

Psycholinguistic Barriers in Foreign Language Communication: A Study of Students at UIN Alauddin Makassar

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Abstrak

This study examines the psycholinguistic barriers encountered by university students in foreign language communication and explores strategies for overcoming these barriers. The research was conducted at UIN Alauddin Makassar, involving students from four language-related departments: English Education, Arabic Education, English Literature, and Arabic Literature. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that psycholinguistic barriers in foreign language communication can be categorized into two main forms: barriers in language production and barriers in language perception. Language production barriers include difficulties in phonological accuracy, inappropriate intonation and stress, morphological and syntactic interference from the first language, and limited alignment between verbal expressions and non-verbal cues. Meanwhile, language perception barriers involve difficulties in maintaining concentration on conversational topics, predicting interlocutors' intentions, and providing appropriate responses to communicative acts. Furthermore, these barriers are influenced by both linguistic factors—such as limited mastery of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics—and non-linguistic factors, including low motivation, high anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. To address these challenges, the study proposes several strategies, including strengthening students' linguistic competence, providing psycholinguistic support to reduce anxiety, and creating supportive foreign language environments. The study highlights the importance of integrating psycholinguistic perspectives into foreign language instruction to enhance students' communicative competence.

Keywords

Psycholinguistics; Foreign Language Communication; Communication Barriers; University Students; Language Learning

Introduction

Human communication is fundamentally mediated through language, which functions not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a means of constructing meaning, identity, and social relationships. In academic and educational contexts, language plays a crucial role in shaping learning processes, particularly when learners are required to use a foreign language. Foreign language communication demands more than grammatical accuracy; it requires the integration of cognitive, psychological, and social processes that operate simultaneously during language production and perception (Harley, 2001).

In the era of globalization, mastery of foreign languages such as English and Arabic has become increasingly important for university students. English serves as a global lingua franca in academic discourse, science, technology, and international communication, while Arabic holds a strategic position in religious studies, intercultural communication, and Islamic scholarship. Consequently, higher education institutions place strong emphasis on developing students' communicative competence in foreign languages. However, despite prolonged exposure to foreign language instruction, many university students continue to experience difficulties in communicating effectively (Scarino et al., 1994).

One of the major challenges in foreign language learning lies in communication breakdowns that occur even when learners possess sufficient grammatical knowledge. Students often struggle to express ideas fluently, interpret messages accurately, or respond appropriately in communicative situations. These difficulties indicate that problems in foreign language communication cannot be fully explained by linguistic competence alone. Instead, they point to underlying psycholinguistic factors that influence how language is processed, produced, and understood in real-time interaction (Stern, 1983).

Psycholinguistics, as an interdisciplinary field integrating linguistics and psychology, provides a valuable framework for examining foreign language communication. It focuses on the mental processes involved in language acquisition, comprehension, and production, including memory, perception, attention, and emotional states (Darjowidjojo, 2003; Chaer, 2003). From a psycholinguistic perspective, communication difficulties may arise due to disruptions in encoding and decoding processes, where speakers struggle to transform thoughts into linguistic forms or fail to interpret incoming messages accurately (Osgood & Sebeok, 1965).

Previous studies have demonstrated that psycholinguistic barriers often manifest in both language production and language perception. In language production, learners may experience problems related to phonological accuracy, intonation patterns, morphological and syntactic interference from their first language, and inappropriate use of verbal and non-verbal expressions (Indah, 2017). In language perception, difficulties may occur in maintaining attention to conversational topics, predicting interlocutors' intentions, and interpreting pragmatic meanings embedded in utterances (Effendi, 1986).

Research on foreign language learning in Indonesian higher education contexts has revealed that students frequently experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence when communicating in a foreign language. These affective factors significantly influence learners' willingness to speak and their ability to process language efficiently

(Horwitz et al., 1986). High levels of anxiety may overload cognitive resources, thereby disrupting language processing and leading to communication breakdowns, even among learners with adequate linguistic knowledge.

