

Close Relationship between Language and Culture and Its Implication on ELT^{*)}

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Abstract: When Indonesians learn English as a foreign language at school, they are inevitably exposed to the target language culture. It is the teacher's job to equip the students with information about the culture underlying it so that they will be ready in interacting with native speakers of English. Teacher should be aware of cross cultural understanding which is important for cross cultural communication and, as the consequence, teacher cannot only teach linguistics aspect of English without teaching culture at the same time. Thus, teaching language structures and cultural conventions should lead students to better acquisition of linguistic and cultural sensitivity. Toward this end, the paper tries to account for the necessity of understanding cultural aspects in the context of English language teaching in Indonesia. The paper tries to discuss 1) the importance of teaching culture, 2) whose and what culture to be taught in ELT classroom, 3) the application of the teaching culture in Indonesia, and 4) some points to take into consideration.

Key words: *language learning, culture learning, English Language Teaching (ELT)*

Abstrak: Ketika orang Indonesia belajar bahasa Inggris di sekolah, mau tidak mau mereka akan dihadapkan pada budaya dari bahasa target. Ini adalah tugas guru untuk membekali siswa dengan informasi tentang budaya yang mendasarinya sehingga mereka siap untuk berinteraksi dengan penutur asli bahasa Inggris. Para guru harus menyadari akan pentingnya pemahaman lintas budaya dalam komunikasi lintas budaya, dan sebagai konsekwensinya para guru tidak bisa hanya mengajarkan aspek linguistik tanpa pada saat yang sama mengajarkan budayanya. Dengan demikian, pengajaran struktur bahasa dan kaidah budaya harus bisa membawa siswa pada pemerolehan linguistik dan sensitifitas budaya. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini mencoba untuk menjelaskan pentingnya pemahaman aspek-aspek budaya dalam ranah pengajaran Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Artikel ini mencoba untuk membahas 1) pentingnya pengajaran budaya, 2) budaya siapa (dan apa) yang harus diajarkan dalam kelas pengajaran bahasa Inggris, 3) aplikasi pengajaran budaya di Indonesia, dan 4) beberapa hal yang perlu dipertimbangkan.

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Kata Kunci: pembelajaran bahasa, pembelajaran budaya, *pengajaran bahasa Inggris*

Introduction: Language and Culture

Fluency in the target language might be one of the most important goals of language learners. However, fluency does not guarantee perfect communication between the language learner and the native speaker of the language since there is another factor which influences communication; that is culture. However, the word 'culture' itself is perhaps one of the most complex terms to define in the English language. Thus although language studies specialists are constantly searching for what 'culture' means in language teaching, the complicated nature of the term makes it difficult to create a clear-cut definition of it. Referring to some literature, the word 'culture' has some definitions by different experts. Hiebert (1983), for example, said that culture is all learned behavior which is socially acquired, that is, the material and non material traits which are passed on from one generation to another. Korzenny (1991:56) defined culture as a social product and it is the result of human originating interaction. Others stated that culture is social cement of all human relationships (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992:183). Meanwhile, Richards and Schmidt (2002:138) defined culture as the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group.

These definitions indicate that human beings are attached to the culture because culture itself is a part of human life and people have to learn the culture, that is, the patterns of behavior, ideas, and beliefs in the society. The culture where we live in influences and shapes our feelings, attitudes, and responses to the things we experience as well as our interaction with others. It also teaches us how to behave and how to be appropriate in communicating with others. Communication practices and behaviors of people from different societies are different because each society has its own culture (Prayogo, 2004). Further, when Indonesian students learn English as a foreign language at school, they are inevitably exposed to the culture.

The fact that language is part of culture requires us not to put aside the cultural knowledge when we teach or learn a language. There are two views showing the relationship between language and culture. The first is that culture would lead somebody in viewing the world and later on determine his behavior linguistically and

non-linguistically. As culture determines our behavior linguistically, then language functions to “express, embody, and symbolize cultural reality”. This means that language is used as a means to express people attitudes, beliefs and points of view, to create experience, and to identify the members of the society. The second opinion is expressed by Sapir and Whorf in their hypothesis that makes the claim that language influences culture (one’s thinking, manner, and behavior). Although the two opinions emphasize on two different things, they both show that language and culture are two inseparable entities, indicating that language cannot be separated from culture or viceversa.

