



LIMITED LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS IN THE BUKIT LAWANG TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze limitations in English language proficiency as a barrier to intercultural communication between local communities and foreign tourists in the Bukit Lawang tourism area, Bahorok District, Langkat Regency. As an international tourist destination that brings together people from diverse cultural backgrounds, Bukit Lawang requires effective communication to support both social interaction and tourism services. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving local tourism actors, tour guides, and visitors. The findings reveal four major forms of linguistic limitations that hinder intercultural communication: (1) limited English language proficiency among local tourism actors, (2) difficulties in understanding foreign tourists due to differences in accents, speaking speed, and vocabulary, (3) differences in intercultural communication styles that affect the delivery and interpretation of information, and (4) limited communication skills that negatively affect the quality of tourism services. To overcome these barriers, local communities and foreign tourists employ four communication adaptation strategies: using simplified English, relying on nonverbal communication, utilizing communication technologies such as Google Translate, and seeking assistance from third parties with better English proficiency. The study concludes that limited linguistic competence remains a significant challenge to intercultural communication in Bukit Lawang; however, its effects can be minimized through effective communication adaptation strategies. Therefore, strengthening tourism-oriented English proficiency, enhancing intercultural communication competence, and optimizing the use of communication technologies are essential to improving service quality and reinforcing Bukit Lawang's image as an international tourist destination.

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1. INTRODUCTION

International tourism represents a space of encounter in which individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural, normative, and communicative backgrounds interact. In this context, communication serves not only as a means of conveying information but also as a medium through which meanings, identities, and cultural knowledge are exchanged between tourists and local communities. Effective interaction enables tourists to develop a more comprehensive understanding of a destination, while



allowing local communities to appropriately communicate their cultural values and regional characteristics. Therefore, the effectiveness of intercultural communication constitutes an important element in tourism practices oriented toward cross-cultural experiences and sustainable development (Aleksandrova et al., 2024; Michelle et al., 2020).

One of the key components of intercultural communication is linguistic competence, particularly when the interacting parties do not share the same first language. Linguistic competence encompasses the ability to understand and use vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatic meanings appropriately within a given communicative context. However, effective intercultural communication is not determined solely by grammatical accuracy but also by the ability to adapt messages to the social and cultural backgrounds of interlocutors. Aririguzoh (2022) explains that successful cross-cultural communication requires the integration of language proficiency, cultural awareness, openness, and adaptive capacity. Similarly, Hoff (2020) conceptualizes intercultural communicative competence as the ability to interpret different cultural perspectives and participate appropriately in processes of meaning negotiation.

The importance of such competence is particularly evident in Bukit Lawang, Bahorok District, Langkat Regency, which is widely recognized as an international ecotourism destination in North Sumatra. The presence of international tourists generates regular interaction with local residents, vendors, tour guides, tourism service providers, and local government officials. These interactions occur in various situations, including the provision of information about trekking routes, transportation, accommodation, local products, community culture, travel safety, and conservation regulations. Although the people of Bukit Lawang are accustomed to interacting with foreign tourists, the English proficiency of some local tourism actors remains limited to basic vocabulary and simple conversational expressions. Such limitations may lead to ambiguity or misunderstanding when tourists require more detailed explanations, particularly in the presence of differences in accent, speaking speed, vocabulary choice, and communication style (Khabib & Muliana, 2025; Putri et al., 2023; Zakaria et al., 2024).

Linguistic limitations in tourism services extend beyond the issue of whether language is used correctly or incorrectly. These barriers may slow the delivery of information, restrict explanations about products and services, complicate communication concerning safety and conservation, and reduce the depth with which local cultural values can be conveyed. In economic transactions, the inability to clearly explain a product's characteristics, price, materials, production process, or cultural significance may affect tourists' understanding and purchasing decisions. Within tourism services, unclear communication may also require tourists to repeat questions, seek alternative sources of information, or rely on guides with greater English proficiency. Previous studies have shown that language limitations can reduce service effectiveness when adequate translation tools and communication strategies are unavailable (Brown et al., 2023). In the tourism context, foreign-language proficiency and intercultural knowledge are also necessary to enable tourism personnel and service providers to communicate information accurately and in accordance with the needs of international visitors (Halawa & Octafian, 2026).

