_____

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO LEARN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Dr. Lakshmi Sudheshna Kruthiventi
Department of English,Government College (A), Rajamahendravaram.,East Godavari District.

Abstract:
Cultural Barriers to learning English are not limited to "differences in customs"; they are socially organized constraints—beliefs, identities, norms, and power relations—that shape learners' motivation, opportunities to practice, classroom interaction, and willingness to adopt new communicative behaviours. Research across EFL/ESL contexts shows that negative community attitudes toward English, identity threat, fear of appearing arrogant or "too Western," gendered participation norms, and school policies privileging a dominant language can raise anxiety and reduce meaningful exposure, undermining proficiency. These barriers operate at multiple levels: micro (Learner Emotions and Identity), meso (family expectations, peer norms, school culture), and macro (Language Ideologies, Socioeconomic Stratification, and National Education Policy). This article reviews major theoretical explanations (Sociocultural Theory, Affective filter, and Socio-Educational Motivation), synthesizes findings from empirical studies and cross-national evidence on language-of-instruction gaps, and proposes culturally responsive strategies for teachers, institutions, and policymakers.

Introduction: Why "Culture" matters in English Learning:

English has become the most influential International Language in education, employment, and global mobility, which has expanded English programs worldwide and intensified pressure on learners to achieve communicative competence. Yet in many societies, English is also politically and culturally loaded: it may index colonial history, elite status, urban privilege, or cultural "otherness," making the learning of English feel like a social alignment rather than a neutral academic skill. These meanings matter because language learning is a social practice; learners do not merely memorize vocabulary but also participate in new interactional norms (e.g., Turn-Taking, argumentation, directness, Self-Promotion) that may conflict with local expectations.

"Cultural Barriers" therefore include any culturally patterned belief or practice that restricts access to English learning opportunities or reduces engagement with them. In classrooms, cultural barriers can appear as silence, reticence, avoidance of eye contact,

---

Limited Peer Collaboration, reluctance to speak with the opposite gender, preference for Teacher-Centered instruction, or resistance to textbook topics perceived as culturally inappropriate. Outside classrooms, they can appear as lack of family support, peer ridicule for speaking English, community narratives that English threatens local values, or workplace environments that discourage using English.

A key point from contemporary second language research is that these barriers are rarely purely individual. They are embedded in social structures: whose English is valued, which accents are mocked, which languages count as "educated," and which learners are welcomed into "English-Speaking" identities. When English is tied to prestige and power, it can simultaneously attract learners instrumentally and repel them socially—especially when they fear losing belonging in their local community.

2. Conceptual framework: How Culture becomes a Barrier:

2.1 Sociocultural Theory and Mediated Learning:

Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that learning develops through social interaction and is mediated by cultural tools (including language, texts, and norms). From this lens, cultural barriers arise when the social environment provides limited opportunities for supported participation in English or when classroom practices prevent learners from using English as a tool for meaning-making with others. If classroom discourse is dominated by teacher talk, exam drilling, or "choral" repetition, learners may not get the mediated practice needed to internalize communicative competence.

Sociocultural Theory also highlights that identities are negotiated in interaction; learners must be able to occupy legitimate roles as speakers. When a learner's community treats English speaking as showing off, or when students are punished for mistakes, learners can be positioned as illegitimate speakers, reducing participation and slowing development.

2.2 Affective filter, Anxiety, and Cultural Threat:

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis argues that even when learners receive input, emotional variables—anxiety, low motivation, low self-confidence—can block uptake of that input. Cultural barriers often operate precisely by raising anxiety: fear of embarrassment, fear of violating cultural norms (e.g., assertiveness, mixed-gender interaction), or fear of negative evaluation for accent and errors. Speaking is especially vulnerable because it exposes learners publicly; as a result, many contexts report "reticence" even among students who can perform well on written tests.

Affective barriers are not just personal traits; they are produced by classroom culture (error correction style, peer teasing, competitive ranking) and social ideology (e.g.,

___

"good English means you are elite," or "English is not for people like us"). When English symbolizes exclusion, the affective filter can remain high even in well-resourced programs.

