communication Styles Of
EFL Students**

Thesis

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how cultural background shapes the communication styles of EFL students at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. Communication in EFL learning is influenced not only by linguistic ability but also by cultural values such as collectivism, politeness, respect for hierarchy, and high-context communication. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight students and analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings show that students' cultural orientations significantly affect their verbal and non-verbal communication. Many students prefer indirect expression, avoid confrontation, rely on silence and gestures, and show hesitation when interacting with lecturers due to cultural expectations of respect. Cultural differences also create barriers, including fear of making mistakes, reluctance to speak, and misunderstandings in classroom interaction. The study concludes that cultural background plays a crucial role in shaping students' communication styles and participation in EFL learning. It highlights the need for culturally responsive teaching strategies to support more inclusive and effective communication in the classroom.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. Background

Communication is a fundamental component in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it not only provides a means for linguistic practice but also serves as a channel for expressing cultural values and social relationships. Language, in this sense, is not merely a system of grammar and vocabulary but also a cultural tool that reflects and transmits shared beliefs, norms, and identities (Kramsch, 2020). In academic contexts, effective communication enables students to actively participate, negotiate meaning, and collaborate with peers. However, communication styles are not universal; they are shaped by cultural backgrounds that determine how individuals express ideas, maintain relationships, and respond to authority.

Culture, defined as a system of shared meanings, values, and practices (Geertz, 2019), plays a central role in shaping communication styles. Hofstede's (2020) cultural dimensions theory highlights orientations such as collectivism versus individualism, high versus low power distance, and high-context versus low-context communication, all of which influence communication patterns. For example, students from collectivist backgrounds tend to prioritize harmony, politeness, and indirectness in interactions, while those from individualist backgrounds often prefer more direct and assertive communication (Markus & Kitayama, 2021). Hall's (2020) high-context communication framework further explains that many cultures rely heavily on nonverbal cues, silence, and shared

understanding rather than explicit verbal expression. These cultural frameworks directly influence how EFL students communicate with lecturers and peers in the classroom.

As Munandar (2015) explained, it was closely connected to politeness strategies and the cultural value of maintaining harmony, which echoes Confucian and collectivist traditions. Such insights reinforce the argument that cultural background not only shapes verbal and non-verbal communication in spoken classroom contexts but also extends to students' academic writing practices. In line with the present study, these findings illustrate how cultural norms emphasizing respect, indirectness, and group harmony may both enrich and constrain the communicative styles of EFL students in Indonesia.

Recent studies have reinforced the role of culture in language education. Nguyen (2024) demonstrated that cultural norms related to politeness and authority strongly influenced students' willingness to participate in English-speaking activities. Similarly, Chen and Li (2023) found that students' preferences for teacher feedback were shaped by cultural expectations, with many favoring indirect and supportive comments over direct correction. Al-Harthi (2022) emphasized that students' interpretations of English texts were mediated by their cultural schemas, resulting in variations in comprehension. Research in the Indonesian context has confirmed these findings. Rahman (2021) reported that Indonesian students' communication styles, rooted in collectivism, shaped their perceptions of fluency and accuracy, while Santoso et al. (2020) highlighted the influence of local languages and cultural practices on English learning. Collectively, these findings

suggest that culture is not an external variable but rather an integral factor shaping communication in EFL classrooms.

Previous studies on English language education in Indonesia have highlighted that teaching and learning processes are strongly influenced by cultural and contextual elements. For instance, Pratama et al. (2024) developed the *EFL Teacher Self- and Collective Efficacy Scale (ETSCE)*, which includes “coping English as classroom communication” and “creating an English milieu” as essential factors of teaching efficacy. Their findings indicate that classroom communication in Indonesia is embedded within cultural norms, including politeness, respect for hierarchy, and collective harmony. This reinforces the idea that communication in EFL classrooms—whether from teachers or students—cannot be separated from cultural background and social context.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in EFL research. Much of the existing literature has focused on linguistic competence—such as grammar mastery, vocabulary acquisition, or test performance—while paying less attention to the sociocultural dimensions of communication (Chen & An, 2020). Misunderstandings in EFL classrooms are often attributed to limited linguistic knowledge, yet cultural differences in communication styles, turn-taking rules, and pragmatic expectations may be equally important causes (Gudykunst, 2020). In the Indonesian context, where students come from diverse ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds, the cultural dimension of communication is highly relevant. However, research specifically examining how local cultural orientations, such as

Acehnese traditions and Islamic values, shape students' communication styles in English learning remains limited.