How necessary is culture in ELT?

There might be some fundamental reasons as the answer of this question. The followings are the benefits of studying culture in English language teaching and learning. First, studying culture does not only increase learners’ curiosity about and interest in target countries but also their motivation (Genc and Bada, 2005). Culture classes have a great role in boosting students’ motivation because learners usually like culturally-based activities. When the teachers introduce the culture of the target language they are teaching, for instance, learners’ interest in those classes improves a lot and the culture-based classes become learners’ preference than traditional ones.

Second, culture has linguistic and pedagogical influences in language teaching (McKay, 2003). From linguistic side, culture has some bearing on the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels. It has effects on the choice of the language materials pedagogically because cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials. For example, while some textbooks provide examples from the target culture, some others use source culture materials (Genc and Bada, 2005).

Third, culture and language are inseparable in that a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. Both of them are very close connected so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 1994:164). This idea is further elucidated by Buttjes (1990, as cited by Purba, 2011) contended that (1) language acquisition does not follow a universal

sequence, but differs across cultures; (2) the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations; (3) every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function, and the content of children's utterances; (4) caregivers' primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge; and (5) the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of his or her culture. As the consequence of the fact, the teachers should also teach its culture when they teach a foreign language. Tomalin and Stempleski (2003:105) argue that 'communication, language, and culture cannot be separated'. They further assert that in order to communicate successfully, we have to be fluent culturally and linguistically. The most obvious example is when we learn the vocabulary of a foreign language, there are quite a number of lexical items which could be understood only if we know the cultural background of the foreign language. If we do not understand the culture, consequently we will not be able to comprehend the text more or less fully. Kadarisman (2005:151-170) provides an interesting example in which without sufficient cultural background, one might not be able to comprehend the meaning of '*The Fourth in Salvador*', a short story by O'Henry (1984). In order to get the meaning of the word '*fourth*' which means '*the fourth of July*', the independence day of United States, one should read the story as well as understand the the history and culture of the target coutry.

Johnson (2005) then adds that experienced teachers of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) know that learning about culture is part of learning English. Adult ESL learners themselves understand that language learning consists of more than the ability to understand new linguistic structures. Indeed, the coding and decoding of communicative acts requires an understanding and appreciation of the cultural context in which they occur.

Those are some benefits of teaching culture in English language classroom. To sum up, teaching culture has a humanizing and a motivating effect on the language learner and the learning process. It helps learners observe similarities and differences among various cultural groups. Besides, learners are affected in their language acquisition by their perception of the target culture. If a language learner

perceives the target culture as well as his native culture in positive terms, then proficiency in the L2 is enhanced (Brown, 2000).

However, some experts approach the issue of teaching culture with some kind of reservation. Bada (2000:100) reminds us that awareness of cultural values and societal characteristics does not necessarily invite the learner to conform to such values, since they are there to “refine the self so that it can take a more universal and less egoistic form”. Besides, we are reminded of the fact that English language is the most studied language all over the world, whereby the language has gained a lingua franca status (Alptekin, 2002). In his article, Alptekin stated that favoring an intercultural communicative of the world for instrumental reasons such as professional contacts, academic studies, and commercial pursuits, the conventions of the British politeness or American informality proves irrelevant. Another objection is proposed by Schumann (1976) who notes that there are two possible “bad” language-learning situations in regards to cultural perceptions. If L2 learners perceive the target culture as dominant or if the L2 learners perceive their own culture in competition with the target culture, then acquisition will be hindered.

Whose and What Culture to Be Taught

In relation to the fact that language is inseparable from culture, the crucial question in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) is ‘Whose culture should be taught?’ Should the teachers teach target culture only or should also incorporate native culture? In this case, there are two different viewpoints among experts. Those who agree with the former are among other Stewart (1982, cited in Alpetekin, 1993) and Valdes (1986). Stewart asserts that teaching formal aspects of a foreign language while referring to the native culture of the learner is virtually useless. Further, Valdes reiterates this view by arguing that the use of native culture in foreign language teaching is devoid of benefit.