A growing body of research has examined the relationship between foreign-language proficiency, cultural competence, and the quality of tourism services. Astawa and Wijaya (2024), for example, emphasize the importance of English proficiency and cultural competence among tourism professionals, while Halawa and Octafian (2026) identify limited foreign-language proficiency as a barrier to providing services for international tourists. Other studies have predominantly investigated language barriers in the contexts of international students, public services, or multicultural interaction more broadly (Ma'arif & Hikmah, 2026; Zakaria et al., 2024). Research on local tourism, meanwhile, has tended to focus on destination development, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation without examining in sufficient depth how linguistic limitations shape information exchange and communication adaptation strategies in everyday interactions (Dewi, 2026; Sudi, 2023). Accordingly, there remains a research gap in understanding limited linguistic competence as an intercultural communication issue associated with tourism services, economic transactions, the communication of cultural values, and the adaptive efforts undertaken by those involved in such interactions.

Against this background, the present study conceptualizes limited linguistic competence not merely as insufficient English proficiency but as a communication barrier that affects the construction of mutual understanding between local communities and foreign tourists. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of forms of linguistic barriers and communication adaptation strategies that emerge in actual interactions within the Bukit Lawang ecotourism destination. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify forms of limited linguistic competence that constitute barriers to intercultural

communication between local communities and foreign tourists; and (2) analyze the communication adaptation strategies employed by both parties to overcome these barriers.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a field research design to examine limitations in linguistic competence and communication adaptation strategies in interactions between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination, Bahorok District, Langkat Regency. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables communication phenomena to be explored in depth based on the experiences, perspectives, and social contexts of the actors directly involved (Hikmawati, 2020; Syahza, 2021). Informants were selected purposively according to the following criteria: having experience interacting with foreign tourists, being involved in tourism-related services or activities, and being willing to provide information regarding communication barriers and adaptation strategies. Based on the research data, four informants participated in the study: the Head of Bahorok District as a representative of the local government (I1), a local resident who frequently interacts with foreign tourists (I2), a foreign tourist from Germany (I3), and a local vendor operating in the Bukit Lawang tourism area (I4). Informant codes were used to improve the traceability of data sources and to facilitate readers' identification of each informant's position within the analytical process.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The interviews focused on informants' experiences in using English, difficulties in understanding or conveying messages, the effects of linguistic barriers on tourism services, and the strategies employed to maintain effective communication. Observations were conducted on verbal and nonverbal communication practices occurring during service encounters, transactions, information provision, and other activities involving interactions between local residents and foreign tourists. Documentation was used to complement interview and observation records and to provide contextual information regarding the communication situations under investigation. The combination of these three techniques enabled the phenomenon to be understood not only through informants' accounts but also through actual communication practices observed in the field (Niam et al., 2024). Data credibility was ensured through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from local government representatives, local residents, vendors, and foreign tourists, as well as through methodological triangulation by cross-checking findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. In addition, member checking was conducted by reconfirming interview summaries and preliminary interpretations with the informants to ensure that the meanings formulated by the researchers accurately reflected their experiences (Syamsuddin et al., 2023).

Data analysis was conducted interactively throughout the data collection process through the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Sugiyono, 2022). Interview recordings and field notes were first transcribed and subsequently read repeatedly to identify statements relevant to the research focus. Initial coding was applied to data segments indicating limited vocabulary, difficulties in understanding accents and speech rate, differences in communication styles, the effects of language barriers on tourism services, and communication adaptation strategies. Codes with similar meanings were then grouped into categories and further developed into two major themes: forms of limited linguistic competence and communication adaptation strategies. The findings were subsequently organized into a comparative matrix across informants to facilitate the identification of similarities, differences, and relational patterns among categories. To maintain reflexivity, the researchers documented their initial assumptions, coding decisions, and changes in interpretation throughout the analytical process. This procedure ensured that the conclusions were not based solely on the researchers' subjective perspectives but could be traced back to evidence derived from interviews, observations, and documentation.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

RESULT

Limited Linguistic Competence in Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is an important aspect of supporting service quality in international tourist destinations, including Bukit Lawang, which receives foreign visitors from various countries each year. In these interactions, linguistic ability, particularly proficiency in English as an international language, plays a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of information and establishing

effective communication. However, the findings of this study indicate that local communities still experience various forms of limited linguistic competence that hinder communication with foreign tourists. These limitations not only affect the exchange of information but may also create misunderstandings in intercultural interactions. The forms of limited linguistic competence identified as barriers to intercultural communication between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination are presented as follows.

