

ISSUES OF CULTURAL CONTENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING¹

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Abstract

This study aims at discussing some issues related to cultural content in English Language Teaching for EFL and ESL classrooms. It's been the common thing to say that language and culture were inseparable, that every language teacher has to teach both language and culture. This common belief has contributed to the teaching and learning process in EFL/ESL classroom which commonly internalized cultural values as well. This therefore will contribute to the elimination of our national cultural values and norms by our next generation. This particular study tries to have a deep analysis on the three main issues, namely, 1) what are the representations of cultural content in English language teaching, 2) to what extent this western cultural content has influenced our young generations, 3) and whether there are certain ways of minimizing this cultural influence in order to maintain our children's understanding on our cultural values.

The result of this study has shown these following findings. Firstly, in English language teaching classroom, it seems that the teacher has to teach not only the language but also the culture as well. Some English textbooks even demonstrate western culture rather than Indonesian culture to create the situational context to the students. Secondly, these cultural contents have lead to the changes of our young generations' performance as well as their ways of thinking. Some of them have even had no ideas of their own culture. Finally, we need to internalize our own culture in our English teaching and learning process that the students will be able to understand their own culture.

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Introduction

The use of English as one of the international languages has encouraged people to learn and use the language to interact with other people coming from different parts of the world and having different language. Gonzales states that the domains in which English is used as an international, an auxiliary language for intercultural and intercountry and regional communication, are mostly those of international diplomacy, scientific discourse, and in international trade and business, for it is the language of financial and global financial transactions and the language of trade negotiations and the medium of discourse of international business.² This has led English as one of the *lingua franca*³ and also encourages the spreads and developments in the English Language Teaching in the non English speaking countries not to mention Indonesia.

It is generally agreed so far that language cannot be separated from culture. Following Linton (1945) via Rajend Mesthrie, Joan Swann, Ana Deumer and William L. Leap, culture can be defined as in the technical sociological anthropological sense the culture of a society refers to, ‘the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation’ Culture in this sense is a ‘design for living’, which defines appropriate or acceptable ways and forms of behavior within particular societies.⁴ While language can be considered as a cultural activity and, at the same time, an instrument for organizing other cultural domains.⁵

²Andrew Gonzales, the Cultural Content of English as an International Auxiliary Language (EIAL): Problems and Issues, in Makhan L. Tickoo (ed.), *Language and Culture in Multilingual Societies: Viewpoints and Visions*. (Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre with Sherson Publishing House, Pte. Ltd, 1995), 58.

³ Kate Woodford and Guy Jackson define *lingua franca* as, “a language which is used for communication between groups of people who speak different languages but which is not used among members of the same language”. Kate Woodford and Guy Jackson, (eds.), *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴ Rajend Mesthrie, Joan Swann, Ana Deumer and William L. Leap, *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2009), 28.

⁵ Farzad Sharifian and Gary B. Palmer, *Applied Cultural Linguistics Implications for Second Language Learning and Intercultural Communication* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1.

The fact that teaching a foreign language cannot be effectively carried out without giving understanding of its culture has led to a very hard job for those involving the practice of the English language teaching. Educators may unintentionally have been inserting western culture in their classrooms, while learners may have been learning western culture while learning the language. This condition may lead to the decrease of the future generations' understanding towards their own culture. They may have been internalizing the foreign culture in their life, and becoming strangers of their own culture. This will not be beneficial for the sustainability of the country. Therefore, the need to have cultural awareness among those involving the English language teaching is unavoidable. Considering these facts, this particular study focuses on three main issues concerning the practice of ELT, namely: 1) what are the representations of cultural content in English language teaching; 2) to what extent this western cultural content has influenced our young generations; 3) and whether there are certain ways of minimizing this cultural influence in order to maintain our children's understanding on our cultural values.

Cultural Content in English Language Teaching

The underlying principles of current practice of education in this country are mentioned in the national law. One of the principles is on the notion of national education which has been defined as education based on *Pancasila* and the 1945 Constitution, and is rooted in the religious values, national cultures of Indonesia, and one that is responsive to the needs of the ever-changing era.⁶ This principle is indeed becoming the main principle in conducting every teaching and learning process. By looking at this definition of the national educational, it is clearly mentioned that every educators and those individual involving in the teaching and learning process need to consider some particular values, namely, religious as well as national cultural values of this country.