2.3 Socio-Educational motivation and Attitudes:

Gardner's Socio-Educational model foregrounds the role of attitudes toward the target language community and motivation in predicting L2 success. In many EFL settings, learners' motivation is shaped by ambivalent attitudes: English may be desired for jobs (instrumental value) yet resisted for identity reasons (integrative conflict). Where the "English-Speaking Community" is imagined as culturally distant or morally suspect, integrative orientations may be weak, and learners may invest only enough effort to pass exams, not enough to build fluency.

In practice, attitudes are not formed in isolation; they are reinforced by Parents, Peers, Media, and Education Policy. Thus, Cultural Barriers can be understood as socially sustained negative attitudes that reduce long-term effort and willingness to communicate.

3. Macro-Level Cultural Barriers: Ideologies, Inequality, and Language Policy:

3.1 English, Power, and Social Stratification:

In many Postcolonial and Multilingual societies, English functions as a gatekeeping language for higher education and formal-sector employment. This creates a cultural economy where English signals status. The result can be paradoxical: communities may publicly criticize English as "foreign" while privately acknowledging its economic value. Learners in marginalized groups can experience English learning as entering a domain associated with "others"—urban elites, higher castes/classes, or "modern" identities—producing identity discomfort and resistance.

This stratification becomes a barrier when learners lack access to the kinds of cultural capital that English classrooms assume: familiarity with certain topics, confidence in debate, experience with individualistic self-expression, and time for extracurricular practice. Even when schools teach English, the hidden curriculum may privilege middle-class communicative styles and penalize learners who speak cautiously or indirectly.

3.2 Language of Instruction and Cultural Exclusion:

Language-of-Instruction Policy can create structural cultural barriers when children are taught in a language they do not understand well. UNESCO's GEM Report press release states that 40% of the global population does not access education in a language they understand, warning that learning in an unfamiliar language can negatively affect learning, especially for children in poverty.

In contexts where English-Medium instruction expands rapidly, similar dynamics can emerge: English becomes a symbolic marker of "real education," while local languages

_____

are treated as lower status—creating resentment and resistance among communities who feel linguistically marginalized.

3.3 Cultural Hegemony and Curriculum Content:

Curricular choices can intensify cultural barriers when textbooks and assessments privilege foreign cultural references, lifestyles, and communicative norms while neglecting learners' lived realities. Learners may disengage if they cannot relate to topics or if materials conflict with local values. Teachers may also Self-Censor, avoiding open discussion, Debate, or Creative Tasks, because they fear cultural controversy. This can shrink the communicative space needed for developing speaking and pragmatic competence.

At a broader level, curricular hegemony can frame English as belonging to a particular culture rather than as a flexible global resource. When learners believe English requires adopting "Western" ways of thinking, dress, or social behaviour, they may protect their identity by rejecting deeper engagement with English, limiting themselves to exam-oriented learning.

4. Meso-Level Cultural Barriers: Family, Peers, and School Culture:

4.1 Family beliefs and support:

Families shape language learning through expectations, resources, and daily practices. In some communities, parents may view English as essential for mobility; in others, they may view it as unnecessary or culturally risky. Even when parents value English, they may not be able to support it due to limited proficiency, time constraints, or unfamiliarity with school expectations. This can reduce exposure to English outside class, especially for first-generation learners.

Cultural beliefs can also limit the kinds of English practice considered acceptable: Speaking English at home may be seen as disrespectful, a rejection of elders, or an attempt to appear superior. Such norms reduce opportunities for low-stakes practice, which is crucial for fluency development.

4.2 Peer Norms, ridicule, and "anti-English" identities:

Peer Cultures are powerful regulators of behaviour. In many Schools and Colleges, speaking English can trigger teasing ("trying to be posh"), especially when accents are imperfect. This creates a social penalty for practicing—the very activity needed to improve. Learners may then avoid speaking English publicly, keeping practice private and minimal, which slows improvement and reinforces the very insecurity that produced avoidance.

Peer Norms can also create "Anti-English" identities where rejecting English signals authenticity or solidarity. This is more likely when English is associated with exclusion or discrimination. In such contexts, students who want to learn English may

experience divided loyalties: progress in English can feel like distancing themselves from their community.

4.3 School Culture: Teacher Authority and Classroom Interaction Norms:

School Culture can either reduce or amplify cultural barriers. A rigid, Teacher-Centered environment may align with local expectations of authority but can reduce interaction, negotiation of meaning, and student talk time. In contrast, Communicative Language Teaching requires students to ask questions, take initiative, and tolerate ambiguity—behaviours that may conflict with norms emphasizing deference, silence, or avoidance of public error.

