



Overcoming Silence: Challenges in English Conversation among Multilingual and Multi-Ethnic Tertiary Students at University of Technology Sarawak (UTS), Sibul, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

English proficiency, particularly in spoken communication, remains a persistent challenge for multilingual and multi-ethnic tertiary students in Malaysia. This case study investigates the barriers faced by students at University Technology of Sarawak (UTS) in conversing in English, examining the psychological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors that influence their communication. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a survey of 120 students, semi-structured interviews with 10 participants representing diverse ethnic backgrounds, and non-participant observations of classroom and social interactions. Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed four major themes: psychological barriers (low self-confidence, language anxiety, and negative self-perception), linguistic limitations (limited vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation challenges, and reliance on memorized expressions), socio-cultural influences (ethnic peer group norms, limited cross-ethnic interaction, and perceptions of English as formal), and environmental factors (limited informal English exposure and prior rote-based educational experiences). The findings highlight how multi-ethnic diversity, while enriching, contributes to mother-tongue clustering and limited opportunities for English use outside academic contexts. The study concludes that holistic interventions, including low-pressure conversation spaces, interactive learning strategies, and cross-ethnic collaborative activities, are essential to enhance students' English conversational competence, confidence, and academic and professional readiness.

Keywords: English conversation, multilingual students, multi-ethnic, tertiary education, Malaysia, communication barriers

INTRODUCTION

English remains a critical global lingua franca for academic, professional, and social communication (Crystal, 2012). In Malaysia, despite prolonged exposure to English in school, many tertiary students continue to struggle with spoken English (Gill, 2014; Pandian, 2018). Studies have shown that even after years of formal instruction, Malaysian ESL learners often experience anxiety, low confidence, and reluctance to speak English (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Yaacob et al., 2021).

These challenges can become more pronounced in institutions with ethnically and linguistically diverse student bodies, such as University Technology of Sarawak (UTS), due to varied linguistic repertoires and peer-group language norms (Asmah, 2015; Nair & Tai, 2022).

This research aims to investigate the barriers faced by multilingual and multi-ethnic tertiary students at UTS when conversing in English, and to analyze the contributing psychological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors.

BACKGROUND

Many studies on Malaysian ESL tertiary students highlight persistent difficulties in speaking English despite years of formal education (Pandian, 2018; Yaacob et al., 2021). Commonly reported problems include communication apprehension, limited self-efficacy, and low willingness to communicate (WTC) in English (MacIntyre, 2007; Hashim & Yunus, 2018).

In multilingual universities, where students come from various mother-tongue backgrounds, local languages often dominate informal communication, limiting the natural use of English outside academic settings (Gill, 2014; Nair & Tai, 2022). This reduces opportunities for spoken practice and further hinders spoken English proficiency.

Although English is used as a medium of instruction and formal communication at the university level, many multilingual and multi-ethnic students remain hesitant to converse in English. This reluctance undermines their academic participation, interpersonal communication, and preparedness for future professional environments (Hashim, 2024; Kho, Ting, & Dumin, 2025; Yahaya et al., 2025).

Prior research continues to identify speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence as major impediments affecting Malaysian tertiary students' willingness to communicate in English-medium contexts (Norwahi & Atan, 2025; Kho et al., 2025).

At UTS, with its ethnically diverse student population, additional socio-cultural and environmental dynamics may exacerbate these challenges. Thus, this study aims:

1. To identify the key barriers preventing multilingual and multi-ethnic UTS students from conversing confidently in English.
2. To examine psychological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors affecting English conversation among these students.
3. To assess the impact of these barriers on academic participation, social integration, and future professional readiness.
4. To propose strategies to improve English conversational competence among UTS students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English proficiency, particularly spoken communication, has long been identified as a major challenge among Malaysian ESL learners, despite more than a decade of exposure to the language in formal schooling. Numerous studies confirm that speaking remains the most anxiety-inducing and least developed skill among Malaysian undergraduates (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Yahaya et al., 2024). A key factor contributing to this issue is communication apprehension, defined as fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others. Studies consistently show that Malaysian students often avoid speaking English due to fear of negative evaluation, low self-esteem, and perceived linguistic inadequacy (Kho, Ting & Dumin, 2021; Shamsuri et al., 2022). These psychological barriers are strongly linked to students' willingness to communicate (WTC), a construct widely used in second language acquisition research. Low WTC often results in silence, minimal classroom participation, and avoidance of English in social interactions.