II. Research Purpose

The primary objective of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how cultural backgrounds shaped the communication styles of EFL students, particularly in classroom interactions and language learning processes. The research focused on exploring the cultural values, norms, and practices that influenced both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the challenges and opportunities that emerged from the diversity of communication styles in EFL learning environments. Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Examine the relationship between students' cultural backgrounds and their communication styles by investigating how cultural orientations such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and high-context communication shaped their interaction patterns in English language learning.
2. Identify the cultural factors influencing students' verbal and non-verbal communication by analyzing the values, traditions, and specific cultural practices that affected their preferences in spoken interaction, non-verbal expression, and participation in EFL classrooms.
3. Analyze the challenges and opportunities arising from diverse communication styles by exploring barriers such as reluctance to speak, fear of making mistakes, or misinterpretations, as well as opportunities for intercultural collaboration and enhanced cultural awareness resulting from students' varied communication practices.

Through the achievement of these objectives, this study was expected to contribute to a broader understanding of the role of culture in EFL learning and to serve as a practical reference for developing more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching strategies.

III. Research Questions

1. How does the student's culture influence their communication style in the context of learning English at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh ?
2. What communication barriers and challenges do students face due to cultural differences in the English learning process at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh?

IV. Background Significance

An understanding of how cultural background shapes communication styles between students at UIN Ar-Raniry Aceh, as well as how this influences the English learning process. This research is not only academically relevant, but also has a significant impact on individual, student communities, and society at large. Here are some key points that explain why this research are importants:

1. Improved Individual Student Experience:
 - a) Improving Intercultural Communication Skills: This develops a deeper understanding of how culture influences communication styles, both in the context of social interaction and in English learning. With this understanding, students can improve their intercultural communication skills, so they can interact more

effectively and meaningfully with classmates, lecturers, and other people from various cultural backgrounds.

- b) Increased Confidence in Learning English: By understanding how culture influences attitudes, motivation and learning styles, students will feel more confident in learning English. This research will help them overcome anxiety and doubts speaking and interacting with English to participate more actively in learning activities.
- c) Holistic Self-Development: This research is not only about improving communication skills but also about holistic self-development. By reflecting on their own cultural biases and assumptions, students will become more self-aware, empathetic, and tolerant of cultural differences to face the challenges of the global world.
- d) Strengthening Cross-Cultural Collaboration: This research will help identify effective strategies for bridging cultural differences in study groups and team projects. In this way, students can collaborate effectively and productively to achieve optimal learning outcomes. Cross-cultural collaboration will also enrich students' learning experiences and broaden their insight into the world.

2. Implications for English Language Learning Development:

- a) Development of Contextual Learning Methods: This research will provide valuable input for English teachers at UIN Ar-Raniry in developing learning methods appropriate to cultural context and

student learning styles by understanding the challenges and opportunities to students, therefore teachers can create relevant learning methods, interesting and effective.

- b) Improving Teachers' Intercultural Competence: This research will also help English teachers to improve their intercultural competence to create an effective method in teaching and guiding students from various cultural backgrounds. This will create an inclusive and respectful cultural diversity learning environment.
- c) Development of Relevant Learning Materials: This research is to inspire English teachers to develop relevant learning materials to cultural context and students' values, including examples of local culture and Islamic values in learning materials, in this way students will be motivated and involved in the learning process.

3. Contribution to the Development of Science:

- a) Enrichment of Intercultural Communication Studies: This research will contribute to intercultural communication studies by presenting unique and relevant findings in the context of the dynamics in cross-cultural communication and provide guidance for future research.
- b) Development English Language Learning Theory and Practice: This research will also contribute to the development of effective and inclusive English learning theory and practice. By exploring the experiences of students and teachers, this research can produce new

insights into how culture influences the English learning process, and how to overcome challenges that may arise.

In short, the significance of this research lies in its potential to improve the experience of individual UIN Ar-Raniry from major English Education Students, develop a more inclusive and harmonious campus community, improve the quality of English language learning, and contribute to the development of science. This research is not only about cultural differences, but also about building bridges that connect these differences, and empowering students to become agents of positive change on campus and in the wider community.