Limited Linguistic Competence among Tourism Actors

Limited linguistic competence among tourism actors remains one of the intercultural communication barriers identified at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. Many local residents who interact directly with foreign tourists possess only basic English proficiency, meaning that their communication is generally limited to simple conversations. This condition creates difficulties when tourism actors are required to provide more detailed explanations about tourist attractions, local culture, trekking routes, or conservation regulations.

As explained by Mr. Syah Afandin, Head of Bahorok District:

"Yes, based on our observations, limited linguistic competence remains one of the challenges faced by some tourism actors. Not all local residents have an educational background in English or have participated in communication training for interacting with foreign tourists. As a result, communication often relies only on basic vocabulary and is not yet sufficient to provide detailed explanations." (Syah Afandin, 2026)

Similarly, Mr. Budi Santoso, a local resident of the Bukit Lawang area, stated:

"I only have basic English skills, which I learned independently through my experiences of meeting tourists. I have never taken a formal English course. Most of the vocabulary I know relates to everyday conversations, such as greeting people, giving directions, mentioning prices, or explaining tourist attractions." (Budi Santoso, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that limited linguistic competence among tourism actors continues to constrain the provision of services to foreign tourists. The English proficiency of local residents is generally limited to basic vocabulary and is therefore insufficient to support the delivery of more detailed information in accordance with tourists' needs. Thus, the limited linguistic competence of tourism actors demonstrates that foreign-language proficiency is an important competency that needs to be strengthened. Improved English proficiency would facilitate communication, enhance the quality of tourism services, and strengthen intercultural interaction between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination.

Difficulties in Understanding Foreign Tourists' Speech

In addition to difficulties in conveying information, local residents also experience challenges in understanding the speech of foreign tourists. These barriers are influenced by differences in accent, speaking speed, vocabulary use, and particular terms that may be unfamiliar to local residents. Consequently, communication does not always proceed effectively and frequently requires repetition before messages can be properly understood.

Mr. Budi Santoso, a local resident of Bukit Lawang, explained:

"What I experience most often is when tourists ask long questions or use words that I have never heard before. Usually, I can understand part of what they mean, but I do not always understand everything immediately. It becomes even more difficult when they ask about trekking routes, local culture, or transportation. Sometimes I have to ask them to repeat the question more slowly, and then I try to answer using the English I know. If I am still confused, I usually use body language or ask someone who speaks English more fluently to help." (Budi Santoso, 2026)

Similarly, Michael Schneider, a foreign tourist from Germany, explained:

"The people here are very friendly and always willing to help. However, when I ask something more detailed, for example about conservation regulations, local culture, or transportation schedules, sometimes they do not seem to fully understand my question. I then have to repeat the question more slowly or use simpler words so that we can understand each other. Even so, they continue trying to help until I get the information

I need. The biggest difficulty arises when detailed information needs to be explained. Simple conversations are generally easy, but when I ask more specific questions, such as about environmental regulations, local traditions, or transportation schedules, communication becomes more complicated. Sometimes I have to repeat my questions several times.” (Michael Schneider, 2026)

These findings suggest that difficulties in understanding foreign tourists’ speech are influenced not only by the limited English proficiency of local residents but also by differences in accents, vocabulary choices, and tourists’ ways of expressing information. These conditions frequently require clarification or repetition to ensure mutual understanding. Therefore, difficulties in understanding foreign tourists’ speech constitute an important barrier to intercultural communication encountered by local communities in Bukit Lawang. Improving listening skills and increasing familiarity with variations in English use within tourism contexts are therefore important for supporting more effective communication and improving the quality of services provided to foreign tourists.

Differences in Intercultural Communication Styles

Differences in intercultural communication styles constitute another factor affecting interactions between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. Although both parties use English as a common language, differences in how information is conveyed, how questions are formulated, and how communication is generally conducted may prevent interactions from proceeding optimally. Foreign tourists tend to ask questions directly and in detail, whereas local residents are more accustomed to providing brief responses based on the information they understand.