Another consistent finding in the literature concerns linguistic limitations, such as insufficient vocabulary, grammar challenges, and pronunciation difficulties. These linguistic gaps often stem from examination-oriented schooling systems that emphasize reading and writing rather than authentic communicative practice (Ugla, Adnan & Abidin, 2012). Researchers argue that decades of grammar-translation instruction produce learners who excel in comprehension but remain hesitant in spontaneous oral expression (Yusuf Bahadur & Hashim, 2023). Pronunciation difficulties, in particular, have been shown to heighten self-consciousness and trigger speaking anxiety. Students often fear being misunderstood, stigmatized, or corrected publicly, which further reduces their confidence to engage in English conversations.

The literature also highlights the significance of socio-cultural factors, especially in multilingual contexts like Malaysia. Students tend to communicate primarily in their mother tongues such as Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Mandarin, or Malay; within their ethnic peer groups. This natural tendency toward linguistic clustering limits opportunities to practise English informally (Halali et al., 2022). In many Malaysian

settings, speaking English among peers may also carry negative connotations, such as being perceived as “showing off,” adopting foreign identities, or distancing oneself from cultural norms. Consequently, the socio-cultural environment can either reinforce or inhibit English use. For students in diverse university settings, English could theoretically function as a lingua franca; however, research shows that the presence of multiple shared mother tongues often reduces its necessity in social interactions (Yusuf Bahadur & Hashim, 2023).

A fourth body of literature focuses on environmental and institutional influences, particularly the mismatch between classroom teaching and real-life communicative needs. Several studies criticize Malaysian tertiary institutions for relying on lecture-based approaches, grammar-focused lessons, and limited opportunities for interactive speaking practice (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Outside the classroom, the campus environment often lacks English-rich social spaces, resulting in minimal exposure to authentic English communication. Students spend most of their time in linguistically homogeneous dormitories or peer groups, further limiting English usage. Researchers argue that without supportive ecosystems such as conversation clubs, peer mentoring communities, or English-medium social events, students are unlikely to build confidence or fluency (Ugla et al., 2012).

The literature consistently concludes that challenges in English conversation among Malaysian tertiary students are multifactorial, shaped by psychological, linguistic, cultural, and environmental factors working simultaneously. While previous studies examined these difficulties in various Malaysian universities, limited research has specifically focused on multi-ethnic, multilingual institutions in East Malaysia, where the diversity of linguistic backgrounds is greater and where English functions differently across social groups. Therefore, this study addresses an important gap by examining how these overlapping factors affect English conversational ability among multilingual and multi-ethnic students at UTS, providing insights that are both locally meaningful and academically significant.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by multilingual and multi-ethnic students at UTS in conversing in English. A quantitative survey was administered to a sample of 120 students from various faculties to collect data on their English usage, confidence levels, exposure, and perceived barriers. To complement the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students representing different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including Iban, Malay, Bidayuh, Melanau, and Chinese. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and aimed to explore participants’ personal experiences, attitudes, and challenges related to English conversation.

Additionally, non-participant observations were carried out in classroom discussions, presentations, online interactions, and informal social settings on campus to assess the actual use of English in real-life contexts. The quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and sub-themes. This integrated methodology enabled the study to capture both measurable trends and the nuanced personal experiences of students, providing a holistic perspective on the factors influencing English conversational challenges at UTS.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Based on qualitative data (interviews and observations), the following themes emerged, reflecting barriers to English conversation among multilingual and multi-ethnic UTS students.

4.1 Psychological Barriers

Table 1. Psychological Barriers

Psychological Barrier	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Fear of making mistakes	3.98	0.82	High
Low self-confidence in speaking English	4.12	0.77	High
Anxiety during English-speaking tasks	4.05	0.85	High
Fear of negative evaluation by peers	3.89	0.90	Moderate–High

A central theme that emerged from the data was the presence of significant psychological barriers that hinder students' willingness and ability to converse in English. Many students reported low self-confidence and negative self-perceptions, particularly when comparing themselves to peers from English-rich backgrounds. Approximately 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that psychological factors negatively affect their willingness to speak English. This reflects Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that anxiety, low confidence, and fear of judgment can block language input and reduce learning. Students frequently described feelings of embarrassment, fear of grammatical mistakes, and concern about negative peer evaluation, features consistent with communication apprehension described by Horwitz et al. (1986). They doubted their competence, felt embarrassed to speak, and feared being judged for mistakes. As one Malay first-year student expressed, "Even if I know the answer, I hesitate to speak because I fear mistakes." Similarly, an Iban second-year student shared, "I know the words, but I feel embarrassed if I pronounce them wrong." These feelings of inadequacy reduce class participation and discourage active engagement, ultimately slowing spoken language development. Students frequently described feelings of embarrassment, fear of

grammatical mistakes, and concern about negative peer evaluation—features consistent with communication apprehension described by Horwitz et al. (1986).