This idea suggests that the culture we English teachers need to deal with in a foreign language program should be the one that views culture as an integrated patterns of abstraction derived from observable behavior of a group of people. In other words, the major cultural contents to include in a language classroom should be what Tomalin and Stempleski (1993:6) call with as “culturally influenced beliefs and

perceptions, especially as expressed through language, but also through cultural behaviors that affect acceptability in the host community". Therefore, realistic elements of culture we should include, as Purba (2011) suggested, are notions like when and what people eat; how they make a living; the attitudes they express towards friends and members of their families; which expressions they use to show approval or disapproval, educational attitudes, time and space patterns, work values, etc.

Another potential problem, however, may emerge is that now English as lingua franca, as Sadtono (2003) stated, cannot be claimed by people from just one English-speaking country with 'one homogeneous culture'. 36 nations have claimed English as their first language (Crystal, 1997 cited by Sadtono, 2003). If we know exactly which English speaking country we are planning to visit, then the answer is relatively simple; but most of the learners of English in Indonesia do not know whether they will even ever go overseas in an English speaking country to study or just to make a brief visit. In addition, many of them perhaps would go overseas not to an English speaking country, but they have to use English anyway, for example to go to Holland, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines or India whose cultures are different from the US, the UK or Australia. Still much larger number of English learners would need English to be used domestically, that is to read textbooks or to work in a company employing foreigners (Sadtono, 2003).

On the other hand, Kramsch (1993) and Prodomou (1992) might be the proponents of the later; teaching target culture should incorporate native culture. Kramsch (1993) claims that learning culture can only be pursued when there is a development in the understanding of one's own culture. Thus although practical advantages do exist in teaching and presenting the target language solely in relation to the target culture, culture teaching must begin with comprehension of one's native cultural behavior, its prejudices and ethnocentric outlook, which can be used as a basis for cross cultural application and analysis. Applying culture teaching through the use of native culture knowledge that teachers are actually more familiar with may be more effective rather than placing overemphasis solely on target language culture. In fact, Prodomou's 1992 study surveying 300 Greek EFL students' preferences on English lessons revealed that students prefer to discuss about various cultures in

general, followed by discussions of their native culture, then followed by the culture of their target language. Moreover, intermediate and advanced students believed that it was more important for their teacher to be familiar with their local culture rather than that of their FL. Prodromou interprets these results as the students' desire to prioritize their cultural identity before acquiring any new cultural knowledge.

Application of Teaching Culture in Indonesian ELT Context

Most of English teachers believe that culture is essential for adult ESL students, but note that it involves a different pedagogical process from teaching language. Success or failure of a particular course often depends on how a teacher uses the media and approaches the cultural elements in the curriculum. Various techniques used in English language teaching methodology can be utilized to teach cultural content. Besides, activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. Lectures, textbooks, observations, interviews, films and videotapes, discussions, simulation, authentic materials, and literature might be good media to apply culture teaching in Indonesian ELT context.

Lectures can be an efficient means of conveying cultural information or offering new perspectives on what Indonesian learners of English already know. If experts in a particular field, especially anthropology, sociology, cross-cultural communication or other related social sciences, are available, they can be invited to give guest lecture to explain deep culture of English (Naning and Abdullah, 2008). Textbooks on cross-cultural communication can help Indonesian learners of English to increase awareness of English culture, for example, *Beyond Language Intercultural Communication for English as a Second Language and Journeys to Cultural Understanding, Intercultural Communication, and Cultures in Conversation*. By reading these materials they have access to detailed treatment of issues related to specific intercultural aspects that they need to understand (Naning and Abdullah, 2008).

Indonesian learners of English can also be asked to observe certain events where English speakers and non- native speakers regularly interact. They may take notes on differences and similarities of the ways both groups communicate and report to the class (Naning and Abdullah, 2008). Films, television, and video tapes can also provide vivid illustration of cultural patterns in action. They may pick up certain

rules from these media. In addition, they can be asked to find out what it means to act like members of English culture. It does not mean, however, that they must change their identity or personality. At least, they can see how native speakers feel in a certain situation. This will hopefully increase their intercultural awareness. Purba (2011) states that film and television segments offer students an opportunity to witness behaviors that are not obvious in texts. Film is often one of the more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel, and rhythm of a culture. Film also connects students with language and cultural issues simultaneously, such as depicting conversational timing or turn-taking in conversation.