Mr. Syah Afandin, Head of Bahorok District, explained:

“From what I have observed, the people of Bukit Lawang are actually accustomed to meeting foreign tourists. However, their communication styles are still different. Foreign tourists usually ask questions directly and in detail because they want complete explanations. Meanwhile, our local people are more accustomed to giving brief answers based on what they understand. These differences in communication styles sometimes mean that the information provided does not fully meet tourists’ expectations, even though local residents have made efforts to provide good service.” (Syah Afandin, 2026)

Similarly, Michael Schneider, a foreign tourist from Germany, stated:

“In my opinion, the people here are very friendly and always try to help. However, I notice that the way they explain information is different from what I am used to in my country. I often ask detailed questions because I want to know more, while they usually provide brief answers. Sometimes I have to ask additional questions in order to obtain more complete information. Even so, they remain patient and continue trying to explain things until I understand” (Michael Schneider, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that differences in communication styles between local communities and foreign tourists also constitute a barrier to intercultural communication. Differences in questioning patterns, ways of providing explanations, and interactional habits mean that the exchange of information does not always proceed effectively. These findings demonstrate that successful intercultural communication is determined not only by linguistic proficiency but also by the ability to understand the cultural characteristics underlying each party’s communication practices. Therefore, strengthening intercultural communication competence is important to enable local communities to adapt their communication styles to the needs of foreign tourists, thereby supporting more effective tourism services.

Limited Communication Ability and Its Impact on Tourism Service Quality

The limited communication ability of local communities affects the quality of tourism services at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. Limited English proficiency restricts the extent to which information can be conveyed comprehensively to foreign tourists. As a result, tourists sometimes require more time to obtain information about tourist attractions, trekking routes, transportation, and other services. Nevertheless, the friendliness of local residents and their willingness to assist tourists remain positive aspects of the visitor experience.

As explained by Ms. Siti, a local vendor in the Bukit Lawang area:

"If tourists only ask about prices or payment methods, I can still explain them. However, when they start asking more about the products or want to know the stories behind the handicrafts I sell, I sometimes find it difficult to explain them in English. In the end, I can only provide a simple explanation or use gestures. Sometimes, tourists also decide not to buy because they may not fully understand the explanation I have given." (Siti, 2026)

Similarly, Michael Schneider, a foreign tourist from Germany, stated:

"During my stay in Bukit Lawang, I found the local people very kind and always willing to help. There were several occasions when I had difficulty obtaining information because of language barriers, so I had to ask several people or seek additional information from a tour guide. Even so, I still enjoyed my experience here because the local people are very friendly. In my opinion, if their English proficiency were improved, the quality of services provided to tourists would certainly become even better." (Michael Schneider, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that limited communication ability affects the quality of tourism services provided to foreign tourists. Language barriers can hinder the effective delivery of information, requiring tourists to spend more time obtaining the information they need. Nevertheless, the friendliness, politeness, and willingness of local residents to assist visitors help mitigate the negative effects of these limitations. Therefore, improving the communication competence of local communities, particularly their English proficiency and tourism service communication skills, is necessary to enhance the quality of tourism services at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. Stronger communication competence is expected to promote more effective interactions, increase tourist satisfaction, and reinforce Bukit Lawang's image as an international tourist destination.

Communication Adaptation Strategies in Intercultural Interaction

Although limited linguistic competence remains one of the barriers to intercultural communication at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination, the findings show that neither local communities nor foreign tourists regard language differences as an absolute barrier to interaction. Both parties employ various forms of adjustment and communication adaptation strategies to maintain the effective exchange of information. These strategies are generally applied spontaneously according to their previous experiences, immediate needs, and the situations encountered during communication. Such adaptive efforts not only help reduce misunderstandings but also strengthen social relationships between local communities and foreign tourists. The communication adaptation strategies used to address limited linguistic competence in intercultural interactions at Bukit Lawang are described below.

Use of Simplified English

The use of simplified English is one of the most frequently employed communication adaptation strategies among both local communities and foreign tourists in addressing limited linguistic competence at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. Although the English proficiency of local residents remains limited, they continue to communicate by relying on basic vocabulary commonly used in tourism-related activities. This strategy allows essential information to be conveyed even when grammatically complete or complex sentences cannot be produced. Foreign tourists also adapt their communication by using shorter sentences, selecting easily understood vocabulary, and speaking more slowly so that local residents can more readily understand their intended meaning.