⁶ Act of the Republic of Indonesia on National Education System, Chapter 1 Article 1.

It is commonly believed that the teaching a foreign language will not be effectively carried out without teaching the accompanying culture. The fact that English is considered one of the most important languages, the need to master the language is unavoidable. This country needs individual having good English proficiency in order to maintain international relation with other countries in the world. This condition has made English as one of the foreign languages to be taught in schools starting from the junior high level up to the university levels. Moreover, there have been some elementary schools also started to teach English to their students. In a long term, it may not be much to say that the next generation will have better English proficiency for they have the opportunity to study the language earlier than their parents.

Considering the important need of mastering the language, every educator and those involve in the English teaching and learning process have done their best to help the learner learning the languages. Every English teacher commonly has a good preparation in conducting their classroom. They tend to have preparations not only in terms of the language items going to be discussed, the teaching technique they are going to apply in the classroom, as well as the learning resources suitable with the topic under discussion. They always try to use various interesting activities to present the context of the given language items being discussed. Some of them even give the explanation on certain language items accompanied by the context of culture in which those items used. This fact is very common in the practice of foreign language classrooms. What may be becoming the main concern is on whether the presentation of this foreign culture is accompanied by the explanation of the local and national culture. This remains an important question in the current practice of English Language teaching in this country.

Consequently, educators need to have awareness and sensitivity regarding issues of cultural content before conducting the teaching and learning process. Teachers need to consider the fact that their students come from different cultural background, have different levels of proficiency, speak their own first language,

and also may have different social and economic background. Therefore, they need to have a critical analysis on the materials as well as the learning resources to be given to the students in terms of western cultural content.

Unfortunately, some or even most English teachers do not have such awareness and sensitivity regarding issues of cultural content in English language teaching practice. A brief study conducted prior to the writing of this paper, on some online English resources provided by scholars of English language teaching in this country has provided some examples of western cultural content even in textbooks written by Indonesian scholars either in the form of pictorial or textual images used by the writers. Firstly, some writers seem to be more convenient to use western image rather than the local or national image.⁷

Secondly, the western cultural content within the English textbook has also take the form of using texts discussing the western topic. A brief observation on the English textbooks provided by the Pusat Perbukuan Department Pendidikan Nasional may become good examples. In one of the book, there is one chapter about descriptive texts. The writers use 8 texts describing interesting places in the world which are predominantly talking about the descriptions of some interesting places found in other countries rather than this country. There is only one text describing one of interesting places in Indonesia. The same thing happens when

⁷ The examples of using the western image in the English textbook could be easily found in some of the 'bse' (online textbooks provided by Pusat Perbukuan Department Pendidikan Nasional) books. Take for example an electronic English book written by Joko Priyana, Riandi and Anita Mumpuni entitled *SCAFFOLDING: English for Junior High School Students Grade VII*. This actually a good textbook completed with an explanation on every western cultural content presented in this book, but when we have a look at the cover of the book will find a very beautiful picture of one of the interesting places in Australia rather than one of our own country. Joko Priyana, Riandi and Anita Mumpuni. *SCAFFOLDING: English for Junior High School Students Grade VII and VII*. (Jakarta: Pusat Perbukuan, Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008). The other example of western image using can be found also in a textbook written by Utami Widiati, et al. entitled *Contextual Teaching and Learning: Bahasa Inggris Sekolah Menengah Pertama/Madrasah Tsanawiyah Kelas VIII Edisi 4* in which we may find the image of two interesting places in western countries. Check for Utami Widiati, et al. *Contextual Teaching and Learning: Bahasa Inggris Sekolah Menengah Pertama/Madrasah Tsanawiyah Kelas VIII Edisi 4*. (Jakarta: Pusat Perbukuan, Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008).

the writers discuss about narrative texts, they prefer using short stories or western fairy tale rather than using those easily found in our culture.⁸

Those are only some examples of cultural content representation found in some of the English textbook. In one sense, those kinds of learning resources could be quite beneficial in providing the context of the language items under discussion to the students. On the contrary, it may also produce a lower understanding of the Indonesian students towards their own culture if their teachers use this kind of learning resources without explaining and relating the western cultural content with the local and the national one. Although it is only the result of a very brief observation of some of the English resources, it provides proofs of the culture content in English textbooks. Therefore, it will not be fair to judge all of the English textbooks written by Indonesian scholars definitely contain western cultural content. Some of those books have inserted the local and national cultures either in the form of image or illustration as well as the texts used.