The learners can be asked as well to discuss some cultural information with their classmates or native speakers, for example, why Americans tend to pay for themselves when they have lunch even though they ask you to go to a restaurant together. The discussion will at first yield different interpretations. When the issue is clarified, they will recognize how their own culture has shaped them and why they do it that way. For a certain period of time, they can be asked to live according to the English cultural rules, for example, how as far as they know Americans have dinner, what kinds of meals they eat, how they set the table, etc. This simulation game can show that the habit which is culturally ingrained affects our behavior. Then they will realize why their British, American or Australian friends act the way they do. They will also understand that their communication actions are influenced by their Indonesian culture. Such awareness tells Indonesian learners of English that when two people (Indonesian and Briton or American or Australian) speaking in the same language (English) they still tend to think in their own cultures. They have to negotiate the same cultural meaning in order to achieve mutual understanding (Naning and Abdullah, 2008).

Using authentic sources from the native speech community, like films, news broadcasts, and television shows, web sites, photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials might also help the students to engage in authentic cultural experiences. In this case, of course, the teachers should adapt their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. For example, even beginning language students can watch and listen to video clips taken from a T.V. show in the target language and focus

on such cultural conventions as greetings. The teacher might supply students with a detailed translation or give them a chart, diagram, or outline to complete while they listen to a dialogue or watch a video (Purba, 2011). After the class has viewed the relevant materials, the teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms represented in the materials and what these norms might say about the values of the culture. Discussion topics might include nonverbal behaviors (e.g., the physical distance between speakers, gestures, eye contact, societal roles, and how people in different social roles relate to each other). Students might describe the behaviors they observe and discuss which of them are similar to their native culture and which are not and determine strategies for effective communication in the target language (Purba, 2011).

Some Points to Take into Consideration

Learning a language means learning the culture of the people who speak the language because language is part of culture (Petrus, 2008). That is why, it is suggested that Indonesian users of English learn not only the linguistic skills but also sociocultural aspects of English. They need to learn further about academic and social life of English-speaking people, improve their communicative ability, and recognize the importance of cultural knowledge of this society (Naning, 2010). However, although it is generally accepted that language and culture are inseparable, before actual teaching is conducted, it is vital for teachers and the curriculum designers to devise clear goals for culture instruction. Furthermore, prior to any hasty integration of cultural materials into the classroom, it is necessary to first address the issue of incorporating native culture vs. sole focus on target culture and consider the various advantages/disadvantages involved with both approaches (Kim, 2002). The decision to choose between either approaches is again heavily influenced by the teachers' own beliefs toward culture, thus it is crucial for the teacher to have a clear yet critical understanding of his/her own perceptions towards culture so as to provide students with opportunities for unbiased and 'healthy' culture instruction (Kim, 2002).

Sadtono (2003) adds that that the problems in learning another culture are immense and can be extremely complicated. The ideal teachers who teach culture are actually those who have been exposed to the two cultures for a lengthy period and who are knowledgeable about the target culture, but such teachers are not easily

found in Indonesia. Teaching culture or Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU) is an burdensome task and not every English teacher can do it well. Sadtono (2003) adds that the ideal CCU teacher should definitely be a super scholar with multiple qualifications and most probably a native speaker of English. If that is the case, a CCU teacher should be a linguist, anthropologist, literary critic, geographer, psychologist, social scientist, etc.

Dunnet, Dubin, Lezberg (as cited in Valdes, 1996:159-160), however, suggested that an ideal EFL (culture) teacher should possess some characteristics. The teacher should have a strong background in comparative analysis and/or comparative cultures and/or training in intercultural communications, have training experience in abroad, be able to select materials which encourage intercultural point of view in the English program, be able to integrate intercultural education with language instruction through carefully designed syllabus, and be able to develop strategies for teaching culture in the English program. Besides, the teacher should ideally be able to examine textbook carefully to determine whether it takes an intercultural point of view, identify the cultural aspects inherent in a textbook, see if the vocabulary items, examples, grammar structures, etc. are placed in some meaningful cultural context, examine if photographs and illustrations in a textbook are culturally related, and examine dialogues for their cultural content.

CLOSING REMARK

It is undeniable that Indonesian educational institution need to intentionally equip EFL learners with intercultural information of English speaking world. When communicating with English speaking people and other non-native speakers of English, Indonesian English users must understand cultural differences they are facing and recognize openly that everyone in the world is culturally different. In addition, Indonesian culture can also be introduced to them with the result that there is mutual appreciation and reciprocal intercultural understanding.

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