In addition to low confidence, speaking anxiety and communication apprehension were commonly reported across ethnic groups. Students described feelings of panic, stress, and fear of negative evaluation when required to speak English in public or spontaneous contexts. A Chinese second-year student explained, “When the lecturer asks me a question in English, I panic. My mind goes blank even if I know the answer.” Another student from the Bidayuh community added, “I start sweating and stammering during oral tasks.” Such anxiety prevents learners from applying their skills in real-life contexts and reinforces avoidance behaviours. Self-comparison to more proficient peers intensified this anxiety, as a Melanau third-year student admitted, “I feel less capable than my friends from Kuching because their English is better.” Ultimately, these psychological barriers suppress attempts at conversation and perpetuate low proficiency. Such anxiety often leads to avoidance behaviour, which reduces opportunities for real practice. This aligns with more recent findings that foreign language anxiety negatively predicts oral participation and speaking performance (for example., Termouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019; Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff, 2020). Additionally, contemporary motivation research emphasizes that learners’ self-concept and self-perceived competence significantly shape language performance and willingness to communicate (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Khajavy et al., 2018). Ultimately, these psychological barriers suppress attempts at conversation and perpetuate low spoken proficiency.

4.2 Linguistic Limitations

Table 2. Linguistic Limitations

Linguistic Challenge	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Limited vocabulary	4.21	0.71	High
Grammar difficulties	4.08	0.74	High
Pronunciation difficulties	4.15	0.78	High
Lack of fluency	3.87	0.80	Moderate–High

Linguistic constraints represented another major theme affecting students’ spoken English ability. Many participants acknowledged limited vocabulary and grammatical challenges, which prevented them from expressing complex ideas and often led to code-switching to their mother tongue. Such challenges align with Nation’s (2013) assertion that insufficient vocabulary size is one of the strongest predictors of limited speaking proficiency. 82% of students reported that linguistic limitations regularly prevent them from speaking English confidently. One Iban first-year student stated, “Sometimes I just nod because I don’t have the words to explain my ideas.” Others reported hesitation when aware of potential grammatical errors; a Bidayuh second-

year student shared, “Even when I practice, I mix up tenses and hesitate to speak.” These linguistic gaps undermine fluency and limit students’ capacity to engage in meaningful communication. Some students also engaged in frequent code-switching due to lexical gaps, consistent with research by Ting and Lau (2018), who note that multilingual Malaysian students often rely on their L1 when unable to retrieve appropriate English words.

Pronunciation and fluency issues also emerged as significant linguistic barriers. Students struggled with English phonemes not present in their native languages, generating self-consciousness and reducing willingness to speak. This is a phenomenon widely reported in multilingual contexts (Derwing & Munro, 2015). An Iban second-year student explained, “Some words are hard to pronounce because we don’t have similar sounds in Iban. I feel people may not understand me.” Such difficulties discourage spontaneous speech and reinforce avoidance, further restricting opportunities to improve fluency, supporting Swain’s (2005) argument that productive output is essential for developing language accuracy and fluency.

4.3 Socio-Cultural Influences

Table 3. Socio-Cultural Influences

Socio-Cultural Factor	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Preference for mother tongue in peer groups	4.30	0.66	High
Perception that English is used only for formal settings	3.75	0.82	Moderate–High
Limited cross-ethnic interaction in English	3.92	0.76	Moderate–High

Socio-cultural dynamics played a crucial role in shaping students’ English conversational patterns. Mother-tongue peer group norms were especially influential. Within ethnically homogenous groups such as Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese, or Malay students, local languages typically dominated daily interactions. This aligns with Giles et al.’s (1991) Speech Accommodation Theory, which explains how individuals converge linguistically toward their social group’s norms. Such patterns create linguistic silos, reducing opportunities for using English as a shared communication medium. Mother-tongue dominance was the strongest socio-cultural factor, with 88% agreeing that their peer groups rarely use English in casual situations. A Bidayuh first-year student expressed, “In my Bidayuh group, we always speak our language. English feels out of place.” This creates linguistic silos and restricts natural English use in social settings.