The Impact of Cultural Content in ELT towards Students/Young Generation

The use of English textbooks containing western cultural content may result in the decrease of our young generations' understanding towards their own culture. They may be more familiar with the western culture rather than their own culture. It may make them internalize the norms as well as foreign cultural values in their daily lives. Some of our young students may have deep understanding on the foreign culture rather than mastering the language.

What may be the most important impact of the current ELT practice is the loss of our own culture since our young generations are no longer have clear understanding of it. Our own valuable cultural norms and values will be left behind by its descendents as they like to have and behave by using the foreign

⁸ Utami Widiati, et al, 58-69.

cultural norms and values. They may even forget their cultural identity. All individuals engage in the foreign language teaching and learning process need to anticipate this by having the cultural awareness of the foreign culture and start having discussion on the national culture while explaining the foreign culture in their classrooms.

Alternative Ways of Maintaining the Students Understanding's on Their Own Culture

One of the best solutions to overcome those problems may be in the form of incorporating multicultural approaches into educational settings. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness⁹ in the practice of English language teaching.

This approach of education serves as an idea stating that all students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should have an equal opportunity to learn at school.¹⁰ One of the major goals of multicultural education is to help students acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully function within their own micro-culture, mainstream culture, and the global community.¹¹

This definition provides clear understanding on the main concept of multicultural education that the need for multicultural education may not only conventionally associated with societies containing ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity, but also with differences in ability, social class, gender, religion, or residence (rural versus urban). In fact, this basic principle is in line with the notion of education as well as the function of education mentioned in our Act on

⁹ Shinegori Tanaka, "English and Multiculturalism—from the Language User's Perspective", in *RELC Journal* (2006; 37), 47. He mentions that the concept of 'cultural awareness'—understanding of different cultures—has been emphasized as an essential part of English learning and teaching.

¹⁰ Ilghiz M. Sinagatullin, *Constructing Multicultural Education in A Diverse Society* (Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN, England: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2003), 83.

¹¹ Sinagatullin, 114.

National Educational System. It is the diversity in term of culture that becoming the main consideration within this approach of education.

This perspective towards the practice of education requires much improvement on the overall components of education, including the curriculum, the educators, learners, and all aspects of education. This idea is in line with one of the definitions of multicultural education mentioned by Banks and Banks in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* that:

Multicultural education is a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women studies.¹²

In terms of the individuals directly involved in the teaching and learning process, the multicultural education perspective also requires better quality of human resources to conduct the teaching and learning processes, namely the educators, particularly language teachers. In the practice of English language teaching, it would be very much interesting if teachers can integrate the local culture as well as the national cultural content in their teaching while presenting the western culture accompanying the language teaching. In the case of using textbooks with western cultural content, they need to introduce the local as well as the national culture to the students. This will probably serve as one initial step of maintaining the students' understanding towards their own culture.

This perspective of education will not be effectively useful without the involvements of other individuals involved in the practice of English language teaching, such as publishers, textbook writers, curriculum designers, the government, as well as the students and their parents' participations.

¹²J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.). *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), xii.

Conclusion

The practice of English Language Teaching (ELT) unintentionally tends to have a great potential of creating questions in terms of culture. The main culturally defined question is the existence of western cultural internalization in the practice of ELT classroom without being accompanied by the educators' awareness on it. This has merely a negative impact on those involved in the teaching and learning activities in terms of their cultural awareness, particularly the students.

One of the best solutions to overcome this may be done by incorporating multicultural approaches into educational settings. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness in the practice of English language teaching.

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