Mr. Budi Santoso, a local resident of Bukit Lawang, explained:

"When I speak with foreign tourists, I do not dare to use long sentences because I am afraid of making mistakes. I usually use simple expressions, such as 'This way' when giving directions, 'Go straight,' 'Turn left,' 'Ticket here,' 'Restaurant there,' or 'Wait a moment' when they need to wait. If they ask about the price, I say 'One hundred thousand rupiah,' or if they are looking for accommodation, I say 'Hotel near here' while pointing in the direction. For me, the important thing is that they understand what I mean. Over time, I have memorized several expressions because I use them frequently when meeting tourists." (Budi Santoso, 2026)

Similarly, Michael Schneider, a foreign tourist from Germany, stated:

"I understand that not everyone in Bukit Lawang speaks English fluently. Therefore, I also adjust the way I speak. I usually use shorter sentences such as 'Where is the river?', 'How much?', 'Can you help me?', or 'I want to go here' while showing the location on a map on my phone. I also speak more slowly and avoid difficult words. If they do not seem to understand, I repeat the question using simpler sentences. In my opinion, this approach is much more effective because we can still understand each other without having to use complicated English." (Michael Schneider, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that the use of simplified English is one of the most frequently adopted communication adaptation strategies by both local communities and foreign tourists. The use of basic vocabulary, short sentences, and simplified speech helps both parties convey and understand information despite limitations in linguistic competence. This finding demonstrates that successful intercultural communication is not necessarily determined by fluency in English, but rather by the ability of local communities and foreign tourists to adapt their communication to the linguistic competence of their interlocutors. Accordingly, the use of simplified English represents an effective communication adaptation strategy for facilitating smoother interactions, improving tourism service quality, and strengthening relationships between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination.

Use of Nonverbal Communication

The use of nonverbal communication is one of the communication adaptation strategies frequently employed by both local communities and foreign tourists to overcome limited linguistic competence at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. When communication in English does not proceed smoothly, both parties attempt to convey their intended meanings through hand gestures, facial expressions, direct pointing to objects or locations, and the demonstration of certain actions. This strategy is considered relatively effective because it helps clarify messages without requiring complete reliance on verbal language proficiency. Through nonverbal communication, interaction can continue, enabling local communities and foreign tourists to understand one another despite limitations in their use of English.

As explained by Ms. Siti, a local vendor in the Bukit Lawang area:

"If foreign tourists do not understand the explanation, I usually show them the item directly or use hand gestures to make it easier for them to understand. For example, when explaining the size, color, or shape of a souvenir, I show the items one by one. If they ask for directions to accommodation or tourist attractions, I usually point to the road or sometimes accompany them until they understand where to go. I also use facial expressions, such as smiling or nodding, so they can understand what I mean. This kind of approach is quite helpful because not everything can be explained in English." (Siti, 2026)

Similarly, Michael Schneider, a foreign tourist from Germany, stated:

"People in Bukit Lawang quite often use body language when communicating. When I asked for directions to a trekking route, they immediately pointed to the road while demonstrating which direction I should take. When buying souvenirs, they also showed the items directly while explaining them with hand gestures. If I did not understand the explanation, they repeated it using clearer gestures. Tourists also usually point to maps on their phones, show pictures of the destination, or use facial expressions so that their questions are easier to understand. These kinds of strategies allow communication to continue even when both parties have limited English proficiency." (Michael Schneider, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that the use of nonverbal communication is an effective adaptation strategy for overcoming limited linguistic competence between local communities and foreign tourists. Hand gestures, facial expressions, direct pointing to objects, and the demonstration of particular actions help clarify the intended meaning of messages, allowing communication to continue effectively despite language barriers. Thus, the use of nonverbal communication demonstrates that successful intercultural communication is determined not only by verbal language proficiency but also by the ability of both parties to employ nonverbal cues to support message delivery. This strategy represents an important form of communication adaptation that facilitates more effective interaction,

reduces misunderstandings, and enhances tourists' comfort during their visit to the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination.

Use of Technology as a Communication Medium

The use of technology is another communication adaptation strategy employed by both local communities and foreign tourists to overcome limited linguistic competence in intercultural interactions at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. When face-to-face communication encounters difficulties due to limited English proficiency, both parties utilize various technologies, including Google Translate, translation features on mobile phones, internet search tools, and digital maps to assist in explaining information. These technologies make communication easier because the intended message can be translated more quickly. Nevertheless, technology is used primarily as a supporting tool to maintain communication rather than as a substitute for direct interpersonal interaction.