In the context of Arabic and English language learning, psycholinguistic barriers may become more complex due to structural differences between the target languages and Indonesian as the learners' first language. Arabic, for instance, possesses a highly inflectional morphological system and complex syntactic rules, while English presents challenges in phonology and irregular spelling–pronunciation correspondence. These linguistic characteristics interact with learners' cognitive and psychological states, increasing the potential for communication difficulties (Tarigan, 1985; Indah, 2017).

Although a number of studies have explored language learning difficulties from linguistic and pedagogical perspectives, research that specifically examines foreign language communication barriers through a psycholinguistic lens remains limited, particularly in Islamic higher education institutions. Many existing studies focus on classroom performance or language acquisition outcomes, rather than on real communicative experiences and the psychological processes underlying communication failures. This gap highlights the need for empirical research that integrates psycholinguistic analysis into foreign language education.

UIN Alauddin Makassar, as an Islamic university with strong emphasis on both English and Arabic language education, provides a relevant context for investigating psycholinguistic barriers in foreign language communication. Students from language-related departments are expected to use foreign languages actively in academic and non-academic settings. However, observations indicate that many students still encounter persistent communication difficulties despite formal instruction and language programs. These challenges warrant systematic investigation to identify their underlying causes and possible solutions.

Therefore, this study aims to examine psycholinguistic barriers in foreign language communication among students at UIN Alauddin Makassar and to explore strategies for overcoming these barriers. By analyzing communication difficulties in both language production and perception, as well as their linguistic and non-linguistic determinants, this study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective foreign language teaching practices. The findings are expected to enrich psycholinguistic research in foreign language education and provide practical insights for improving students' communicative competence in higher education contexts.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate psycholinguistic barriers in foreign language communication among university students. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' communicative experiences, perceptions, and psychological processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly suitable for examining language-related phenomena in natural contexts, as it emphasizes rich, contextualized data and meaningful interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

The research was conducted at UIN Alauddin Makassar, an Islamic higher education institution that places strong emphasis on foreign language education, particularly English and Arabic. The participants consisted of students from four language-related departments: English Education, Arabic Education, English Literature, and Arabic Literature. These departments were selected purposively because their students are required to actively use foreign languages in both academic and communicative settings. The participants were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure that they had sufficient exposure to foreign language learning and communicative practice (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore students' subjective experiences, difficulties, and psychological responses during foreign language communication. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining focus on the research objectives. This method enabled the researcher to capture detailed insights into psycholinguistic barriers related to language production and perception (Moleong, 2018).

Participatory observation was employed to examine students' actual communicative behavior in both formal and informal contexts, such as classroom interactions, group discussions, and everyday conversations. Through observation, the researcher identified recurring patterns of communication breakdowns, hesitation, anxiety, and non-verbal responses that reflected underlying psycholinguistic processes. Observation served as an important complement to interview data by providing empirical evidence of communicative difficulties as they occurred naturally (Spradley, 1980).

In addition, document analysis was used to support and triangulate the findings. Documents analyzed included course syllabi, learning materials, students' written assignments, and institutional language program guidelines. These documents provided contextual information regarding instructional objectives, language exposure, and expected communicative competence. Document analysis helped to situate students' communication difficulties within the broader educational and institutional framework (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents were transcribed and carefully examined. Relevant data were then reduced by selecting, categorizing, and coding information related to psycholinguistic barriers and their contributing factors. The categorized data were displayed in thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation and pattern identification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, several strategies were applied. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different data sources and collection techniques. Member checking was also employed by confirming key interpretations with selected participants to ensure accuracy and credibility. Furthermore, prolonged engagement and persistent observation were applied to enhance the depth and reliability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their consent prior to data collection. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using

pseudonyms and excluding identifiable information. The study adhered to ethical standards of qualitative research to ensure respect, transparency, and academic integrity.