A case study of English-Speaking barriers at Tibah University in Saudi Arabia highlights that English speaking proficiency is impacted by factors including the English Programme and Curriculum, Teaching Strategies, and students' motivation, anxiety, and reticence. This type of finding is consistent with the broader idea that classroom culture—how teachers handle mistakes, how participation is valued, how safe students feel—mediates whether cultural norms become barriers or can be negotiated constructively.

5. Micro-Level Cultural Barriers: Identity, Gender, and Pragmatics:

5.1 Identity Threat and Investment:

Learners often ask implicitly: "If I speak English well, who will I become in others' eyes?" If English proficiency is read as elitism or cultural betrayal, learners may reduce investment. Even highly motivated learners may compartmentalize English—using it only for exams or professional contexts—because using English socially feels identity-threatening.This is why interventions that focus only on grammar or vocabulary can fail: the barrier is not cognitive capacity but social meaning. Successful programs often reframe English as an additional resource rather than a replacement identity—an approach aligned with Multilingual, Translanguaging-Friendly Perspectives in Language Education.

5.2 Gender Norms and Participation Constraints:

In some contexts, gender norms constrain interaction patterns—who can speak to whom, in what settings, and with what level of assertiveness. When speaking tasks require mixed-gender group work or public performance, learners may experience conflict between classroom expectations and cultural expectations. This can lead to silence, absenteeism, or minimal participation. Teachers who ignore these norms may unintentionally raise anxiety; teachers who accommodate them thoughtfully can maintain participation while gradually expanding learners' comfort zones.

5.3 Pragmatic differences: Politeness, Directness, and Classroom Discourse:

English Pragmatic Norms (e.g., direct requests, explicit disagreement, Self-Promotion in interviews) may conflict with local politeness norms. Learners may

avoid speaking because they do not know how to be polite in English without sounding weak—or how to be assertive without sounding rude. This pragmatic uncertainty can look like low proficiency but is often a cultural-pragmatic barrier. Without explicit pragmatic teaching, learners may remain cautious, limiting their communicative range.

6. Implications for Teaching and Policy:

6.1 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:

Teachers can reduce cultural barriers by designing tasks that respect local norms while still building communicative competence. This includes using locally relevant themes (family, community issues, regional workplaces), allowing students to draw on their first languages strategically for planning and comprehension, and explicitly teaching pragmatic choices (Polite Disagreement, Turn-Taking, Requesting Help). When learners see their culture represented as legitimate content, English becomes less identity-threatening.

6.2 Building Safe Speaking Environments:

Given the strong role of anxiety and reticence in speaking barriers, classrooms need psychologically safe routines: predictable speaking formats, small-group rehearsal before public performance, supportive error correction, and norms against ridicule.

6.3 Family and Community Engagement:

Programs are more effective when they address community narratives around English. Schools can hold multilingual orientations that frame English as additive (not replacing mother tongue), share realistic pathways for using English for local opportunities, and encourage parents to support practice even if they do not speak English (e.g., providing quiet study time, valuing effort). This helps shift cultural meanings of English from "elitist" to "useful and shared."

6.4 Policy: Multilingual foundations and Equitable Access:

UNESCO's GEM evidence suggests that learning is stronger where children have access to instruction in a language they understand and where bilingual approaches are implemented effectively. For English education policy, this supports strengthening Mother-Tongue foundations, building high-quality bilingual models, and avoiding abrupt English-Medium transitions that create cultural and cognitive overload. Equity requires not only "more English," but better sequencing, teacher preparation, and materials that connect English learning to learners' linguistic realities.

_____

References:

- Alhmadi, N. S. (2014). English speaking learning barriers in Saudi Arabia: A case study of Tibah University. Arab World English Journal, 5(2), 38–53.
- UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report. (2016/2023 update). 40% don't access education in a language they understand.
- Gardner, R. C. (Talk/working paper). Motivation and Second Language Acquisition. (University of Western Ontario materials).
- UniversePG. (2023). Reflections of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis in language classroom.
- Azar University journal PDF. Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory for Second Language Learning (discusses mediation and development in L2).