As explained by Mr. Syah Afandin, Head of Bahorok District:

"Technology now greatly helps local people when communicating with foreign tourists. If there is a word or sentence that is difficult to explain, tourism actors usually open Google Translate on their mobile phones. Some also use the voice feature so that the translation appears immediately and can be played for the tourist. In addition, the internet is often used to find new vocabulary related to tourism, for example terms concerning trekking routes, orangutan conservation, or tourism services. Based on our observations, technology has been quite helpful in reducing communication barriers. However, English proficiency still needs to be improved because technology should only serve as a supporting tool when communication becomes difficult." (Syah Afandin, 2026)

Similarly, Mr. Budi Santoso, a local resident of the Bukit Lawang area, stated:

"If I really do not understand a tourist's question, I usually open Google Translate on my phone. Tourists also often type their questions into the application, and then we read the translation together. Sometimes we use the microphone feature so that spoken words can be translated immediately. If tourists are looking for a particular place, we usually open Google Maps and show them the location. This makes things easier because we do not have to guess what the other person means. Although the translation is not always completely accurate, at least communication can continue and the information can still be understood." (Budi Santoso, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that the use of technology is an effective communication adaptation strategy for addressing limited linguistic competence between local communities and foreign tourists. Translation applications, voice features, internet-based tools, and digital maps help clarify the information being conveyed, allowing communication to continue despite language barriers. Therefore, the use of technology as a communication medium demonstrates the positive contribution of technological developments to intercultural communication at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. Technology not only facilitates the delivery of information but also helps local communities and foreign tourists achieve mutual understanding, thereby making interactions more effective and contributing to improvements in tourism service quality.

Seeking Assistance from More Competent Third Parties

Another communication adaptation strategy employed by local communities is seeking assistance from third parties with better English proficiency, such as tour guides, family members, other vendors, or younger community members who are more accustomed to using foreign languages. This strategy is generally used when the information that needs to be conveyed is relatively detailed and therefore requires stronger communication skills.

Mr. Budi Santoso, a local resident of the Bukit Lawang area, explained:

"When tourists ask about regulations for entering the conservation area, trekking schedules, the types of orangutans found in Bukit Lawang, or safety procedures during the trip, the information is not always easy to explain. Usually, I contact a tour guide who speaks English more fluently or direct the tourists to the Tourist Information Center so that they can receive a more complete explanation. If the question concerns conservation regulations, I sometimes also ask for assistance from officers of Gunung

Leuser National Park who understand the relevant information. In this way, the information provided is more accurate and the tourists also have greater confidence in it. While they are explaining, I usually listen as well so that I can increase my knowledge and learn how to explain the same information to other tourists in the future.” (Budi Santoso, 2026)

Similarly, Ms. Siti, a local vendor in the Bukit Lawang area, stated:

“There have been tourists who asked whether the souvenirs were made directly by the people of Bukit Lawang, what materials were used, whether they were environmentally friendly, and even what the motifs on the handicrafts meant. Questions like these are sometimes quite difficult to explain in English. I usually ask a tour guide who is accompanying the tourists for help because they speak English more fluently and understand information about local products. The tour guide then helps explain the origin of the products, how they are made, and the meaning of the handicrafts. After the tourists receive a more complete explanation, they usually become more confident about buying the products. This approach is very helpful because communication can still proceed effectively even though the vendors’ English proficiency is limited.” (Siti, 2026)

These interview findings indicate that seeking assistance from third parties is an effective communication adaptation strategy for overcoming limited linguistic competence. The presence of individuals with stronger English proficiency helps clarify information and allows communication to proceed more effectively. Cooperation among community members in supporting the communication process also reflects a shared commitment to providing better services to foreign tourists. This strategy further demonstrates that successful intercultural communication depends not only on individual linguistic competence but also on collaboration among tourism actors in creating high-quality tourism services.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that limited linguistic competence remains a major barrier to intercultural communication between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. This limitation is reflected in the generally basic level of English proficiency among local residents, which means that interactions often remain limited to simple conversations. As a result, local communities experience difficulties when they are required to explain more detailed information, such as trekking routes, conservation regulations, local culture, and available tourism products. Local residents also frequently encounter difficulties in understanding foreign tourists due to differences in accent, speaking speed, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Differences in communication styles further increase the potential for misunderstanding, particularly because local residents tend to provide brief responses while foreign tourists are more accustomed to asking detailed questions. These findings indicate that linguistic competence is not limited to the ability to speak a foreign language but also includes the ability to understand messages, select appropriate vocabulary, and adjust communication according to the cultural background of the interlocutor.