Despite the ethnic diversity at UTS, participants reported limited cross-ethnic interaction in English, echoing findings that Malaysian students frequently default to their ethnic languages during informal communication (Wee, 2024). Students tended to remain within their own ethnic groups, reducing opportunities to use English as a lingua franca. As a Chinese second-year student noted, “English is only for class. Outside, I speak Mandarin with my friends.” This lack of intergroup communication further reduced natural English exposure (Wee, 2024).

Additionally, many students held the perception that English is strictly a formal or academic language, which prevented them from using it for casual conversation. An Iban second-year student commented, “Speaking English casually feels strange. I only use it for presentations.” This perception limits spontaneous use and slows conversational development, reflecting findings that Malaysian learners often associate English with formal academic contexts rather than everyday social interaction (Talib & Omar, 2025). Such socio-cultural norms may hinder the development of conversational fluency.

4.4 Environmental and Institutional Factors

Table 4. Environmental and Institutional Factors

Environmental Barrier	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Lack of English use outside classroom	4.18	0.73	High
Rote-learning background limiting speaking skills	3.95	0.81	Moderate–High
Lack of informal speaking support (clubs, peer groups)	4.10	0.79	High

Environmental factors also shaped the extent of students’ English exposure. Observations indicated a lack of informal English use outside the classroom, as dormitories, cafeterias, and social areas were dominated by mother tongues or Malay limiting opportunities for informal English practices. This aligns with Cummins’ (2000) argument that meaningful language acquisition requires extensive authentic exposure beyond classroom instruction. 74% of students indicated they rarely use English in natural campus settings such as dormitories, cafeterias, or group discussions. An Iban first-year student reported, “In the cafeteria or dorm, everyone speaks our mother tongue. I rarely get to practice English.” This limited exposure reduces opportunities for practical language use and confidence building.

Students’ prior educational experiences also contributed to their difficulties. Those from secondary schools focused on rote learning, grammar drills, and exam preparation reported feeling unprepared for spontaneous English communication at the university level, leading to strong written skills but weak spontaneous oral skills.

This reflects findings by Gill (2014), who notes that Malaysian English instruction remains largely exam-oriented and teacher-centred, limiting communicative competence. A Melanau second-year student explained, "Our school focused on memorizing grammar rules, not speaking. Now I feel lost when I have to talk freely." These pedagogical approaches lead to weak conversational readiness despite years of formal instruction.

Finally, students pointed to the absence of casual speaking support structures such as conversation clubs or relaxed speaking spaces. While some formal clubs exist, students expressed hesitation or shyness in joining them, echoing the need for supportive, low-anxiety environments recommended by Krashen (1985) and MacIntyre (2007). A Malay third-year student noted, "We need spaces to speak English without pressure. Clubs exist, but I feel shy." Without low-pressure environments, learners miss vital opportunities to practise English in supportive, non-evaluative settings.

CONCLUSION

This case study has explored the challenges faced by UTS tertiary students in conversing in English, highlighting the complex interplay of psychological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors. The research shows that many students experience low self-confidence, language anxiety, and negative self-perception, which discourage them from actively engaging in English conversation. Linguistic limitations, such as restricted vocabulary, grammar errors, over-reliance on memorized phrases, and pronunciation difficulties, further hinder fluent communication.

The multi-ethnic and multi-racial composition of UTS students introduces unique socio-cultural dynamics. While diversity enriches campus life, it also encourages ethnic group clustering where mother tongues dominate informal interactions, reducing opportunities to practice English. Cultural perceptions of English as formal or academic, combined with peer pressure and fear of judgment, exacerbate students' reluctance to use English socially. Environmental factors, including limited exposure to informal English contexts and prior educational experiences emphasizing rote learning, reinforce these barriers.

The findings demonstrate that English conversational challenges at UTS are not merely linguistic but deeply tied to identity, confidence, and social norms. Students' hesitancy affects not only academic engagement—such as participation in tutorials, presentations, and group discussions—but also social integration and future employability in professional and multicultural settings.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach: creating supportive environments that encourage risk-taking in language use, providing structured opportunities for cross-ethnic English communication, integrating informal and

interactive speaking activities, and promoting awareness of the importance of English for both academic and professional success. By implementing these strategies, UTS can empower its students to overcome silence, build confidence, and develop effective English conversational skills, enabling them to thrive academically, socially, and professionally in a globalized context.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Stephanie Larry Daniel (Conceptualization, Writing, Analysis, Resources)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Artificial Intelligence tools were used only to assist in data organization and writing support.

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