Barriers in Language Production

Language production emerged as one of the most significant psycholinguistic barriers experienced by students in foreign language communication. The findings indicate that students encountered persistent difficulties in transforming their thoughts into coherent and fluent utterances when using English or Arabic. These difficulties were not merely linguistic in nature but were deeply rooted in cognitive and psychological processes that operate during speech production. From a psycholinguistic perspective, language production involves a complex sequence of mental stages, including conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, all of which must function efficiently for successful communication (Levelt, 1989).

One of the most frequently observed barriers in language production was related to phonological accuracy. Students often struggled with producing correct sounds, stress patterns, and intonation, resulting in unclear pronunciation and reduced intelligibility. In English, inconsistencies between orthography and pronunciation caused confusion, leading students to pronounce words based on spelling rather than phonological rules. In Arabic, students faced difficulties in articulating sounds that do not exist in Indonesian, such as emphatic consonants and pharyngeal sounds. These phonological challenges indicate disruptions at the phonological encoding stage, where learners fail to retrieve or execute appropriate sound representations during speech production (Harley, 2001).

In addition to phonological issues, morphological and syntactic difficulties were prominent barriers in students' language production. Many students relied heavily on Indonesian grammatical structures when constructing sentences in English or Arabic. This reliance resulted in word order errors, incorrect verb inflections, and inappropriate sentence patterns. Such errors reflect negative transfer from the first language, a phenomenon commonly discussed in psycholinguistic studies of bilingual and second language production. When the target language system is not yet automatized, speakers tend to access the more dominant first-language structures, which interferes with accurate production in the foreign language (Stern, 1983).

The findings also reveal that students experienced considerable hesitation and disfluency during speech production. Frequent pauses, self-corrections, repetitions, and unfinished utterances were observed during communicative interactions. These behaviors suggest that students were engaged in excessive self-monitoring, constantly evaluating the grammatical correctness of their speech before articulation. While self-monitoring is a natural component of speech production, excessive monitoring increases cognitive load and disrupts fluency, particularly in foreign language contexts (Levelt, 1989). This condition aligns with psycholinguistic theories that emphasize the limited capacity of working memory during real-time language production.

Anxiety emerged as a critical psychological factor influencing language production barriers. Many students reported fear of making mistakes, being judged by peers, or appearing incompetent when speaking a foreign language. This anxiety often caused students to delay responses or avoid speaking altogether. Psycholinguistically, anxiety

consumes attentional resources that should be allocated to linguistic processing, thereby impairing the formulation and articulation stages of speech production. Horwitz et al. (1986) argue that foreign language anxiety can significantly hinder learners' performance by interfering with cognitive processing during communication.

Another important barrier in language production involved difficulties in integrating verbal language with non-verbal expressions. Effective communication requires coordination between spoken language and non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and body posture. However, the findings indicate that students often produced speech with limited emotional expression and rigid body language. Their focus on linguistic form reduced their ability to manage pragmatic and expressive aspects of communication. From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, this imbalance reflects attentional overload, where limited cognitive resources are directed primarily toward linguistic accuracy rather than communicative effectiveness (Indah, 2017).

Furthermore, limited vocabulary knowledge significantly constrained students' language production. Students frequently reported knowing what they wanted to say but being unable to find appropriate words in the target language. This lexical retrieval problem caused delays in speech and led students to switch to their first language or abandon their utterances altogether. Lexical access is a crucial component of language production, and difficulties in retrieving words indicate weak connections between semantic representations and lexical forms in the mental lexicon (Harley, 2001). Without sufficient lexical resources, students struggle to express ideas smoothly and accurately.

The findings also suggest that insufficient exposure to authentic foreign language use contributed to production barriers. Many students primarily used foreign languages in formal classroom settings and rarely engaged in spontaneous communication outside instructional contexts. As a result, their language production processes remained slow and effortful. Psycholinguistic research emphasizes that frequent and meaningful language use is essential for developing automaticity in speech production. Without repeated practice, learners remain dependent on controlled processing, which is cognitively demanding and prone to breakdowns during communication (Krashen, 1985).