These findings are consistent with Brown et al. (2023), who explain that communication barriers are caused not only by limited language proficiency but also by constraints in the use of communication support resources. Brown et al. found that healthcare professionals often did not use interpretation services because they lacked understanding of the relevant procedures, perceived interpreter use as time-consuming, and preferred to rely on informal interpreters. As a result, the quality of services provided to patients with limited language proficiency became less optimal. A similar pattern is evident in Bukit Lawang, where local communities also face limitations in conveying information effectively to foreign tourists. Although the two studies were conducted in different contexts—healthcare services and tourism—both demonstrate that limited linguistic competence can reduce communication effectiveness when it is not supported by adequate communication strategies. Therefore, improving language proficiency and optimizing the use of communication support tools are important requirements for creating more effective service interactions.

The findings of this study are also in line with Burhamzah et al. (2026), who identify limited vocabulary, differences in accent, and difficulties in understanding pragmatic meaning as key barriers in intercultural communication. Their study emphasizes that successful communication is determined not only by linguistic ability but also by cultural awareness, adaptive capacity, and the communication

strategies employed. Similar conditions were found in Bukit Lawang, where local communities attempted to overcome language limitations by using simplified English, simplifying sentence structures, employing nonverbal communication, and seeking clarification when misunderstandings occurred. Openness, empathy, and a willingness to maintain interaction also helped sustain communication despite limited foreign-language proficiency. These findings therefore reinforce the view that communication adaptation constitutes an integral component of intercultural communication competence.

In addition, the findings of this study are consistent with Halawa and Octafian (2026), who revealed that limited foreign-language proficiency and inadequate cross-cultural knowledge frequently lead to misunderstandings in services provided to international tourists. Their study demonstrated that these limitations directly affect tourist satisfaction, thereby highlighting the need for structured training in foreign languages and intercultural communication. A similar pattern was also identified in Bukit Lawang, where limited linguistic competence slowed the process of information delivery and occasionally reduced its accuracy. Nevertheless, local communities demonstrated a relatively strong capacity for adaptation by employing nonverbal communication through hand gestures, facial expressions, pointing to objects, and demonstrating particular actions to help tourists understand the information being conveyed. In addition, local residents utilized technologies such as Google Translate, voice translation features, and internet-based tools as communication aids, while also seeking assistance from tour guides or colleagues with stronger English proficiency when dealing with more complex conversations.

The findings of this study also reinforce Dewi's (2026) conclusion that linguistic barriers can create various challenges in tourism services and therefore require community capacity-building strategies through language training, information digitalization, and collaboration with multiple stakeholders. In Bukit Lawang, communication adaptation strategies that have developed naturally through repeated interactions with foreign tourists have proven effective in minimizing the effects of limited linguistic competence. The combined use of simplified English, nonverbal communication, digital technology, and collaboration with individuals who possess stronger foreign-language skills constitutes a key strategy for maintaining the effectiveness of intercultural communication. Therefore, this study emphasizes that strengthening linguistic competence should be accompanied by improvements in intercultural communication competence through tourism-oriented English training, the development of cross-cultural communication skills, and the optimization of communication technologies. These efforts are expected to improve the quality of tourism services, enhance foreign tourist satisfaction, and strengthen Bukit Lawang's image as a friendly, communicative, and professional international tourist destination.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that limited linguistic competence constitutes a significant barrier to intercultural communication between local communities and foreign tourists at the Bukit Lawang Tourism Destination. These barriers are reflected in limited vocabulary, difficulties in constructing explanations in English, challenges in understanding accents, speaking speed, and unfamiliar terms, differences in communication styles, and an inability to convey detailed tourism-related information. These conditions result in slower information exchange, the need to repeat or simplify messages, and less effective tourism services, particularly when communicating about trekking routes, conservation regulations, transportation, local culture, and tourism products. Nevertheless, local communities and foreign tourists are able to maintain effective interaction through the use of simplified English, nonverbal communication, translation applications and digital maps, as well as assistance from third parties with stronger English proficiency. These findings confirm that successful intercultural communication is determined not only by language fluency but also by the ability of both parties to adapt messages, utilize diverse communication resources, and collaborate in the process of meaning-making. Therefore, improving the quality of tourism services in Bukit Lawang should be supported through tourism-oriented English training, the strengthening of intercultural communication competence, the provision of multilingual tourism information, and the strategic use of communication technologies.

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