Overall, barriers in language production among students at UIN Alauddin Makassar reflect the interaction of linguistic limitations, cognitive constraints, and affective factors. These barriers highlight that foreign language communication difficulties cannot be fully addressed through grammar instruction alone. Instead, they require pedagogical approaches that consider the psycholinguistic processes underlying speech production. By reducing anxiety, enhancing lexical and phonological competence, and increasing opportunities for authentic communication, students can gradually develop more efficient and confident language production skills.

Barriers in Language Perception

Language perception constitutes a crucial component of successful foreign language communication, as it enables learners to comprehend spoken input, interpret communicative intentions, and formulate appropriate responses. The findings of this study indicate that students at UIN Alauddin Makassar experienced significant psycholinguistic barriers in language perception when communicating in foreign languages. These barriers

affected not only their ability to understand linguistic forms but also their capacity to process meaning, context, and pragmatic intent in real-time interaction. From a psycholinguistic perspective, language perception involves complex cognitive processes, including auditory perception, lexical access, syntactic parsing, semantic interpretation, and pragmatic inference (Osgood & Sebeok, 1965).

One of the most prominent barriers in language perception identified in this study was difficulty in maintaining concentration during spoken interaction. Students frequently reported losing focus when listening to foreign language speech, particularly in extended conversations or discussions involving multiple speakers. This lack of sustained attention often resulted in incomplete comprehension of messages and disrupted interactional flow. Psycholinguistically, such difficulties are closely associated with limitations in working memory capacity, which plays a central role in processing and temporarily storing incoming linguistic information (Baddeley, 2003). When working memory resources are exceeded, learners struggle to retain earlier segments of discourse while processing new input.

Another major perception barrier involved difficulties in processing speech at natural speed. Many students indicated that they could understand foreign language input when spoken slowly but experienced significant comprehension problems when speech was delivered at normal or fast pace. Rapid speech reduced their ability to segment sounds, identify word boundaries, and access lexical meanings efficiently. This finding suggests weaknesses in automatic auditory processing, where learners have not yet developed rapid phonological decoding skills. Psycholinguistic research emphasizes that insufficient exposure to authentic spoken input hinders the development of perceptual automaticity, making comprehension effortful and error-prone (Harley, 2001).

The findings also reveal that students often experienced difficulties in predicting interlocutors' intentions during communication. They struggled to infer whether an utterance functioned as a request, suggestion, criticism, or expression of agreement. As a result, students sometimes responded inappropriately or failed to respond altogether. This difficulty reflects limited pragmatic competence, which is essential for interpreting meaning beyond literal linguistic forms. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, pragmatic inference requires the integration of linguistic input with contextual knowledge, cultural norms, and prior experiences (Stern, 1983).

Furthermore, ambiguity in foreign language input posed significant challenges to language perception. Students reported confusion when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, or indirect speech acts. Rather than using contextual clues to infer meaning, many learners became fixated on unknown words, causing them to lose track of the overall message. This behavior indicates inefficient top-down processing, where learners rely excessively on bottom-up decoding and fail to utilize contextual information to support comprehension. Psycholinguistic models of language perception highlight the importance of balancing bottom-up and top-down processes for effective comprehension (Field, 2008).

Another perception-related barrier identified in this study was difficulty in integrating linguistic input with non-verbal cues. Effective communication involves not only understanding spoken words but also interpreting facial expressions, gestures, intonation, and body language. However, many students reported focusing so intensely on

decoding linguistic forms that they overlooked non-verbal signals. This narrow attentional focus limited their ability to grasp speakers' emotional states or communicative intentions. Psycholinguistically, this phenomenon reflects attentional overload, where limited cognitive resources are allocated primarily to linguistic decoding at the expense of multimodal processing (Levitt, 1989).

The findings also indicate that anxiety and emotional tension negatively affected students' language perception. When students felt anxious or insecure, they reported difficulties in concentrating on incoming speech and increased susceptibility to misunderstanding messages. Anxiety heightened sensitivity to perceived errors and reduced learners' confidence in their comprehension abilities. According to affective filter theory, negative emotional states can obstruct cognitive processing by limiting access to linguistic input and reducing attentional control (Krashen, 1985). This emotional interference further exacerbates perception difficulties in foreign language communication.

In addition, limited background knowledge and cultural familiarity contributed to perception barriers. Students often struggled to comprehend topics or references that were culturally distant from their own experiences. This lack of schemata hindered their ability to construct coherent mental representations of discourse. Psycholinguistic research emphasizes that comprehension is facilitated when listeners can activate relevant background knowledge to interpret incoming information. Without such schemata, learners rely solely on linguistic input, increasing cognitive demands and the likelihood of misunderstanding (Anderson, 1995).

The interaction between linguistic complexity and cognitive load also played a significant role in language perception barriers. Complex sentence structures, unfamiliar discourse patterns, and dense informational content placed heavy demands on learners' cognitive resources. When cognitive load exceeded processing capacity, comprehension deteriorated, resulting in partial or distorted understanding. This finding aligns with psycholinguistic theories suggesting that processing difficulty increases when linguistic input surpasses learners' proficiency levels and cognitive readiness (Baddeley, 2003).

Overall, barriers in language perception among students at UIN Alauddin Makassar demonstrate that comprehension difficulties extend beyond vocabulary and grammar knowledge. They involve intricate interactions between cognitive processing, emotional states, attentional control, and contextual understanding. These findings underscore the need for foreign language instruction that addresses perceptual processing skills, pragmatic awareness, and affective factors. By enhancing exposure to authentic spoken input, fostering pragmatic competence, and reducing anxiety, learners can develop more efficient language perception abilities, thereby improving overall communicative competence.

Conclusion

This study has examined psycholinguistic barriers in foreign language communication among students at UIN Alauddin Makassar, focusing on difficulties in language production and language perception. The findings demonstrate that communication problems experienced by students are not solely caused by limited linguistic knowledge but are deeply rooted in cognitive and psychological processes involved in real-time language use. These barriers reflect the complex interaction between

linguistic competence, cognitive capacity, and affective factors in foreign language communication.

Barriers in language production were primarily manifested in phonological inaccuracies, morphological and syntactic interference from the first language, limited lexical access, and excessive self-monitoring during speech. Psychological factors such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes further disrupted the fluency and effectiveness of students' language production. These findings confirm psycholinguistic theories suggesting that speech production in a foreign language requires substantial cognitive resources, which may be overloaded when linguistic systems are not yet automatized.

Similarly, barriers in language perception were found to involve difficulties in maintaining attention, processing speech at natural speed, interpreting pragmatic meanings, and integrating linguistic input with contextual and non-verbal cues. Emotional factors, particularly anxiety, were shown to negatively affect comprehension by interfering with attentional control and working memory. These perception-related barriers highlight the importance of considering both cognitive and affective dimensions in foreign language comprehension.

Theoretically, this study contributes to psycholinguistic research by providing empirical evidence of how production and perception processes interact to shape foreign language communication difficulties in higher education contexts. It reinforces the view that successful communication requires efficient coordination of multiple mental processes rather than isolated mastery of grammatical structures. Practically, the findings suggest that foreign language instruction should move beyond form-focused approaches and incorporate psycholinguistic principles that address cognitive load, emotional regulation, and pragmatic competence.

Future research may extend this study by employing longitudinal designs or mixed-method approaches to examine the development of psycholinguistic competence over time. Additionally, comparative studies across different institutional or cultural contexts may provide further insights into how psycholinguistic barriers vary among foreign language learners. Overall, integrating psycholinguistic perspectives into foreign language education holds significant potential for enhancing students' communicative competence and fostering more effective language learning outcomes.

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